JANIS S. BOHAN

CONVERSATIONS

AND GLENDA M. RUSSELL

ABOUT

WITH VIVIENNE CASS,

PSYCHOLOGY

DOUGLAS C. HALDEMAN,

AND

SUZANNE IASENZA, FRITZ KLEIN,

SEXUAL

ALLEN M. OMOTO,

ORIENTATION

AND LEONORE TIEFER

Conversations about Psychology and Sexual Orientation

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WITH

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Fritz Klein, Allen M. Omoto, and Lenore Tiefer

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To Elyse Morgan and Liberty Smith,
who shared the journey,
and to the dog

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Introduction

The Conversation Begins

Glenda M. Russell and Janis S. Bohan

The idea for this book grew out of countless conversations between the two of us about psychology's approach to sexual orientation. As we talked about this topic, we found ourselves alternately excited by the possibilities of rethinking sexual orientation and frustrated by the difficulty of doing so. At some point, one of us commented about how much fun and how challenging these conversations were, and the other suggested that they might form the basis for a book. The more we discussed the idea, the more it seemed appropriate to use a conversational format as a way to pursue the topic of psychology and sexual orientation. Our own conversations had left us not only with the certainty that we had no definitive answers but also with a wariness about such answers. It made more sense to approach the topic as an open-ended and ongoing conversation rather than as a treatise that begins with the statement of a problem and ends with a clear resolution.

Format of the Book

The format of this book reflects our belief that a conversational approach is an appropriate method for exploring psychology and sexual orientation. The book is designed on the model of a conversation where ideas are raised by one speaker and others respond with their own thoughts. In the first chapter, the two of us offer some general distinctions between essentialist and social constructionist approaches to sexual orientation. This is a theoretical discussion that anchors the rest of the book; it is one

rich with questions about real-world implications of how psychology construes sexual orientation. Chapters 2, 6, and 9 represent our efforts to apply the essentialist-social constructionist distinction to three specific realms—clinical work, research and theory building, and public policy. The divisions among these three application areas are not clear-cut. As some of the respondents point out, it is impossible to discuss, for example, clinical practice without touching on public policy or to discuss research and theory without commenting on the implications of those for clinical practice. However arbitrary, the distinctions among these three areas serve to promote some order in discussions that could be endless in their ramifications.

We have asked distinguished and thoughtful people—theoreticians, researchers, practitioners, and educators—to provide commentaries on each of the three applied chapters. Of those we invited, six scholars provided essays in response to our chapters: Douglas Haldeman, Suzanne Iasenza, and Leonore Tiefer respond to our essay on clinical practice; Vivienne Cass and Fritz Klein respond to the essay on theory building and research; and Allen Omoto responds to the essay on public policy. These respondents were selected because collectively they represent a range of opinions on and experiences with social constructionist and essentialist approaches. In addition, we expected them to be able to look at the issue of psychology and sexual orientation in thoughtful ways, whatever their initial positions, and to juggle the complexity of issues in the area, rather than speak from rigid positions that push polemics at the expense of depth.

We sent several items to all six commentators. First, they received the prospectus describing the book. They also received chapter 1, which outlines the basic theoretical issues underlying these discussions, and the specific applied essays to which they were to respond. Finally, they all received a single page of instructions for their task, in which we suggested that they view our chapter as one installment in a conversation (in which the two of us were admittedly long-winded). We invited them to join the conversation with their reactions, including areas of agreement, differing perspectives, new ideas, related material that might enrich the discussion, and anything else that came to mind.

Each application section—our essay and the responses of contributors—can stand on its own without requiring the reader to read all other sections. This format allows the reader whose primary interest is in clinical applications, research and theory, or public policy to read only that

section of the book. Appreciation of any of the application sections, however, will be enhanced greatly by a prior reading of chapter 1.

Following the presentation of our essays and the responses of other authors, our afterword pulls together some overlapping themes from the previous chapters and also suggests new directions for conversation. We have tried to bring only a temporary closure to this conversation about psychology and sexual orientation in tacit acknowledgement that a final closure is neither possible nor desirable.

Why a Conversation?

The domain of psychology and sexual orientation is rich with interesting twists and full of turns and thorny challenges. Indeed, the topic carries a constant invitation to talk in terms so theoretical as to be removed from the material world. The conversational format we have employed here helps to move the discussion back to the real world. It allows conversants to get feedback and to revise ideas as well as to raise problems regarding positions that once seemed clear-cut and unassailable. The format also increases the give-and-take between theoretical positions and practical applications.

Further, there is a congenial quality to the conversational format that encourages continuing engagement among participants. Whereas a debate might force us to claim a firm position, seeing complex phenomena in oversimplified terms (Flick, 1998), a conversation is a process of exploration that insulates against premature resolution grounded in simplistic answers. The use of the conversation has the potential to enhance all participants' ability to be open and creative in approaching the elusive answers to questions about psychology and sexual orientation.

Whatever its merits, the conversational format is not always easy to maneuver. It requires a tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to forgo instant closure. It works optimally if all participants are willing to change their minds. It occasionally instills disappointment when a favorite insight does not withstand another's scrutiny. It is not effective in domains where sound bites are needed, because it resists the reduction of complex ideas to simple statements.

The conversational format might also be a source of confusion for the reader. Not all the writers in this volume agree; in fact, we intentionally requested commentaries from individuals representing a breadth of

positions. In addition, writing styles, the extent of appeal to other work, and the scope of discussion vary among authors. In keeping with this conversational format, we have chosen not to edit contributors' chapters (except where necessary to adhere to this conversation format) but to let them stand as would contributions to a spoken conversation. For the same reason, we have not responded to each point made by each author, nor have we commented on every occasion where we believe our points have been misunderstood. Perfect understanding is not essential for a productive conversation. Indeed, misunderstandings are often a part of idea exchange, and it is likely that we—as well as the other authors—have occasionally misread others' meanings. We leave it to the reader to explore all the ideas raised here and to seek among them both points of clarity and points of confusion. It may be that those areas of confusion are markers for ideas that need further elaboration or more careful analysis.

We have formatted the book in a way that facilitates ready identification of the writer(s) of each chapter. We urge the reader to attend to these distinctions and not to expect single-mindedness of ideas, agreement regarding interpretations, or similarity of style among chapters. In keeping with our intent to have the participants' contributions speak for themselves, references are placed at the end of each chapter. Because of considerable redundancy in the references we invoked in our writings, however, references for all of our chapters (including this introduction, chapters 1, 2, 6, 9, and the afterword) are located at the end of the book. As we have read and discussed responses to our chapters, we have often found our own ideas about some topics transformed; in other areas, our original positions have endured or been strengthened by respondents' comments. Some disagreements between and among us have been resolved and some agreements questioned anew. This process is, indeed, exactly the source of delight in both the topic and the opportunity to engage in interactive conversations about it. Inevitably, in this process each of us contradicted herself. Rather than insisting on the "purity" of consistency, and the ultimate "truth" such consistency implies, we resorted to a mutually favorite quote from Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself."

In short, despite the challenges of the conversational format, it offers the possibility for rich exploration. It helps us to capture complexity and to maintain an open dialogue among participants who are not necessar-

ily in agreement. At its best, the conversational approach carries the potential for beginning a new narrative about psychology and sexual orientation, one that relies on—rather than eschews—ongoing evaluation and revision.

Notes on Language

As noted, the various authors in this volume are not always in agreement; among the areas about which authors disagree is the use of language in specific circumstances. Because we view language as both constitutive and generative of reality, we take the authors' linguistic choices quite seriously. Therefore, we have kept authors' original linguistic usages despite the fact that this results in the presence of different language across different chapters (e.g., the use of "patients" in some chapters and the use of "clients" in others).

The second note about language is more complex. Under most circumstances, we would not use the appellation "nonheterosexuals," because that term defines people by virtue of their *not* being members of a certain class. When the group being defined by negation is one that faces disapprobation in society, as is the case for those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, such usage is particularly problematic.

We considered a number of alternatives to this term, searching for a term that included the broadest range of those who do not identify as heterosexual. The word "queer" has been used in just this way. As much as we like the word, we chose not to use it for several reasons. First, some people find the word offensive, invoking as it does its historical use as a pejorative epithet. Second, the term has been politicized in a way that might make its use misleading; we wanted a term to denote a group of people rather than a particular political stance. Finally, in some circles, "queer" has been used to denote not only LGBs but also heterosexuals who espouse a particular position or who violate conventional sexual norms.

We also considered creating a new term to capture the nonheterosexual population; in fact, we had several delightful conversations toying with this possibility. In the end, however, we concluded that such a term might be confusing and might distract from the conversation, especially since our essays are scattered throughout the book and are meant to

stand alone if the reader so desires. Rather than introduce and explain the new term in each section, we decided to forgo that option and returned to "nonheterosexual," despite its obvious weaknesses.

Accordingly, we have used this terminology as a tool for dismantling usual notions of sexual orientation. We are aware that others have used the term "nonheterosexual" (as well as variations on that term) out of a fundamental disdain for all that is not heterosexual. Our own motives are decidedly different. In trying to disentangle psychology's approach to sexual orientation, we call into question all categorical terms used to denote sexual orientation (indeed, we challenge the very term "sexual orientation"). Those include the terms "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual," as well as "heterosexual." Inevitably, when we challenge any of these notions, we challenge all of them, because they are intertwined and their definitions are interdependent. In cases where our aim is to raise fundamental questions about nonprivileged categories, we resort to the use of the term "nonheterosexual" to denote a class that has as its major shared characteristic *not* being heterosexual—and the stigma that implies. We do not use the term "nonheterosexual" in any other context.

A related issue is this book's emphasis on lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs). In principle, a book on sexual orientation might be expected to give equal attention to all categories of sexual orientation. The inequality of attention in this regard reflects what occurs in the larger society: heterosexuality is privileged, and nonheterosexual identities are the object of focus because they are regarded as the "problem." We are aware that this book's focus on LGBs recapitulates this problematization of nonheterosexual experiences seen in broader spheres. However, it is our hope that this book goes beyond such recapitulation and analyzes the basis of and the flaws in this problematization of nonheterosexual experiences. Indeed, we suggest that thoughtful attention to LGB experience might lead to a reconceptualization of the notion of sexual orientation more generally. Finally, in challenging some of the basic understandings of sexual orientation, we reject the unfair treatment that people who are called lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals have received in this society.

In a related vein, the reader will note that we have chosen not to consider transgendered individuals in these conversations. We acknowledge the importance of the inclusion of transgendered people within the movement to secure equal rights for all. However, the question of how gender identity issues relate to sexual orientation is currently a topic of

considerable controversy. Since this book deals specifically with sexual orientation rather than gender identity, the inclusion of transgender issues would seem problematic, indeed. Accordingly, we have not addressed this topic—but do encourage others to apply a similar analysis to these issues.

Why (Only) Psychology and Sexual Orientation?

As the title of this book suggests, we have chosen to emphasize psychology's treatment of sexual orientation, rather than address how other mental health professions have dealt with the topic. Much of what this book has to say has obvious implications for social work, psychiatry, and related disciplines. Certainly, we have drawn on research and writings from many other disciplines. Still, there are several reasons for this focus on psychology in particular. First, we both work as psychologists, and our training is rooted in the discipline of psychology. Between us, we have worked in the areas of research, theory development, teaching, and clinical practice, as well as community-based social activism rooted in our psychological understandings. Psychology is the discipline with which we, as well as all but one of our respondents, are most familiar.

A second reason for this focus on psychology lies in the degree to which psychology as a research-based discipline has contributed to the development of LGB psychology in its present form. The final reason has to do with the relative advantages of taking a critical look at our own discipline, rather than at others. Self-criticism carries a certain ease and limited need for apology that are lacking when one is offering critiques of other disciplines.

A Note on the Uses of This Book

Some of what is written in the extended conversation that makes up this book challenges certain familiar arguments made in support of full human rights for LGB people. Those who oppose equal rights for LGBs may be tempted (we use this word intentionally) to employ some of what is said in this book on behalf of their political cause and/or to devalue individual lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals. We wish to emphasize here that our position is clear: sexual orientation should never be the basis for

formal or informal bias at the personal, institutional, or cultural levels. Anyone who quotes material from this book for purposes of opposing equal rights for LGBs is engaging in an intellectual distortion of our position as well as a moral violation of the spirit of the conversation contained in this book. More important than such potential for distortion is this: we have faith that LGB psychology is sufficiently mature not only to withstand challenge but to be enriched by such challenge and to move forward.

About Reading This Book

Before entrusting this conversational exchange to you, the reader, we wish to comment on the process of reading it. Some of the ideas you will encounter are familiar, while others are not. Occasionally, familiar ideas will crop up in very new contexts. Friends and colleagues who have read all or parts of the manuscript have commented on how disquieting the experience has at times been for them. Carol Hathaway-Clark, a colleague who read the clinical applications chapter, is a particularly keen self-observer. She commented that she felt excited and challenged by the material, as if she were embarking on a new journey. At the same time, she felt anxious. She concluded that, while the process of challenging familiar understandings is interesting and exciting, it also disrupts what has been familiar and what had seemed to be settled. In this particular case, the challenge may be all the more unsettling because some ideas in this book may seem reminiscent of positions far less friendly than our own to a commitment to full human rights regardless of sexual orientation.

The relative youth of LGB psychology is a factor, as well. Many of us received our training in contexts that were explicitly homophobic (where LGB orientations were directly disparaged). Virtually all of us were trained in heterosexist contexts (where heterosexual orientation was taken as normative and superior). Even as the training of psychologists and other professionals has been improving in this regard, old homophobic and heterosexist patterns are not easily discarded. Moreover, even in educational contexts where homophobia has been challenged actively, there is little in the way of positive alternatives to the old models. Thus, all of us are in the position of trying to work our way out of traditions that are limited in important ways. On those occasions when this book

challenges the best of the newer models, the process can become especially disconcerting.

The difficulty of reading this book may also be increased by the fact that sexual orientation continues to be a socially disruptive and emotionally charged issue. That disruptiveness and that charge are bound to creep into any discussion of sexual orientation, and they may be especially jolting to members of a discipline who have been socialized to think of themselves as objective and neutral.

As disconcerting as the journey represented by this book has been for us, it has also been exciting and intriguing and fun. We have learned to sit with—and occasionally even to thrive on—our own confusion about issues related to psychology and sexual orientation. We invite you to do the same and to continue this conversation on your own, beyond the discussions offered here.

Acknowledgments

Our thinking about psychology and sexual orientation has been challenged and expanded by our formal and informal conversations with a number of people. Most directly, we wish to thank the authors of the chapters in this book for their thoughtful responses to our ideas. We are grateful to Vivienne Cass, Fritz Klein, Douglas Haldeman, Suzanne Iasenza, and Leonore Tiefer for their willingness to approach a task riddled with uncertainty and for their wonderfully varied executions of that task. In a more technical vein, we would also like to thank Tim Bartlett, our first editor at New York University Press, whose enthusiasm and guidance brought this book to fruition; Jennifer Hammer, Tim's replacement, who has ushered it to its publication; and Eloise Pearson, who typed much of the manuscript.

In the course of developing our thinking on the subject matter of this book, we called upon a number of colleagues and friends to read all or part of the manuscript. Their feedback was invaluable to us and added immensely to this book. We want to acknowledge the friendship and contribution of Judith Dowling, Deborah Flick, Ellen Greenhouse, Carol Hathaway-Clark, David Lilly, Karen Raforth, Louise Silvern, and Lester Wall. Two colleagues, who are also friends, were especially instrumental in reading and rereading every word as we wrote. We are most grateful to Elyse Morgan, who read our work with the eye of an expert and a novice

simultaneously; her influence on this book has been inestimable. Liberty Smith came to us as a nonpsychologist with a strong background in social constructionist, feminist, and multicultural perspectives. Liberty challenged our psychological universe, questioned our language, and did so with great intelligence, grace, and good humor. While we accept the limitations of the final work as our own, its strengths have been greatly enhanced through our conversations with Elyse and Liberty. It is in acknowledgment of their contributions that we dedicate this book to them.

During our work on this book, we were simultaneously engaged in a research project based in Salt Lake City, Utah. The research focused on students who established a Gay/Straight Alliance at East High School in 1995; it expanded to include contacts with school personnel, students' families, and members of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual and the heterosexual ally communities of Salt Lake. We have been inspired by the friendships we have made in Salt Lake. In particular, we have been led by the young people we met there to rethink the apparent universals of queer life. Though our conversations in Salt Lake have included barely a mention of the topics in this book, the creativity and courage shown by our friends there have formed an important backdrop to this work. We are grateful for the richness they have given us.

Conceptual Frameworks

Janis S. Bohan and Glenda M. Russell

Consider these quandaries:

- A client enters psychotherapy seeking to find his "true" sexual orientation. He has had satisfying sexual and emotional relationships with women for many years but now finds himself attracted to a man.
- Researchers design a study to investigate the relationship between mental health and the level of disclosure of lesbian identity. A potential participant in the study demurs, insisting that the label "lesbian" does not match her sense of self, although she is in a long-term, exclusive relationship with another woman.
- A law intended to ensure equal rights for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals is challenged by a right-wing group, which insists that sexual orientation is not a genuine axis of identity, that it can change, and that it is sometimes actively chosen. In support of its position, the group cites findings from cross-cultural investigations and psychological research.

In certain domains of discourse regarding sexual orientation, we can find vigorous attempts to address quandaries such as these. Most such attempts lie outside the field of psychology, but increasingly they are finding their way into the psychological literature. At the heart of many such discussions is an appeal to a distinction between essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on sexual orientation. This book is intended to enter into those discussions.

Essentialism, Social Constructionism, and Sexual Orientation

Our aim in this book is to explore the implications and ramifications of two very distinctive perspectives on psychological understandings of sexual orientation. In this chapter, we introduce certain core principles of essentialist and social constructionist[1] understandings of sexual orientation; these principles serve as a framework for a more detailed discussion of the implications of each approach for psychological praxis. Actually, it is oversimplified to speak of "an approach" in either case. Each of these perspectives entails a very convoluted set of principles, the complexity of which cannot be adequately addressed in the space available here. However, we hope to provide sufficient introduction of key elements to ground later discussions of implications of these approaches. If we are successful in that attempt, we will have tools to unpack the complexity of the issues raised here, as well as to raise others.

Ontology and Epistemology

It may be helpful to frame this discussion in terms of two intertwined but discernibly distinct levels of analysis: the ontological and the epistemological. The ontological domain addresses the question of what *is*: what is the nature of reality? In the case of sexual orientation, the pertinent question is this: in what sense can sexual orientation be said to exist as an actual element of reality? The epistemological domain, on the other hand, has to do with questions of knowledge: what is knowledge, how is knowledge attained, what are the criteria that warrant what we take for knowledge?

In what follows, we first examine the essentialist and the constructionist perspectives on sexual orientation, paying attention to the ontological and the epistemological components of each. We then inquire briefly as to the implications of each as it is applied to the sorts of questions that occupy psychology.

Essentialism and Sexual Orientation

The Ontological Domain

The essentialist perspective on sexual orientation is grounded in an ontology of realism—that is, the assumption that the categories employed to discuss reality in fact describe actual phenomena that exist independent of our understandings of them. Thus, from an essentialist perspective, sexual orientation exists as a free-standing quality of individuals, an essential element of individual identity, much as one's sex, gender,[2] or ethnic identity.[3] Sexual orientation identity, in this view, is present as a component of identity, whether or not it is acknowledged by the individual, observed by others, or given meaning by the culture. It is a fundamental and definitive axis of each individual's core self, regardless of how that self may be manifested (or hidden) in varying situations.

In addition, essentialist ontology argues that the meaning of sexual orientation is ahistorical and universal. Essentialism asserts that sexual orientation as an element of individual identity has existed throughout history and across cultures; in every time and locale, the sex of one's partner (or of others to whom one is attracted emotionally and/or sexually) has been a definitive contributor to identity. Thus, across time and culture, there have been individuals who were fundamentally (in contemporary Western terms) heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Whether or not a given culture provided words to designate these identities, whether or not there was an identifiable LGB community, whether or not these people made a point of revealing their identities, there have always and everywhere been people who defined themselves in terms of the sex of those they loved (for further discussion see Bohan, 1996).

From an essentialist ontological stance, then, sexual orientation is an extant trait of the individual, a core aspect of one's character; such an identity is grounded in the sense that sexuality itself is definitive of one's identity. One expression of this identity is the choice of one's partner, with particular focus (in contemporary Western understandings) on the sex of one's partner. Although attitudes toward variations in sexual orientation may differ across time and culture, these identities themselves have existed transhistorically and universally. They represent fundamental, essential qualities that are made manifest in what we term sexual orientation.

The Epistemological Domain

The essentialist perspective on sexual orientation meshes rather neatly with psychology's predominant epistemological position, namely positivism. Positivist epistemology is grounded in certain basic assumptions: that there is a real world whose existence and nature are independent of its being observed; that it is possible to know, measure, and quantify this reality through the careful implementation of methodologies that are founded on the certainty of objective, value-neutral observation; and that such careful application of methods allows us to "discover" and "describe" that reality.

This positivist epistemology is perfectly suited to the essentialist perspective on sexual orientation precisely because sexual orientation is taken as an extant phenomenon that can be discovered and described. The task of science, from this perspective, is to reveal the phenomena that define sexual orientation and to answer meaningful questions about them through the application of positivist methodologies.

Social Constructionism and Sexual Orientation

Social constructionism is a relatively recent approach to questions of the meaning of "truth" and "knowledge"—in other words, to questions of both ontology (being) and epistemology (knowledge). Constructionism is relatively less well known than are the realism and positivism that undergird essentialism and that provide the foundation for psychology's approach to sexual orientation. Accordingly, a brief discussion of the key points of constructionism is in order before we elaborate on its meaning for the topic of sexual orientation.

Social constructionism argues that we do not know reality directly. Rather, what we take as truth—that is, what we take to be an accurate description of reality—is in fact a hypothesis, a best guess based on the limited information available to us. Thus, we do not firmly "know" in the usual sense of having access to an accurate rendition of a free-standing reality. Rather, we come to particular understandings about whatever there is on the basis of the necessarily circumscribed means of knowing that are available to us. These understandings are *socially* constructed. That is, they are not (simply) the creations of each individual but rather reflect widely shared consensus about the nature of reality. Such under-

standings are indelibly marked by the beliefs and prior interpretations embedded in our own culture, including assumptions about what questions it is important to ask as well as the concepts available to us to organize our understandings.

In particular, our understandings are shaped by the language we employ and the categories we create to define and describe the phenomena we take to be reality. The straightforward quality of this statement belies the profound change in perspective that it signals. We mean this statement literally. We elaborate on it further as this discussion proceeds and return to it repeatedly throughout the book.

In addition, it is important to recognize that the language and the categories available to us reflect the belief system of the dominant culture, framing our understandings and realities in a manner congruent with that culture's values. Thus, our shared understandings reproduce, support, and perpetuate the status quo. For example, much of the discourse on sexual orientation from all sides—including from LGB-affirmative positions in psychology and in the culture at large—has been couched in terms of categories defined by this prevailing discourse.

The understandings we construct do not seem to us to be hypotheses but seem self-evidently true. In other words, we believe we describe some extralinguistic reality—a reality that exists outside and beyond discourse—rather than an understanding profoundly shaped by linguistic forms. Although we believe we have "discovered" and are describing reality, we are actually putting language to the visions gained through the lens of our particular context. Rather than describing a free-standing reality, the particular discourse we employ to express our so-called knowledge does not simply represent reality. Rather, that discourse—the language, beliefs, statements, terms, and categories we employ—endows experience with meaning, actually forges the meanings that we take to be reality. Our experience is thus formed not by reality but by discourse, by our particular constructions—which themselves reflect and support familiar cultural understandings (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1985; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, 1990; Sampson, 1993a, 1993b).

To apply this concept to our own circumstance, in the sociocultural milieu in which American psychology currently functions, we "know" that there are two sexes, male and female, and two genders, masculine and feminine.[4] The notion that there are two sexes seems self-evident—until, that is, we consider the case of "intersexes," individuals who do not fit the criteria presumed to place one in one or the other category and

who routinely face surgical procedures to "fix" themselves so that they will fit into these arbitrary categories (e.g., Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Money, 1987, 1988). Or until we consider cultures that recognize a third and even a fourth gender and that understand these not as variations on the two that seem so obvious to us but as genuinely distinctive categories of sex/gender (Blackwood, 1984; Tafoya, 1992; Whitehead, 1981; Williams, 1986). Such variations in meaning illustrate what is meant by the social construction of reality.

Importantly, the constructionist argument asserts that, no matter how self-evident our own particular deductions appear, they are no more certain, no more directly representative of "truth" than are other, very different understandings. If we cannot know reality directly but only through the limited vision of our own position, then we cannot legitimately assert that our rendition correctly taps some core truth about human experience.[5] In contrast to the positivist assumption that we can match our depictions against reality and thereby test their validity, constructionism asserts that there can be no unconstructed standard against which to compare one or another understanding, no criterion for validity in the usual (positivist) sense.

Faced, then, with the question of why one or another idea/construction holds sway, constructionists argue that, since the preference for one construal over another *cannot* be grounded in an objective match to reality, such preference must reflect some other basis of judgment. The selection of one understanding over another occurs for good reasons, and constructionists insist that it is possible to dismantle (or deconstruct) a given pattern of so-called knowledge to consider why this rather than that particular piece of certainty has evolved. Thus, we can ask the questions "Why this understanding, in this culture and at this time? And what would be the consequences of our adopting a different understanding?" (see especially S. L. Bem, 1993, 1995; Kitzinger, 1987, 1995; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). Again, notice that the question here is not which construction is more accurate but what are the implications of embracing one or another construction.

The Ontological Domain

Applied to sexual orientation, the constructionist approach suggests that sexual orientation is not a trait or quality of individuals. Rather, it is a socially constructed notion, a construct that imbues certain acts and

experiences with a particular meaning; these experiences are taken as expressions of an identity grounded in (what we term) sexual orientation. However, these experiences are not intrinsically or necessarily manifestations of identity, nor need identity be organized around the nature of one's erotic and affective attachments. Viewed from a different historical or cultural position, these same phenomena would carry a very different meaning. Same- or other-sex attachments would not necessarily be seen as constitutive of identity; indeed, there might be no construct of sexual orientation at all, no sense that the sex of one's partner is significant to one's sense of self. In Padgug's (1989) words,

> The members of each society create all of the sexual categories and roles within which they act and define themselves. The categories and significance of the activity will vary as widely as do the societies within whose general social relations they occur. (P. 60)

The Epistemological Domain

From a constructionist perspective, so-called knowledge does not represent a discovery of an independently existing reality but rather the construction of an understanding generated and validated by social discourse. Thus, it is not possible to employ particular methodologies in order to discover and describe the parameters of sexual orientation identity. In contrast to psychology's positivist stance, constructionism argues that whatever understanding we have of that construct is not a product of objective observation but one of collective exchange—albeit one in which prevailing understandings have disproportionate influence in comparison to less dominant discourse.

In a position that can be seen as straddling the epistemological and ontological domains, constructionism asserts that we actually create rather than describe reality through the discourse we employ and that this creation is dynamic and constantly evolving. The weaker version of this argument contends that what we construct is *meaning*. That is, the same phenomenon takes on very different meanings in various cultures or across time. Such meaning, in turn, provides a script for how members of that culture relate to the phenomenon in question.

Strong constructionism, on the other hand, insists that we actually construct not only meanings but phenomena themselves through discourse (e.g., Kitzinger, 1995). Thus, naming a thing actually speaks it into being. There is no such thing as extralinguistic reality; our discourse

creates what it bespeaks. In terms of sexual orientation, for example, the very notion that one can or should define identity in terms of sexual or affectional preferences causes people indeed to understand themselves in that way. The provision of specific categories "describing" sexual orientation defines for individuals the options available to them. The discourse "describing" characteristics of members of those categories in turn frames individuals' own self-definitions and shapes their behavior.

Intersections between Essentialism and Constructionism

For the project we undertake here, we have recourse to both essentialist and social constructionist perspectives. Both have contributed to understandings of sexual orientation, and both have value in application to actual events. At the same time, these two perspectives represent significant differences in both epistemological and ontological domains, and any effort to merge the two is, therefore, oxymoronic.

Most psychological research and theory that deal with sexual orientation have derived from an essentialist approach. We naturally draw extensively on this corpus of work to illuminate the essentialist perspective. We also—and here is an oxymoronic twist—draw theory and data drawn from essentialist models to illuminate a social constructionist perspective. We recognize the inherent—and inevitable—contradiction in using essentialist approaches to support a constructionist perspective.

With a parallel twist, we employ a social constructionist framework in two distinct ways. First, we use social constructionism as an epistemological tool for critiquing essentialist approaches to sexual orientation. In this case, social constructionism is an epistemological tool for looking at (and deconstructing the very notion of) sexual orientation. We then use constructionism as an ontological device, offering it as an alternative framework for understanding the phenomena we know as sexual orientation. In what follows, we consider the interrelationship of essentialism and social constructionism on the ontological and the epistemological levels.

The Ontological Domain

Constructionism suggests that the understandings assumed by a particular culture act to frame its members' experience and to shape their behavior. In this culture, at this time, our understanding or construction of sexual orientation is an essentialist one. That is, the dominant understanding is that sexual orientation is indeed a core, essential, fixed attribute of individual identity.

Sexual orientation may well be a socially constructed meaning imposed on experiences that could equally well accommodate myriad other meanings. However, *this particular, essentialist meaning* is the one that individuals in this culture are likely to embrace (cf. Cass, 1984, 1990; Schippers, 1989). Thus, individual identities inevitably reflect and instantiate socially constructed understandings.

Each person's coming to her or his identity involves creating narratives about who she or he is. This is far more than a matter of making up stories, and it implies neither truth nor the absence thereof. Rather, from a constructionist perspective, creating narratives is a dynamic and reiterative process that has generative impact. Creating narratives actually shapes individual identity (e.g., Cass, 1990; Crawford, 1995; Frantz & Stewart, 1994; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Park, 1992; Personal Narrative Group, 1989; Sarbin, 1986; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995).

The conceptual categories and the language available for narratives of individual identity necessarily consist of the language and the categories created by our collective constructions of the notion of sexual orientation. People in this culture can thus be expected (from a weak constructionist perspective) to imbue their experience with essentialist meaning. They might also be expected (from a strong constructionist perspective) to be influenced to a large extent by the dictates of essentialist understandings of the categories provided and the attributions associated with those categories. Put directly, the understandings we have (collectively) created become scripts for our (individual) lives.

The Epistemological Domain

When we consider epistemology, the oxymoronic quality of attempts to fuse these two perspectives becomes especially clear. A merger of essentialist and constructionist epistemologies is philosophically impossible; we cannot both "discover" and "construct" reality. Here lies a funda-

mental challenge to psychology's approach to sexual orientation. To the degree that the very notion of sexual orientation and the categories contained within it are constructions, positivist analysis cannot yield what it intends—namely, accurate descriptions of independently existing, extralinguistic phenomena.

This last suggestion gives impetus to the constructionist challenge to the notion of validity. If there is no "truth" to which we have recourse, the merits of a particular position must be judged by some criterion other than its validity in the usual sense. From this position, we are encouraged to examine the particular versions of reality that are widely endorsed by this culture. Thus, we might ask, "What is the impact of holding an essentialist view of sexual orientation? Why do we define individual identity in terms of the sex of one's partner? Why these particular categories rather than some others?" And, a most important question for our purposes here, "What are the implications of one or another understanding of sexual orientation? Who benefits, and how?" These and related queries can be subsumed within the direct and politically crucial question "What purpose is served by one or another position? How is it used, and by whom?"

Psychology, Constructionism, and Sexual Orientation

Considerable recent scholarship across a variety of disciplines has explored a constructionist perspective on sexual orientation, detailing its rationale and implications (e.g., S. L. Bem, 1993, 1995; Butler, 1990, 1993; D'Emilio, 1983, 1992; Foucault, 1979; Greenberg, 1988; Kitzinger, 1987, 1995; McIntosh, 1968; Plummer, 1981; Richardson, 1987; Rust, 1993; Stein, 1996; Tiefer, 1987; Weeks, 1981, 1989). In combination, these works open the way to an analysis of how individuals' lives are framed by their culture's understanding of sexual orientation and by their own self-identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual.

However, this social constructionist approach to sexual orientation is not widely known outside academia, nor has it guided the psychological literature on the subject to any marked extent. Psychological theory, research, and practice that address sexual orientation—as well as the implementation of psychological understandings in the public sphere—have derived almost entirely from an essentialist approach; this is true in two senses. First, most work in the psychology of sexual orientation be-

gins from the essentialist ontological assumption that sexual orientation is a primary, nuclear quality of self. Second, the psychology of sexual orientation is grounded in the presumption that, by conducting proper research, one can discover and describe the "true" nature of gay/lesbian/bisexual experience. Both positions stand in contrast to the constructionist perspective, which asserts that there is no entity—sexual orientation—to be discovered, investigated, described, or explored; the very object of our curiosity is a social construct shaped by our means of knowing rather than a free-standing phenomenon that can be known directly. Thus, psychology has contributed to as well as been shaped by the cultural understanding of sexual orientation as an essential trait of individuals.

Implications of Essentialist and Constructionist Perspectives

In order briefly to illustrate the implications of the contrast outlined here, we offer several situations that individually and collectively demonstrate the differences between psychological praxis from a constructionist and from an essentialist stance. These illustrations should also make clear the intransigent dilemma that underlies this discussion: there are clearly circumstances in which essentialist understandings provide a strikingly powerful instrument on behalf of those who identify as other than heterosexual, and there are instances where the reverse is true. Thus, the question is not which is "correct" but how we tease out the outcomes of adhering (particularly without reflection) to one or the other point of view. As a means of addressing this question, let us consider several circumstances where the purposes of LGBs may be both served and impeded by each approach.

Coming Out

In both lay and professional literature, the process of "coming out"—coming to a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity—is portrayed as a discovery; identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual involves the unearthing of something already present, even if hidden, denied, or ignored. Common images include finding one's true self or "coming home" to the place where one always really belonged. The national support group Parents,

Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) uses the swan to represent LGB people. This symbol, taken from Anderson's fable "The Ugly Duckling," fits an essentialist view: LGB individuals are beautiful in their true (LGB) identity, rather than ugly in a false (heterosexual) one. Such portrayals of coming to a nonheterosexual identity represent an essentialist construal of sexual orientation. Incidentally, although the topic receives far less attention, we also hold an essentialist view of heterosexual identity. Although heterosexual individuals do not face the same struggle in coming to this identity, since the heterosexual assumption is simply embraced, we nevertheless assume that those who identify as straight are equally at home, having found (if without struggle) their true self.

This metaphor of discovery makes sense of what is otherwise often experienced as a terribly confusing and painful sense of ill fit in the world. Such coherence is widely understood as a key element to optimal mental health (Morgan, 1991). The provision of a label for oneself and one's feelings brings closure to the identity confusion that almost surely follows upon the awareness of feelings that are condemned by society (Cass, 1979; de Monteflores, 1986; Troiden, 1989). As a part of the process of coming to terms with this identity, the essentialist understanding of identity as permanent also provides a basis for a new self-narrative, for rereading the past as having contained the seeds of this identity, perhaps throughout one's lifetime. This reconstruction of identity as always having been gay or lesbian or bisexual lends a sense of continuity to one's personal history and a sense of integrity to one's current life (see, e.g., Whisman, 1996).

Further, claiming a lesbian or gay (and perhaps a bisexual) identity provides an entree to the LGB community, with all the attendant support and socialization functions the community serves; it offers other "swans" among whom one feels at home. Like other minority communities, the LGB community takes its collectivity (at least in part) from a sense of shared identity, whether grounded in common experiences, shared oppression, or other signals of unity. A categorical identity is often central to the existence of such communities, and their members may be admitted on the basis of their claiming the appropriate identity. To deny the category of nonheterosexual identity would be to deny this basis for collective identity; to claim it is to open access to the rich resources of community.

Finally, essentialist renditions of coming out may serve a function for heterosexual people as well. First, they reinforce the perception of LGBs as "other," their identity defined by their deviation from the heterosexual norm. Further, when an individual claims a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity and does so by appeal to the discovery of a core essential self, she or he contributes to the reification of discrete categories of sexual orientation. This may, in turn, lead heterosexual people to feel safer in their own identity; as long as the categories are distinct and the identity stable across time, they needn't be concerned that their own identity might somehow transform into a nonheterosexual one.

On the other hand, embracing an essentialist understanding of coming out may lead the individual to distort or disclaim elements of his or her own experience or history in order to match the newly claimed category. Thus, past relationships might be demeaned or regarded as deceitful or inauthentic, despite their having been experienced at an earlier time as good and fulfilling relationships. Personal preferences that are incompatible with the category might be expunged in the name of adhering to the socially constructed confines of the identity. For example, an individual who identifies as lesbian might feel it necessary to quell—and even disown—feelings of attraction to men. A recent highly publicized example of the failure to exorcise such unacceptable feelings is seen in the story of the lesbian sexuality expert Joann Loulan, who is involved in a relationship with a man. While some have supported Loulan's choice (Cotter, 1997; Faderman, 1997; Martin & Lyon, 1997), many in the LGB community have ostracized her precisely because "real" lesbians do not develop intimate relationships with men (e.g., Clausen, 1990; Gideonse, 1997; Graff, 1997; Lipstadt, 1997; Oakley-Melvin, 1997; Quinn, 1997). The potential loss of Loulan's contributions to the community and her loss of the support of many in the community are the price exacted by the demand for rigid adherence to discrete, essentialized categories.

This same expectation for adherence to discrete categories can have direct and unfortunate consequences for individual LGBs. People who are convinced that neat categories represent the only acceptable identities may withhold information about themselves that violates this model. Where such information is important, as for example, in health care, its withholding may prove detrimental. Consider the case of an out lesbian who is afraid to tell her physician about her sexual activities with men or the man who identifies as heterosexual and dares not reveal

same-sex sexual activity. Consider the case of a gay man who dares not tell his psychotherapist that he is attracted to women or the woman coming to a lesbian identity who feels compelled to conceal from her counselor her continuing involvement with men. Surely the physical or mental health care these individuals receive will be compromised by the limitations they impose on disclosure as a result of the demand to comply with precise categorical boundaries.

Developmental Issues

The dilemmas raised by these two approaches become especially clear when we contemplate their implications for youth coming to a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity in this culture. On the one hand, a clearly defined identity meets what is portrayed as a central need for adolescents in this culture, namely some sense of structure, clarity, and certainty in a period that often seems uncertain and chaotic. This need is as relevant to heterosexual youth as to LGB adolescents. The crucial difference lies in the differential impact of anticipatory socialization (Herdt, 1989a), the process by which they are taught what to expect of adult life. Given that this socialization is grounded in the heterosexual assumption, heterosexual teens' sense of sexual orientation identity serves to confirm their place in the normative story of growing up. However, for LGB youth, such socialization provides them with no template for their own life and serves, rather, to highlight their variance from the expectations of the dominant culture. Thus, for LGB teens, although coming to a firm sense of identity can be seen as a major developmental milestone, it is also true that one element of that sense of identity separates them from mainstream society—including the mainstream peer group.

Again, an essentialist approach may allow the teen to lay solid claim to a nonheterosexual identity, granting access to an alternative community. The advantages of such belonging are numerous; at a very basic level, this community may serve as peer group to LGB teens. Given the centrality of peers to the developmental tasks of adolescence and given the rejection often faced by LGB teens, a group that fills this role is indeed important. The LGB community also serves the function of providing affirmation and support for the difficult process of coming to terms with a stigmatized identity—a task especially difficult for youth, who have few psychological or material resources for this struggle.

On the other hand, essentialist understandings of sexual orientation may have unfortunate consequences for youth. We mentioned earlier that such categories restrict individual variation in identity, even among adult LGBs. Such restriction is of even greater concern with adolescents, since the task facing adolescents as understood by this culture—namely to define who they are to be—demands freedom of exploration. The potential life scripts conveyed to adolescents at this vulnerable moment of identity formation may be especially compelling. For youth who claim a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, the process of open exploration so necessary for the development of a rich sense of identity may be foreclosed in the name of embracing and striving to play out the part proffered them. The search for and susceptibility to ready-made blueprints for one's identity may characterize youth of any group. However, the discredited status of bisexual, gay, or lesbian identity clearly imbues sexual orientation identity with unusual salience.

Further, the relative absence of models or life scripts for LGB youth magnifies the power of those images that are available. Other than pejorative stereotypes, the icons provided by the LGB community are rendered virtually the only depictions of how one is to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. These images may not always serve youth well. For example, the notion that LGB teens must either be perfect (as when we idolize the "best little girl/boy in the world")[6] or tragic (as in our focus on suicide or homelessness among LGB teens) disregards the vast majority of LGB youth, leaving them and their struggles and triumphs invisible to others—including other LGB youth.

A constructionist perspective, on the other hand, creates considerable space for continuing exploration and fluidity of identity for youth, providing alternatives to rigidly delineated LGB identity. Such an understanding allows—indeed, encourages—the creation of alternative narratives, ones that do honor to the diversity of adolescents' individual gifts and collective experiences (Russell, Bohan, & Lilly, in press). If sexual orientation is seen as more nebulous in definition and flexible across time, there will be no need for teens to engage in (or avoid) particular experiences as a means for proving their sexual orientation or to feel an urgency about offering such "proof." Early pregnancy, for example, proves an adolescent is heterosexual only if none but heterosexuals are presumed to have heterosexual intercourse. Deviation from gender norms implies one is gay or lesbian only if none but gays and lesbians engage in gender bending.

Still, a constructionist approach brings dilemmas of its own. One can argue that calling into questions the categories of sexual orientation devalues the often painful process of coming to a bisexual, gay, or lesbian identity. Further, such deconstruction of categories makes room for considering sexual orientation identity in more fluid terms. An argument for fluidity, in turn, might be invoked to insist that youth who identify as LGB are just "in a phase" and that they can and should dismiss their same-sex feelings and embrace heterosexuality. In fact, the potential for such fluidity is sufficiently threatening that the LGB community as a whole may regard the argument for flexibility as heretical. In the face of such dismissal of the possibility of fluidity, people who assume a more flexible identity may find themselves ostracized from the community, as has been the case for Joann Loulan.

For teens, such fluidity may mean expulsion from the peer group—that is, the LGB community—that is so central to their sense of well-being and so crucial to the tasks of their age. The community stands to lose, as well. We are familiar with an extremely bright and competent young woman who identifies as bisexual. This woman was deeply involved in a youth group for LGB teens in Salt Lake City and went on to direct the LGB community center there. While she was in a relationship with a woman, she was welcomed and revered in the community. When she married a man, she was effectively shunned. She lost her sense of belonging; the community lost an unusually capable organizer and an important voice for youth.

Politics and Public Policy

The quandary we are exploring here is also apparent in areas of politics and public policy. In recent years, political and policy efforts emanating from the LGB community and its allies have relied on essentialist renderings of sexual orientation (although this has not always been the case, as we see in chapter 8). Psychology's essentialist position has contributed to this stand, very often undergirding successful efforts at protecting LGB rights. Very clear examples of this can be taken from recent court cases such as the battle over Colorado's Amendment 2 (A2).

A2 was a popularly initiated referendum that prohibited equal protection on the basis of on sexual orientation; it was passed by Colorado vot-

ers in 1992. After a lengthy court battle, the amendment was declared unconstitutional in 1996. Contributing to this decision was an *amicus curiae* brief authored by several professional mental health organizations, including the American Psychological Association. Key arguments in this brief—and, indeed, in the justices' final ruling—appealed to essentialist understandings of sexual orientation.

As this example illustrates, an appeal to essentialism can be extremely effective, at least in the short run. However, it is also important to consider the long-range implications of such arguments and the more subtle, perhaps detrimental assumptions that underlie them. The fragility of these arguments was made strikingly clear in a powerful but little-known (at least among psychologists) flyer distributed by Colorado for Family Values (CFV), the primary impetus behind A2. This flyer explicitly referred to essentialist arguments employed by pro-LGB forces and systematically debunked them—often by an appeal to research readily available to us all. Both the Court's action and CFV's flyer will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 8; for now, these comments stand as a brief sketch of the dilemmas we face.

The point here is not that one or the other position—essentialist or constructionist—is ultimately "true;" as we have seen, according to constructionism such arguments for ultimate truth cannot be sustained by any match to a free-standing reality. Rather, the point is that invoking essentialist arguments opens the possibility for just such attacks as that issued by CFV. Forces that oppose LGB interests can easily muster information to counter the very arguments used to make a case on behalf of LGB rights. That case is, in the end, riddled with assumptions that are at best open to question and at worst fatal to pro-LGB positions.

It is also important to query yet another element of the essentialist position that has underpinned this political stance, namely the assertion that sexual orientation is not (ever) a matter of choice. We do not wish to argue here whether or not this is indeed the case. A great deal of literature indicates that most people do not experience sexual orientation as a matter of choice; a smaller but compelling body of work demonstrates that some people do experience it precisely that way. Rather than resolve this question, we wish to point out that this argument reflects and perpetuates an element of internalized homophobia. The question we must ask is this: why would it be a problem for sexual orientation to

be a choice? If lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities are truly healthy variations on human experience, why must we insist that they are not chosen in order for them to be deemed acceptable? Doesn't this argument—that sexual orientation is not a choice, that one can't help it—serve to reinforce the notion that it *is* a problem and that if one could chose otherwise, she or he surely should and would? In short, this argument subverts itself, rather than the homophobia that it was intended to target.

These concerns are beginning to filter into the literature dealing with psychology and sexual orientation. In an address at the American Psychological Association meeting honoring his work in the public interest, the prominent gay psychologist Gregory Herek (1997) raised just such issues. Herek urged psychologists to turn their energy to questions such as these in order to build a solid psychological foundation for addressing politics and public policy. Included among the topics he raised for ongoing discussion are the need to recognize the potential fluidity of sexual orientation and the variety of paths by which individuals come to one or another identity. In addition, the appeal to a distinction between identity and behavior, he suggested, while useful in many ways, may reinforce the condemnation of same-sex sexual behavior by implying that such behavior is, indeed, to be condemned. Further, a focus on discrimination against and differential treatment of LGBs may foster a mentality of victimization, hampering our attempts to assume a more affirmative, proactive stance in our public policy efforts. Finally, Herek questioned LGBs' embrace of the assertion that they are just like everyone else. While strategically a useful position, he maintained, this argument ignores the reality of stigma and its effects, thus obscuring the importance of questions such as how LGB individuals cope with the stress of living a stigmatized identity.

The issues raised here and those elaborated by Herek challenge truly fundamental assumptions infusing most work in the area of psychology and sexual orientation. Those assumptions have proven fruitful in their application to certain actual situations. At the same time, they pose quandaries that psychologists must address if understandings of sexual orientation and the application of those understandings are to be coherent and helpful to LGBs.

The question of how to resolve such dilemmas returns us to the initial purpose of this chapter: to lay out the two perspectives under consideration and to point out how each makes sense and at the same time raises

apparently intractable questions. Given this paradoxical situation, we are led not to ask which is "true" but what are the consequences of embracing one or the other? Who benefits? It is to questions such as these that we now turn as we explore each of the three areas of application addressed in this book: clinical practice, research and theory building, and public policy.

N O T E S

1. We use the terms "social constructionism" and "constructionism" interchangeably. Technically, the word "social" is crucial to the meaning we intend to convey here—namely, the shared, discursive nature of the construction of understandings. However, for ease of reading, we sometimes employ the shorter version with the intent of conveying the same meaning.

2. The distinction between sex and gender is a topic of considerable recent debate (e.g., Butler, 1993; Unger, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The term "gender" is largely replacing "sex," even where the distinction between the two has been held to be important to gender theory and psychological thought. For example, an APA task force report (Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 1991) recommended the use of "gender" to refer to male and female, although these are precisely the identities previously designated by the term "sex," in explicit contrast to gender. While it is our position that this distinction is crucial and that its loss poses a serious theoretical, empirical, and political problem, limitations of space preclude our addressing it at length here. Where the distinction seems important to our points, we will clarify our usage. In other instances, we will use the two terms interchangeably or simultaneously (i.e., sex/gender).

3. Considerable literature supports the proposition that all of these "attributes" of identity are also socially constructed (e.g., S. L. Bem, 1993; Bohan, 1992; Butler, 1990; Colker, 1996; Diamond, 1994; Gould, 1994; Gutin, 1994; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Lopez, 1997; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; Shreeve, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wills, 1994; Zuckerman, 1990). Their use as illustrations here appeals to the common assumption that they (like sexual orientation) are actual, extant qualities of individuals, an assumption we do not endorse.

4. Here is an area where the sex/gender distinction becomes relevant. We are fairly certain as a culture that the first members of each pair are "naturally" connected—i.e., that men (sex) are masculine (gender). Although the inevitably of this connection is currently under question in some quarters, the existence of the diagnostic category "gender identity disorder" points to our assumption that deviations from it violate our cultural understanding of normality (DSM-IV).

5. This position clearly represents a profound challenge to psychology's epistemological foundations. We will return to this issue as our discussions continue.

6. This phrase is a reference to a stigma management technique often noted among LGBs. It entails striving for excellence in every possible arena in order to compensate for or distract from the "flaw" of LGB identity. The technique is enshrined in the title of Reid's (1976) autobiography, *The Best Little Boy in the World*.

Chapter 2

Implications for Clinical Work

Glenda M. Russell and Janis S. Bohan

There has been only limited discussion of the relative merits of applying essentialist and social constructionist perspectives to clinical work that focuses on sexual orientation (e.g., Hart, 1984; Richardson, 1984, 1987; Schippers, 1989; Stein, 1996). Stein has pointed out that most mental health professionals subscribe to essentialist ideas about sexuality and, therefore,

> the concerns of social constructionists have not found their way into the discourse about approaches to evaluation and treatment of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men. (Stein, 1996, p. 90; see also Cass, 1996)

His statement could be broadened: neither has the social constructionist perspective become part of the discussion of how psychotherapists work with issues related to sexual orientation with heterosexuals. Given this limitation, it seems appropriate that we begin this chapter by returning to the underpinnings of essentialism and social constructionism.

The ontological assumption underlying essentialist approaches to issues of sexual orientation is that there exists a core self or identity, including a core sexual orientation. Epistemologically, this work is founded on the assumption that, if psychotherapists use the proper methods, they can identify and help clients to discover their real, true sexual orientation. The central question of psychotherapy related to sexual orientation within an essentialist perspective, then, is: who are you?

Moving to the social constructionist perspective, the ontological assumption is that discourse is central to the construction of one's reality, including one's identity. The epistemological assumption is that understanding is constructed within the dynamic context of psychotherapy.

The discourse between client and therapist results in the cocreation of new understandings. From this perspective, the central question of psychotherapy is: who do you want to be? Even then, it is assumed not that there will be a unitary answer to that question but rather that the answer will change across time and across circumstances. In order to answer this question in a personally meaningful way, other questions come into play: how did you come to want to be who you want to be? Out of what contexts did your personal beliefs, goals, and dreams emerge? Do you wish to explore and perhaps even challenge these original assumptions?

While it is relatively easy to make clear distinctions between the philosophical underpinnings of essentialism and those of social constructionism, the line of demarcation between psychotherapies undertaken within the two frameworks is less clear. As previous work indicates, there is often considerable overlap in what experienced practitioners actually do in psychotherapy, regardless of their divergent theoretical perspectives (e.g., Beutler, Machado, & Neufeldt, 1994; Lambert & Bergin, 1994). It is likely that the broad strokes we use here to distinguish essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on psychotherapy are not quite so clear-cut as our dichotomizing discussion might suggest.

Psychotherapy: Essentialist Perspectives

An essentialist perspective on psychotherapy with LGBs may be characterized either by an LGB-affirmative stance or by a stance that privileges a heterosexual orientation (Stein, 1996). The latter has been largely discredited by professional psychology, and we focus in this chapter on the former. The essentialist approach informs most LGB-affirmative psychotherapy—that is, therapy that supports LGBs in coming to a positive sense of their identity. Generally, in the essentialist approach to psychotherapy, the therapist acts as an interpreter and focuses on explanations that emphasize denotative understandings, general categories, and broader rules (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). Specific tenets related to sexual orientation within the essentialist perspective include the notion that sexual orientation is a real thing and that it is a fixed part of the individual. Further, sexual orientation is seen as a core aspect of a person's identity; it is so central that people necessarily define themselves in terms of their partners' sex. A final tenet is that sexual orientation is not some-

thing that individuals choose but, rather, something over which they have no real control.

The purpose of psychotherapy within the LGB-affirmative essentialist perspective is to assist individuals in determining the category of sexual orientation to which they belong. The techniques by which this determination is made may cover a broad range, depending on the theoretical perspective that the therapist brings to the task. An additional task of psychotherapy is to help LGB persons to become comfortable with their sexual orientations. Generally, the approach emphasizes the therapist's role as an expert (Gergen & Kaye, 1992). With respect to sexual orientation specifically, a central aspect of the therapist's expertise lies in knowing the client's real sexual orientation or knowing how to determine it.

Psychotherapy: Constructionist Perspectives

Social constructionist approaches cover a wide range of psychotherapeutic territory. The diversity of *constructionist* approaches to therapy is made even more complex by the presence of *constructivist* approaches that themselves represent a "polyphony of voices—not all of which are singing in the same key" (e.g., R. A. Neimeyer, 1995, p. 30). While the two words "constructionist" and "constructivist" have sometimes been used interchangeably (e.g., Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988), there have been increasingly apparent differences in how constructionist and constructivist therapies are described (see, for example, Hoffman, 1992). Still, there is no clear-cut dividing line between the two approaches.

Constructivist therapies generally emphasize a view of humans as active makers of meaning. According to Robert Neimeyer (1995), the four prominent metaphors of psychotherapy within the constructivist tradition are therapy as personal science, as selfhood development, as narrative reconstruction, and as conversational elaboration. In contrast to the constructivist emphasis on personal meanings, constructionist approaches tend to place relatively greater emphasis on the role of shared social understandings. In constructionist therapies, local contexts are emphasized over notions of universal principles that apply across contexts (e.g., Cecchin, 1992).

Overall, however, the emphasis within both constructionist and constructivist psychotherapies is not so much on the use of particular tech-

niques (Efran & Clarfield, 1992; G. J. Neimeyer, 1995) as on the creation of particular contexts. Especially within the ken of constructionist therapies, the emphasis is on a dynamic, dialogic relationship between the therapist and client. Fruggeri (1992), for example, suggests that client and therapist coconstruct a reality that allows for the emergence of new alternatives. The therapist does not function as an expert in the usual sense (Lax, 1992). Rather, the therapist's expertise is in asking questions, prompting explorations that allow the client to formulate new self-narratives; the new narratives, in turn, give way to new forms of agency (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992)—that is, new actions in the service of new understandings of self, others, and contexts.

An important aspect of social constructionist approaches to psychotherapy is the deconstruction of the categories that the client inevitably brings into the situation (e.g., Cecchin, 1992). Clients' beliefs—indeed, all their experiences—are formed in social contexts, including family groups, broader social arenas, and psychotherapy itself. The effort to understand the bases of clients' experiences opens up the possibility of questioning their most basic ways of organizing experience, including their beliefs about the therapist's expertise and the nature of the client-therapist relationship.

With regard to sexual orientation, constructionist psychotherapies typically open the possibility of exploring the nature and sources of a client's beliefs about and experiences of sexuality (e.g., Tiefer, 1987, 1991) and sexual orientation (e.g., Cass, 1996; Hart, 1984; Richardson, 1984, 1987; Schippers, 1989; Stein, 1996). Client and therapist work together to understand how the client's understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation developed over time and as a function of different relationships and contexts. This exploration often leads to questioning specific aspects of beliefs about and experiences with sexual orientation.

By way of illustration, a client might come to understand how he changed his narrative about his own experience of sexual orientation to fit prevailing notions of coming out in the LGB community. Or, an African American woman might focus some of her exploration on the match between her experiences as a lesbian and differing notions of what it is to be lesbian within the African American community and within the white LGB community. A client who identifies as bisexual might explore how his fundamentalist religious background interferes with his comfort at referring to himself as bisexual despite the appeal of that label in many other respects. As a final illustration, a client who is heterosexu-

ally identified might explore the ways he suppressed same-sex attractions because of homonegativity he encountered over the course of his life.

These illustrations are not meant to suggest what needs to be discussed in constructionist therapies. Nor are they meant to deny the need for therapists to meet clients where they are—that is, to understand and accept clients as they see and present themselves at any moment in time. Nor do we mean to suggest that the therapist's role is to engage in the essentialist–social constructionist debate with their clients. Rather, the illustrations offer a sample of the ways clients in constructionist-oriented therapies might question how they have come to understand and represent their own sexualities. In the process of such explorations, it is possible that new understandings—new narratives—will emerge. It is desirable, within the constructionist framework, that clients adopt an ongoing practice of questioning their own and others' constructions of sexual orientation.

Changing Contexts of Coming Out

One might well question what prompts the shift to a consideration of constructionist approaches to psychotherapy. We suggest that changing contexts surrounding the cultural meaning and individual experience of sexual orientation are in a state of flux and that psychological understandings and psychotherapeutic practice will benefit from attention to these shifts. Before offering a case study to illustrate the principles we have raised here, let us elaborate further on this argument for the impact of changing contexts.

In chapter 1, we raised the issue of how useful an essentialist position can be for individuals in the process of coming to an LGB identity—of "coming out." Individuals who live in a pervasively homophobic and heterosexist society typically and understandably experience some degree of confusion and distress when they experience same-sex attractions. They know—or at least can figure out quickly—that these feelings are not endorsed by most segments of their society. The disapprobation accorded same-sex attractions may be revealed in a number of ways, from a stunning silence about and invisibility of LGB feelings to outright condemnation of and even violence toward LGBs.

In such a context, LGB feelings find little legitimation and are therefore often experienced as disruptive. The homophobic and heterosexist

context creates the need for a personal and social transition during which persons come to acknowledge and gain comfort with their sexual orientations. This transition is the process we know as coming out. Finding a place where same-sex attractions are named, accepted, and celebrated typically provides a sense of relief (Cass, 1979, 1984; Troiden, 1989). It is no wonder that the movement from believing that one's feelings have little legitimation to the experience of having those feelings acknowledged is sometimes described as coming home. It could as well be described as an escape from the homophobia and heterosexism that had previously denied the legitimacy of those feelings.

Essentialist views of LGB orientations within psychology—including LGB-affirmative psychotherapies—developed in a context of severe homophobia and heterosexism. These views represented a radical departure from traditional pathologizing views, moving us a considerable distance toward dismantling homophobia and heterosexism. In many respects, these approaches were appropriate to the time and place in which they emerged. Those who developed LGB-affirmative approaches—which are grounded in validating rather than pathologizing essentialist views—were visionaries who moved LGB psychology from a role as a tool of oppression to a far more open exploration and affirmation of LGB lives. They laid the groundwork for any positive approaches to LGB psychology that followed.

Changing Contexts

While homophobia and heterosexism vary enormously in type and intensity across locales, both have been increasingly challenged in recent years. Due to these challenges and to the (consequent) increasing visibility of LGB identity and LGB communities, young people are identifying as LGB at earlier ages (D'Augelli, 1991, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1995). Many have access to more images and more positive images of LGBs as they move through childhood. They have labels for their same-sex feelings, they know others share them, and they can often imagine having access to a community where those feelings are acceptable—even if such access is not readily available.

This is not to suggest that LGB youth do not continue to confront significant problems rooted in homophobia and heterosexism. They undeniably do (e.g., for reviews see Bohan, 1996; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1995). But the nature of the homonegativity they

encounter, as well as their internal and external resources for managing it, is changing. Where challenges to overt homophobia and heterosexism have met with a measure of success, these expressions of bias are becoming more subtle and more covert. In concert, a growing range of resources is available to many youth as they explore sexual orientation identities. In the face of these and other changes, the context in which LGB youth are coming out is changing in an ongoing way and with no predictable endpoint.

In our recent experience, we have encountered two rather striking examples of such changing contexts and their implications for LGB youth and the process of coming out. One derives from the experience of one of our authors as consultant to a county-based coming-out program for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth. The young people in this program, based in Boulder, Colorado, speak of their self-identifications and their sexual and gender behaviors in remarkably fluid and noncategorical terms. Fewer of the youth identify as exclusively gay or lesbian; more are drawn to various bisexual (or, as we are inclined to refer to it, ambisexual) self-identifications. There has been an increasing tolerance for bisexual identifications in the group, as well as an apparently increased willingness to talk about behaviors that locate youth outside the exclusive gay or lesbian categories.

We have also encountered similar trends in a quite different context, among students and alumni of a gay/straight alliance associated with a high school in Salt Lake City, Utah. For several years, we have been conducting a still-ongoing research project interviewing many of these youth, their families and teachers, and LGB and heterosexual activists in the community (Bohan & Russell, in press). Over the course of the project, some of the youth have moved from speaking in deterministic, even biological language about sexual orientation to employing less deterministic models. While they certainly have not adopted a social constructionist model of sexual orientation and do not appear to know that language, several acknowledge appreciation of the role of fluidity of sexual orientation in some people's lives. The change is evident in the alliance's copresident's recent estimates of the sexual orientations of club members (most of whom we have not met). After suggesting the proportion of members who identify as gay, lesbian, or heterosexual, she added that nearly half are what she termed "spectrum people." These are youth who do not identify with any of the usual categories of sexual orientation. Rather, they say that they fall somewhere along a hypothetical

spectrum of sexual orientation and resist being forced into a particular category.[1]

Observations such as these suggest that, as homophobia and heterosexism are challenged and shift in their meaning and manifestation, the context for coming out is indeed changing, as well. At least some LGB (and "spectrum") youth appear to be experiencing themselves in different and noncategorical terms; their understandings of themselves and of sexual orientation seem to be changing. These changes may reflect progress in decreasing homophobia and heterosexism, progress that has created a different context for coming out. Whatever the source of such shifts, they suggest that new approaches to understanding sexual orientation are called for. Optimistically, it is possible that cultural change around issues of sexual orientation may be a harbinger of future directions for psychology. New paradigms emerge from contextual shifts (Kuhn, 1970; Toulmin, 1982), and these new contexts may require different paradigms for thinking about and conducting psychotherapy with LGB individuals.

A Case Study

As a means of exploring what such a paradigm might look like, we now consider the impact of the potential fluidity, flexibility, and volitional qualities of sexual orientation that have been noted in the literature (e.g., Bart, 1993; Golden, 1987, 1994, 1996; Jennes, 1992; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Klein, 1993; Whisman, 1996). We present a few case examples from our own experience to illustrate the importance of these notions in clinical work and refer the reader to this literature for further discussion.

The first case study introduces the clinical implications of essentialist and social constructionist approaches to psychotherapy. We describe the case first from the essentialist and then from the constructionist perspective. As we mentioned earlier, it is doubtful that clinical work fits so neatly into essentialist or constructionist categories. At the same time, there are some significant differences between the two approaches that can be illustrated with the case study method. In addition, by focusing specifically on issues of sexual orientation, we are decontextualizing the case from myriad other clinical considerations. In actual clinical practice, of course, a client rarely enters into therapy with a single, focused

issue that has been disjoined from the rest of his or her life, and it is a rare effective therapy that conforms to such a singular focus.

The case study involves Steve, a white man of about forty years of age. We offer it as an illustration of coming-out issues in an adult client. Steve has been married for twelve years and describes his marriage, including his sexual relationship with his wife, Laura, in generally satisfactory terms. Recently, Steve has become increasingly interested in images of sexual encounters with men. He reports having had no history of sexual contact with men, though he has always been at least vaguely excited by fantasies of sex with men. Until lately, Steve has been able to "deny" (his word) his excitement in relation to and his attractions to men. Steve's goal for therapy is "to discover [his] true sexual nature." He adds that he needs to find out once and for all whether he is gay. (Notice that egosyntonically heterosexually identified persons do not usually express parallel needs to understand their sexual orientation.)

Essentialist Psychotherapy with Steve

Steve approaches his psychotherapy with an explicitly essentialist goal: he is looking to discover something about himself, something that is real but has heretofore been primarily hidden. His understanding of sexual orientation is marked by rigid categories of heterosexual and gay, with barely any room even for (a third category of) bisexuality. Steve seeks to know which category fits his "true self."

Steve's essentialist approach reflects the dominant mode of thought about sexual orientation among his friends and, indeed, in much of the society at large. Thus, whatever the origins of his understanding about sexual orientation, it receives continuous support in most of his relationships and in public discourse. His essentialist construal of sexual orientation also is consistent with how Steve approaches his life in general. He holds steady and relatively inflexible assumptions about himself and the world. He has difficulty making decisions because he takes it as a given that doing so involves a search for the "best" one. He places strong emphasis on doing the right thing, a value that he attributes to his family of origin. When he views himself as having failed to do the right thing, he is quite self-critical.

Within an essentialist approach to psychotherapy, it is suggested that there is *a* single sexual orientation that is the "right" one for Steve. If Steve does not know what his sexual orientation is, then something must

have prevented him from discovering it in the past. The goal of therapy is to help Steve to figure out what his true sexual orientation is and, by extension, has always been. (This goal is not different from lay portrayals of therapy's goals in matters other than sexual orientation; therapy is seen as a search for the "true" self). Doing so will mean that Steve has discovered one important aspect of his true nature. It is not assumed that Steve has any real choice about or direction over his true identity. As is often said within the context of LGB-affirmative stances, the only volitional aspects of Steve's sexual orientation are whether he expresses, accepts, and/or discloses it, not what it actually is.

The therapist's task in this therapy is to guide Steve in the process of introspecting about and discovering his true sexual nature. The therapist will be alert to particular clues that suggest both the presence of a true sexual orientation and motivations for and methods by which Steve has inhibited his understanding of his true sexual nature. Steve's job is to provide the therapist with enough information to provide a transhistorical self-description from which the therapist and Steve can ferret out the right clues and come to solutions.

Steve's Relationship to Himself. The essentialist approach in this therapy has some specific implications for how Steve sees himself. He assumes there is some central aspect of himself about which he has lacked insight. In his words, there has been something he hasn't "been able to confront." Confronting and coming to terms with his sexuality, as it is perceived within the essentialist framework, can be a liberating and growth-producing transition for Steve. It may offer him a sense of increased courage and self-awareness, as well as an enhanced sense of consistency between his public and private experiences.

On the other hand, within the essentialist perspective, if Steve now sees himself as gay, then he always was gay. He must conclude, then, that he has been fooling himself or lacking in self-awareness or lacking in courage or some combination of these. None of these options promotes a positive sense of himself, nor do they help to mitigate Steve's self-critical propensities.

The essentialist approach that Steve brings to therapy, coupled with the essentialist framework for the therapy, inspire an aggressive self-searching. Steve's view is that there is an important secret locked within himself, and he must struggle with himself to release it. To be unable to unlock this secret would suggest that Steve has been some combination

of misguided, wrong, lacking in insight, and weak. This approach inclines Steve to have a limited sense of power about his sexuality; it has a hold on him. It is easy to imagine his having little sense of joy about his sexuality. It is difficult for him to trust his capacities to see and experience himself clearly. Whatever the conclusion about the nature of his sexual orientation, Steve's approach to it almost inevitably starts off with an apology.

Steve's Relationship with Laura. In keeping with his own and the therapy's essentialist framework, if Steve decides he is gay, this means he has been gay all along. This conclusion arguably relegates his wife to being a part of what is now seen as a false history, despite Steve's view that he loves Laura and that their marriage is generally positive. This view extends Steve's difficulty with integrating a transhistorical view of himself to a new level; he now has difficulty integrating his interpersonal history with his wife.

If Steve decides his true nature is to be gay, he is in an awkward position with Laura. In keeping with essentialist categories, a gay man does not "belong" in a heterosexual marriage. There is not much he can do about being gay, though; he is at the mercy of genetics or nature or true identity. (And here is where genes or nature or true identity begins to sound like a runaway train.) This is a situation that invites Steve to leave the marriage, rather than to work with Laura toward a mutual understanding of the meaning to their relationship of his changing understanding of his sexuality.

Alternatively, if Steve and Laura stay in their marriage, then two possibilities follow. First, his newly found true self is in danger of being perceived as a false self, much as it must have been before his awakening. Steve may now have the problem of determining how he can be certain that his heterosexual identity is true and permanent, since he has been confused before. On the other hand, an essentialist perspective may assist Steve and Laura in changing their relationship as smoothly as possible. Their seeing sexual orientation as a nonvolitional phenomenon about which Steve simply lacked adequate information may offer the potential for decreasing difficult feelings as Steve and Laura renegotiate their relationship.

Steve's Relationships with Other People. Within an essentialist framework, movement from one to another sexual orientation category entails dra-

matic shifts in one's understanding of self along a number of dimensions. Steve's sense of himself as a gay man probably will differ significantly from his earlier view of himself as a heterosexual man. If Steve is gay, this has implications for interpersonal relationships beyond the one with his wife. If Steve does not disclose his "new" sexual orientation, then others—family and friends, for example—will be the position of dealing with a person who has changed without their being able to pinpoint what that change is or what meaning it has to their respective relationships with Steve. For his part, Steve may be left to experience a discontinuity between his public and private experiences of self. On the other hand, if Steve discloses that he is really gay (and has been all along), then others will be left to wonder just who it was that they had been relating to before Steve's discovery. They may also wonder how and when they can form a new or different relationship with the "true" Steve.

Psychotherapy within an essentialist view of sexual orientation may assist Steve in coming to an understanding of his sexual orientation. It carries the advantage of doing so in a way that allows the world to seem relatively simple to understand, stable over time, and generally manageable. However, it may also leave Steve with some discontinuous understanding of himself. How does Steve, for example, integrate his positive relationship with Laura—including its sexual aspects—with his new understanding that he has always been gay? How can Steve escape the sense that his sexual orientation is something beyond his control? How does Steve resolve his long-standing failure to be aware of his real sexual orientation? How can he be sure he has it "correct" this time? These are some of the questions that are likely to go unaddressed when client and therapist adhere to a strictly essentialist construal of sexual orientation in their psychotherapeutic work together.

Social Constructionist Psychotherapy with Steve

From a social constructionist view, sexual orientation is always situated in and always influenced by time, place, and culture. It always has a localized meaning for the person. The constructionist view is not so much concerned with categories of sexual orientation as it is with understanding how these categories reflect and, in turn, influence social and cultural tensions and expectancies. Sexual orientation is assumed to have unique meanings for each individual. Just as socially constructed categories of sexual orientation change over time, so, too, might the mean-

ings of sexual orientation that an individual makes over the course of a lifetime. Of particular clinical interest within a social constructionist perspective are the ways in which an individual takes in and acts on construals of sexual orientation, how these construals interact with other construals held by the person, and how construals are expressed and changed in relationships with other people.

Challenges Posed by the Constructionist Approach. A therapist using this approach must find a balance between meeting Steve and his construals of sexual orientation where they are and inviting Steve to examine those construals over time. The social constructionist approach may be expected to be especially challenging to a person like Steve, who describes himself as drawn to clear-cut distinctions, categories, and judgments. The approach asks a client to be open to self-examination and self-questioning and to tolerate ambiguity. It invites Steve to move beyond not only his own but also his world's categories of sexual orientation.

Within the constructionist approach, assertions about the origins of sexual orientation are not made. If there is any "final say" with respect to sexual orientation, it is in the meanings that the client makes of it. The constructionist framework does not assume that Steve (or the therapist) is a repository of some ultimate truth with respect to his sexual orientation. Rather, it is assumed that Steve needs to make meaning of his sexuality. His meaning will include understandings of his own impulses and how he makes sense of them, as well as attention to choices about the kind of life he wishes to make for himself, as a sexual being and otherwise. The framework assumes that Steve will inevitably define and understand his sexuality not in isolation but in the contexts of other influences made explicit in therapy, including marital, familial, social, and cultural influences.

The approach allows for and even assumes that the meanings Steve attributes to various aspects of sexual orientation may well change over time. If Steve changes his understanding of his sexuality, that does not necessarily suggest that he has formerly been fooling himself, lacking in self-awareness, or lacking in courage. It may be that Steve is changing, in which case psychotherapy is an excellent context for him to explore all factors, intrinsic and extrinsic, that have bearing on his changes. A change in Steve's understanding of his sexuality could reflect multiple influences. Several such influences—each of which may or may not be operative in Steve's particular case—are offered here as illustrations of the

virtually limitless range of factors that might prompt a person to reconsider meanings of sexual orientation.

For example, perhaps Steve has become more aware of sexuality in general. Perhaps a greater sense of comfort in his heterosexual relationship has opened the way for him to explore same-sex feelings. Perhaps Steve has become friends with some LGB people, and contact with them has allowed him to think about same-sex issues differently. Maybe Steve is changing in the degree to which he feels bound by conventions of various sorts and is, therefore, more open to considering less conventional forms of sexuality. Perhaps his relationship with a male friend has grown intimate in unanticipated ways that suggest the possibility of sexual expression. Or perhaps the recent death of a parent has freed him to consider ways of being that formerly were not available to him.

There is no way of predicting what will capture Steve's attention as he explores his sexuality in psychotherapy—and the same is true for any client. Steve's understanding of his sexuality will reflect both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that bear on how he feels about himself as a sexual being. He may focus attention on the nature of messages about sexuality—in general and specifically about different orientations—that he has received in the recent and more distant past and how he has internalized and made sense of those messages. Steve might want to consider how he came to believe that people fit into discrete categories of sexual expression and what that belief has to do with his general tendency to order his world according to strict notions of nominal and moral classes. Steve might want to consider his views of each sexual orientation category. Has he internalized sexual orientation notions from particular sources and in particular ways? Does he treat them as categorical imperatives that inevitably imply a set of rules for how he is to live his life, or does he use the categories as a basis for a social definition that needs to be adapted for his unique uses? Although Steve is not a likely candidate for affirmatively answering a related question, other clients might be: is there something to be gained by issuing a fundamental challenge to the categories of sexual orientation?

In more practical terms, Steve might question how he imagines himself expressing different sexual understandings. Is he able to imagine that he could begin to think of himself in broader sexual terms and yet remain in his generally positive relationship with Laura? How will his changing construal of himself as a sexual/relational being influence his marital relationship? Can Steve imagine Laura only as a barrier to his

fully expressing himself sexually, or can he consider the possibility that his personal evolution may have positive consequences for the relationship? How does Steve want to deal with the fact that his changing construal of himself as a sexual being presents ethical challenges to him as a social being and as a husband? The social constructionist framework allows for and even invites attention to difficult ethical and moral questions such as these (e.g., Efran & Clarfield, 1992). Seeing Steve's sexuality in less deterministic terms may introduce the dimension of Steve's responsibility to Laura and their relationship in a much more pointed fashion than would seeing his sexuality in essentialist terms. In addition, for Steve, exploring issues around his relationship with Laura could well involve more general attention to how he understands right and wrong and responsibility—areas he has identified as carrying a particular charge for him personally.

In the course of exploring his understanding of sexual orientation, Steve might also consider how his changes affect his nonmarital relationships. From a social constructionist perspective, relationships are cocreations of the parties involved, as well as influenced by context, history, and so forth (e.g., Sampson, 1993b). The occurrence of significant change in one person in the relationship creates a new context for everyone in the relationship. Considerations in this regard might lead Steve to focus on the kind of friend he wants to be as well as on how he might express his new understanding of his sexual self.

Related to Steve's evolving understandings, he might want to spend some time in therapy exploring how negative images of sexuality in general and LGB orientations in particular have influenced his views of himself as a sexual being. Erotophobia and homonegativity tend to exert ongoing influences and constraints on many, if not most, people's understandings of themselves as sexual beings. Psychotherapy designed to assist Steve in the process of making decisions about sexuality would likely require some attention to erotophobic and homonegative influences. The precise nature of how such attitudes have affected Steve is expected to be unique to him; however, some broad conceptualizations of erotophobic and homonegative constructs can be used to help with that process.

Going about the process of exploring sexuality within a social constructionist approach does not guarantee Steve protection against self-criticism. However, self-criticism is not necessary, either. Moving out of an essentialist construal frees Steve from having to see his heterosexual

history as a hypocrisy or a sham. He can change his understanding of himself as a sexual person without having been wrong or weak originally. Working within a social constructionist framework opens the possibility for a gentler self-questioning. There is no hidden secret to be unearthed. Rather, it is assumed that everyone changes, and the challenges of changing involve self-exploration and moral choices.

The social constructionist approach requires that Steve move toward a position of trusting himself, his perceptions, and his choices—even though these are seen as emergents of particular contexts at particular times. He does not have the benefit of an ultimate truth or an all-knowing therapist. It is an approach that offers Steve the possibility of developing his unique understanding of his sexuality rather than subscribing to broader social categories. The social constructionist perspective does not assume that Steve can—or should—live outside the influence of social constructions. The perspective does assume that Steve's relationship to those social constructions can be more thoughtful and personalized and can involve a greater degree of volition.

Psychotherapeutic work within the social constructionist framework makes different demands of Steve than does work within an essentialist approach. The constructionist approach requires Steve to tolerate ambiguity, and it may require more time in therapy. Not everyone is open to such requirements; nor is everyone able to draw on the internal and external resources necessary for that kind of work. The set of personal and social matters that is relevant for a given individual's discussion of sexuality is unique at any given time. The social constructionist therapist interested in Steve's understanding of his sexuality might consider Goode's summary:

> Certainly Freud was right when he said that seemingly innocuous activities and objects can represent sex. But Kenneth Burke was equally correct in writing the opposite: that sex often stands for something else. (Goode, 1978, p. 304)

The case study of Steve suggest some of the implications of the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives in clinical work with issues of sexual orientation. Perhaps the differences between the two perspectives are best expressed by the differences in how we have written about them: the essentialist approach has a specified outcome and a method of reaching it; the social constructionist approach implies a context for and a process of questioning, rather than a specified outcome. Therapies en-

acted within these two perspectives may not always look different from the outside, but each nonetheless draws on vastly different assumptions and suggests different possibilities at virtually every step in the therapeutic process.

The Phenomenology of Sexual Orientation

One dimension of difference between essentialist and social constructionist approaches to psychotherapy involves how client and therapist work with phenomenological aspects of sexual orientation. Many therapists maintain essentialist notions of sexual orientation at least in part because they hear clients' narratives that are steeped in essentialist assumptions and experiences (e.g., Cass, 1996; Whisman, 1996). Indeed, it is clear that therapists need to meet clients where they are with respect to sexual orientation, just as with any other issue. Therapists take their clients' experiences as givens, not because they always endorse clients' conclusions or their actions but because therapists and clients together need to understand what *is* in order to move toward what could be. Essentialist and constructionist perspectives treat this notion of what *is* differently: the former construes it as referring to an extralinguistic reality, whereas the latter construes it as referring to the client's current understanding of a given experience.

One way of understanding therapy in general—and certainly a way consistent with social constructionism—is to view it as a process of considering perspectives different from those that a client customarily employs. Psychotherapy represents an invitation to clients

> to consider how they would experience their lives if they operated from different assumptions—how they might act, what resources they could call upon in different contexts, what new solutions might emerge. (Gergen & Kay, 1992, p. 183)

One of the fundamental tasks of the therapist is to offer a bridge between understanding a client's present life and understanding the possibilities for change. In most areas of psychotherapy, therapists attend to this task with familiarity, if not always with ease. However, when the focus of the therapy is an issue that is sensitive, such as sexual orientation, then it is more difficult for therapists and clients to ask even simple questions in the face of the potential disruptiveness of such topics. There is, instead, a

tendency to avoid discussing sexual orientation any more than necessary, lest such discussions reveal homonegativity in therapist and/or client and threaten the smooth relationship between them (Russell & Greenhouse, 1997). Indeed, we know of LGB persons who, after initial interviews with prospective therapists, ruled out any therapist who had made *any* comment about their sexual orientations. Homonegativity is so frequently encountered that any reference to sexual orientation may be construed as reflecting homonegativity. Obviously, if a therapist raises the issue of sexual orientation with a client, it must be done with some sensitivity to these dynamics. Nonetheless, the fact that the issue carries an emotional and social loading does not obviate the need to discuss it or the potential benefit from doing so.

Clinical Presentations of Coming-Out Issues

We discussed previously how LGB persons typically go through a process of coming out, as well as some of the advantages and disadvantages of understanding coming out in essentialist terms. To extend that analysis further, consider here how we might look at coming out through the lens of social constructionism.

Clients often present essentialist renditions of their development of an LGB identity. Many LGBs, whether clients in psychotherapy or not, experience the coming out process as a journey with a natural starting point and an inevitable endpoint. They have discovered some important aspect of themselves and they learn to accept and even embrace that. However, within constructionism, just as sexual orientation is a social construction, so too is the concept of coming out as discovery.

To suggest that the very notion of coming out is itself a social construction does not ignore or deny the intense feelings typically associated with the experience. Nor does it undermine the personal and social significance of coming out, either as an event or as a process. However, the social constructionist view does carry the demand to see the clinical presentation of coming out in terms of social discourse as well as in personal terms. Put another way, LGB clients who are coming out—or who are discussing coming out—do not do so in a vacuum. Not only their understandings but their very experiences of coming out are inextricably tied to contextual factors. How clients attend to, understand, and interpret what happens during the coming-out process is influenced by the social constructions of LGB identity and of coming out. Sometimes clients re-

construct their own histories to conform to current notions of coming out, a process that has been referred to as retrospective interpretation or biographical reconstruction (see Whisman, 1996).

One way of viewing this is to say that a given client's understanding of sexual orientation is not distinct from the social discourse on sexual orientation. From a social constructionist perspective, any issue raised by any client is influenced by social discourse. Because many of the assumptions about sexual orientation carried by therapists and clients alike are taken as self-evident, it may be useful to explore the impact of social discourse by examining a completely different topic whose distance from this one allows a different perspective.

Codependency as a Social Construction

Most experienced therapists have seen many constructs take root in popular psychology and eventually find their way into clinical practice. One such construct—and one that helps us illustrate our point—is codependency.[2] Before the term "codependency" found its way into popular parlance, the construct that the term identified was rarely explicitly formulated in clinical settings. Symptoms that later would become associated with codependency undoubtedly were discussed by clients and their therapists, using other language and generated by and, in turn, generating different understandings. This observation does not suggest that elements of what came to be known as codependency did not exist before the label was applied to them. Neither does the observation imply that people made up the idea of codependency out of nothing. It does suggest that, until someone offered the term and a definition, there was no understanding of codependency per se.

Once the notion of codependency caught on among the general public, it also became an issue that clients brought to therapy. Having the construct of codependency in social discourse gave people a way to understand and make sense of some things that were going on in their lives. We need not assume that codependency was the only way or the best way for everyone to make sense of experiences, only that it was a useful concept for some. As the construct caught on, it seemed to take on a life of its own. For a period of time, one encountered it on talk shows, in clinical practice, in jokes, and in serious conversations between friends. From a weak constructionist perspective, the concept of codependency made meaning of many people's experiences. From a strong constructionist

perspective, by naming something "codependency," we constructed a pattern of experience termed codependency. We identified a set of characteristics and a kind of history that went with codependency. We treated it as a syndrome and made attributions to it to explain people's behavior. We convened therapy and self-help groups for people who had problems with codependency. Eventually, these people were referred to as codependents. We reified codependency, conferring on it status as an identity that existed outside the language we used to refer to it. What had not existed became named and ultimately became reality—first as an adjective and eventually as a noun.

Over time, one encountered the concept of codependency virtually everywhere. Moreover, clients often came into therapy with the self-identified problem of codependency. What various clients actually meant when they labeled themselves codependent was not always the same. In fact, it became necessary—as it always does—to have clients put the label into their own words and describe their understandings of its influence on their lives. None of this is meant to suggest that the construct of codependency was not useful to some people; it clearly was. It is also the case that codependency, as a construct, seemed to become so reified and overused that, at times, it obscured other equally or more helpful ways for some people to make sense of their experiences.

It is perhaps easier to see how the construct of codependency was influenced by social discourse than it is to see that sexual orientation has borne similar influences. Codependency is both a younger and a less socially charged construct than is sexual orientation. In addition, codependency, as a construct, was generally seen as involving social-developmental roots. Sexual orientation, on the other hand, has been viewed as having more biological roots (at least in most pro-LGB quarters), which renders its socially constructed quality more elusive. (The political reasons for the confluence of pro-LGB positions and the essentialist framework are discussed in chapter 9.) Nonetheless, there are clear parallels between the constructed nature of codependency and that of both sexual orientation and coming out.

Coming Out as a Social Construction

Just as individuals come to see themselves as codependent, so might individuals embrace sexual orientation categories and the discourse of coming out to make sense of their experiences in a culture that makes

those labels so readily available. Essentialist renditions of sexual orientation exist throughout much of the culture, including in the LGB community and among heterosexually identified people who support LGB rights. Given the constructed nature of these concepts, therapists who work with LGB clients might invite clients to look carefully at the understandings of sexual orientation that they bring to psychotherapy.

Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Coming Out

One further note about clinical work with issues related to coming out is warranted. Coming out, as we understand it, is meaningless in the absence of homophobia and heterosexism. If there were no homonegativity, then engaging in same-sex behavior/relationships would simply be something that (some) people did. It would not represent a "role exit" from heterosexual life (D'Augelli, 1993), nor would it require a new self-definition (Herdt, 1989a). All of the tasks of coming out and indeed the very construct of coming out make sense only because of homonegativity. While this is an obvious social observation, it also has implications at the personal and clinical levels. Seeing the influences of homonegativity in their lives offers LGBs the possibility of demystifying some aspects of their existence and may well reduce the potential for internalizing homonegativity. Just as important, seeing homonegative influences in their personal narratives offers LGBs the possibility of envisioning narratives with fewer homonegative influences. In other words, the more realistically LGBs see homonegativity, the more they can see beyond homonegativity.

Sexuality: Powerlessness or Creativity?

The notion of sexual orientation as a biologically derived phenomenon over which a person has no volition carries clinical implications that should not be ignored. The experience of sexual orientation as beyond one's control carries the potential for making sexuality into a burden that one must carry rather than the creative outlet that it might be. It is a small step from the born-that-way argument so common to LGB discourse to the phenomenological sense of being helpless and out of control. Taking this step is made easier by pervasive homonegativity. Homonegativity sometimes presents burdens of such magnitude that people can come to associate their sexuality with stress and strain (see,

e.g., Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1992), rather than with something pleasurable.

We are not saying that LGB persons cannot position themselves affirmatively if they adopt a born-that-way argument. However, we do not typically hear LGB-affirmative statements in the born-that-way rhetoric. In fact, what frequently follows claims of biological causation of sexual orientation are statements such as this one:

> Why would I choose to be something that horrifies my parents, that could ruin my career, that my religion condemns, and that could cost me my life if I dared to walk down the street holding hands with my boyfriend? (Quoted in Marcus, 1993, p. 9)

The political purposes of such statements are clear, as we see in chapter 9. LGBs do encounter a broad range of homonegative experiences. However, what is missing at the personal level might also be posed as another question: "Why would I choose to give up an aspect of my existence that brings together some of the most creative and joyous and generous urges in human experience?" In their clinical work with LGBs, therapists would do well to maintain alertness to the *potential* consequences of their clients' adopting a biological model of sexual orientation. Most therapists would view as irresponsible the failure to question heterosexual clients' feelings of burden and helplessness in relation to their sexuality. And yet, with the best of intentions, therapists often allow LGB clients to maintain narratives that hold equally negative views of their sexuality.

A Few Examples

We conclude this chapter with vignettes drawn to illustrate how a social constructionist understanding of sexual orientation allows for fluidity and requires a willingness to look beneath the surface of categories.

Refusing Labels

Our first vignette involves Sharon, a forty-five-year-old female who is a client in psychotherapy. Upon entering therapy, Sharon identified herself as a lesbian who had been in a relationship with another woman, Nancy, for nine years. Together, Sharon and her partner had parented three children from the latter's heterosexual marriage. Her reason for

seeing a therapist had to do with the dissolution of that relationship; it was not a welcome prospect for Sharon.

It was only after considerable grieving about the end of her relationship that Sharon began to talk about how she saw herself moving toward other relationships. In the process of such explorations, she reported the following history. In her early twenties, Sharon had had relationships with men and with women. These were about equal in number over time; none was thought by Sharon to be permanent. She refused to label her sexual orientation during those years, despite considerable pressure to do so from various sources.

Sharon's relationship with Nancy was the first one that involved cohabitation and the mutual expectation of a lifelong commitment. She immersed herself in her new family, including Nancy's three children. It was in the context of parenting that Sharon began to feel isolated. She worried that the children felt isolated as well, an observation she attributed to their having two mothers rather than a more customary familial arrangement. Sharon, with Nancy's approval, initiated efforts to find similar families. In the process of doing so, she found herself referring to Nancy and herself as lesbian mothers. Sharon was aware that she was using a label to denote her sexual orientation for the first time in her life.

As she retrospectively explored that change, Sharon realized that she had been comfortable with her refusal to self-label until two things occurred. First, her felt commitment to Nancy suggested that she would remain in a relationship with a woman permanently—hence, she was in a lesbian relationship. Second, her concern for their three children's isolation prompted Sharon to look for similar families. Using the shorthand of "lesbian mother" was instrumental in her search. The adjectival use of "lesbian" to describe her relationship with Nancy now gave way to seeing herself as "a lesbian mother."

As she reflected on these changes, Sharon was clear that the end of her relationship with Nancy signaled a new context. The familiar language no longer seemed as appropriate, and Sharon again began to think of herself as having no particular label for sexual orientation. This was of no concern to her; she was less comfortable imposing a label that might not fit her in new contexts than she was going without a label.

Sharon is someone who can be comfortable without describing herself in terms of a particular orientation. The task of therapy is for Sharon to understand the pressures that push her to self-label and to find a basis for resisting those pressures. Sharon's case offers a contrast to the more

commonly described situation in which a person who is exclusively in- volved in lesbian or gay relationships refuses to accept the respective label due to internalized homophobia. In those cases, the task of therapy is to explore homonegative messages that clients have internalized, thus enabling them to feel greater latitude about whether to adopt labels sig- nifying sexual orientation and, if so, which ones. Such discussions are likely to include attention to the advantages and disadvantages of label- ing and of various choices of labels.

There has been considerable discussion not only in the LGB-affirma- tive psychotherapy literature but also in LGB popular parlance of cases suggesting that some lesbian or gay persons reject those labels at least in part because of profound internalized homophobia. Far less attention has been given to how internalized homophobia can prompt people to adopt the labels "lesbian" or "gay." Because nonheterosexual behavior has been regarded in such negative terms, engaging in nonheterosexual rela- tionships tends to be taken as a disqualification of a heterosexual iden- tity. One piece of evidence that one is not "fully" heterosexual is taken as proof that one is lesbian or gay.[3] As with antimiscegenation laws, which assert that one drop of nonwhite blood means that a person is black (Cose, 1995; Morganthau, 1995), one suggestion of nonheterosexual be- havior is enough to mean a person is lesbian or gay. Both assertions are predicated on the notion that being black or being gay or lesbian is so overwhelmingly bad that even a hint of such a characteristic changes the person—and, according to racist and homophobic thinking—does so for the worse. A person who has internalized this kind of thinking may fall into self-labeling as gay or lesbian on the basis of a single same-sex en- counter and nothing more. In that case, adopting the label "gay" or "les- bian" reflects internalized homophobia rather than its absence.

This is the case with heterosexually identified people, as well as with those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Both in clinical situations and elsewhere, we have talked with heterosexually identified people who find the label confining and constraining. For some heterosexuals, the label does not capture the experience and full sense they have of their sexuality. For some heterosexuals, the label signifies a degree of social and political privilege they do not wish to have. For others, the matter is more personal: using the label heterosexual does not say enough about who they are and, in fact, the label, because it carries so much connota- tive baggage, may misrepresent them in some important ways.

Having the term "bisexual" available does not necessarily solve the problem. This term is most frequently used to describe a third category, somewhere between gay/lesbian and heterosexual, and as such is still anchored by these two categories. For some, the term is an affirmative statement of something that is closer to their personal experiences than are the alternatives, capturing the dynamism of their experienced sexual being more than do other labels. However, the term implies a degree of homogeneity that disguises the tremendous variability among those who do not identify as lesbian/gay or as heterosexual (e.g., Klein, 1993; Ross, 1991; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994).

Insisting on Labels

One woman of our acquaintance, Penny, describes her history as follows. For the first decade of her sexual experience, Penny was involved sexually with women; she sometimes felt sexually attracted to men, but she did not act on those attractions. For the second decade of her sexual activity, Penny has been involved exclusively with men, though she has been attracted to women at times. Penny found it helpful when she read that one pattern of bisexuality involves alternating attractions to the two sexes, sometimes over the course of many years. She liked the sense of finding her experience reflected in an article on bisexuality. That, however, was not the basis for her choosing the label "bisexual." Rather, she likes that label because, even though her sexual relationships have been exclusively with men for more than a decade, she does not want to speak out of existence her earlier relationships with women. They represent an important aspect of her personal history that Penny wants to keep alive. She is quite aware that, in identifying as bisexual, she opens herself up to the possibility of social disapprobation for not claiming heterosexual status, even though that label accurately captures her present behavior. The label, however, does not accurately represent who Penny experiences herself to be.

It is interesting to contrast Penny's approach with Sharon's. Penny prefers a label that offers a transhistorical and transcontextual description of her sexual orientation; Sharon has used a label only when it reflected a given situation, refusing any transhistorical label. Taken together, Sharon and Penny demonstrate the complexity of people's choice of labels and, even more, the complexity of underlying experiences of

sexuality. From these examples we can see that it is necessary for each person to understand her or his own experience and to take into account how the insistence on or refusal of labels will best reflect the kind of individual each wants to be. Such choices are inevitably influenced by social relationships and political realities. In the absence of universal consistencies among the various dimensions along which sexual orientation is defined and described, the choice of whether to label and, if so, which label to select must rest with individuals themselves. No one else, including a therapist, is in a position to impose a judgment on such matters.

An awareness of the complexity that underlies experiences of sexual orientation identity is likely to enhance psychotherapeutic work with clients of any sexual orientation. Such awareness offers the potential for cocreating with clients a context in which meanings about sexual orientation can be explored and challenged and transformed.

NOTES

1. While the refusal to accept categorical labels sometimes reflects internalized homophobia—that is, a judgment that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual would be bad—this is not always the case. For some individuals, available categories may simply be inadequate to capture their experience.

2. Our aim here is not to discuss codependency in any detail, but rather to use the concept to illustrate how a psychological construct is influenced by social discourse. For those unfamiliar with the concept, the term originated in the addiction field and was initially applied to individuals who engaged in dysfunctionally dependent relationships with alcoholic family members. A. W. Smith (1988, p. 3) described codependency as "a condition, actually a state of being, that results from adapting to dysfunction (possibly addiction) in a significant other."

3. The persistence of homogeneity in this regard is especially striking when we consider the research that contradicts the idea of perfect correspondence between sexual behavior and categorical labels. See chapter 6.

The Best of Both Worlds
*Essentialism, Social Constructionism,
and Clinical Practice*

Douglas C. Haldeman

My godson, who is a thirteen-year-old soccer superstar, recently dyed his hair platinum blonde. Good as it looks, it caused me to wonder aloud to his mother, who is a developmental psychologist, how we know when adolescence is over. She replied, "When we've separated ourselves enough that we feel safe going back into the stew." Not unlike where we are developmentally in LGB psychology, actually. And though the debate about cultural assimilation has been going for some time now, it has only recently come to the clinical practice of psychology. How secure are we with the cohesiveness of LGB psychology and its contribution to LGB society as a whole? Are we ready to break the mold of tradition in conceptualizing clinical practice, or at least move out of the box?

The discussion of how to conceptualize clinical practice with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients is in a transition that parallels our evolving understanding of sexual orientation itself. As such, it is an opportune time to examine long-held beliefs and to see where modification of these beliefs can bring clinical practice closer to the needs of an evolving LGB community. Historically, we have seen an essentialist position dominate our thinking with regard to the clinical implications of issues for LGB clients. This position may now be strengthened, and brought closer to the complex realities of sexual orientation, by integrating a social constructionist perspective. After all, if adolescence is indeed the "second autonomy," then we should be able to modify our structures without fearing a loss of cohesion.

Contributions of Essentialism

Most clinicians familiar with the life experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients are acquainted with essentialist phenomenology as it relates to sexual orientation. I cannot count, in my own experience as a clinician, the number of times I have heard a client say, "From an early age, I *just knew* I was different," when asked to describe the process of coming to awareness of sexual orientation. Similarly, asking a newly out LGB individual at midlife to assess her or his path around sexual orientation often elicits a remark such as "I just could not continue to *live a lie*," as if the recent decision to come out necessarily invalidates all life choices around sociosexual relating that preceded it.

Essentialism is the very cornerstone by which LGB people have defined and protected themselves. The dominant culture, the LGB subculture, and the mental health professions have all reinforced the notions that sexual orientation is an innate, integral aspect of identity, that it is fixed and immutable, and that the primary task of psychotherapy is to facilitate the individual's uncovering of a repressed or denied essence. "I am what I am" has been the party line. Those who deviate from this way of understanding sexual orientation are either being dishonest with themselves or putting themselves at risk to be portrayed as mentally ill by the heterosupremacist fringes of religion and psychoanalysis, clinging to the pathology view of same-sex sexual orientation despite its having been long rejected by all mental health organizations. As a result, writings about sexual orientation from other than an essentialist perspective have been all but absent from the psychological literature (Stein, 1996).

Given the present discussion, it is tempting to do a theoretical about-face and embrace social constructionism as the path to a more complete, thoughtful understanding of the complexities associated with sexual orientation. But, before the bath water is discarded, along with the baby that was once our profession's nascent understanding of sexual orientation, it might first be useful to examine the ways in which essentialism has served a variety of useful purposes.

Organized psychology and psychiatry have been major contributors to the robust, enduring qualitites of the essentialist perspective on sexual orientation. Given that most of the historical literature on sexual orientation was written from a negative essentialist viewpoint, it became important for the organized mental health professions to develop policies that were consonant with the ever-growing database about the psychoso-

cial aspects of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals' normative life experiences. The findings of investigators studying any number of variables relative to life adjustment, personal sense of well-being, relationship competence, vocational abilities, and a significant array of other factors have consistently supported the notion that there is no difference based upon sexual orientation per se that confers a pathological or otherwise compromised way of being in the world. Quite the opposite: for those who are able to come to terms with themselves, the overall level of psychological adjustment seems to be improved. Finally, those studies that have attempted to impute pathological status to same-sex sexual orientation have been debunked on methodological grounds (Gonsiorek, 1991). Negative essentialist views of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals persist, of course, and probably will for as long as homonegativity is culturally sanctioned. But they are unsupported by any reliable evidence and are advocated by those residing in the fringe regions of social science, as well as the fundamentalist sectors of Christianity.

The essentialist perspective of sexual orientation has, first and foremost, insulated many lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals from the sting and burden of society's stigmatization of same-sex affectional and erotic attraction. Whether or not the individual so impacted is in psychotherapy, there is no better antidote for the internalized toxicity of arbitrary homonegativity than the knowledge that, for reasons yet unclear, some individuals are *by nature* drawn to members of their own sex and that such attachments are normal. This position is bolstered by sociohistorical and anthropological observations, which show that homosexuality occurs across cultures, species, and throughout history (Weinrich & Williams, 1991). Whether such realizations develop for the individual gradually or occur all at once, they invariably soothe the wounds of a disapproving world and enhance the individual's emerging sense of self as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

The essentialist perspective also offers an automatic means by which the therapist may explain a lifetime of hurt and thus offer a path to salvation: namely, self-identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and ultimate connection with the LGB community. Unitary explanations for complex phenomena have always had a certain appeal to psychotherapists. Witness the codependency and Adult Children of Alcoholics movements of the 1980s: in this case, the family dynamic and its attendant psychoemotional consequences became the lens through which a whole generation of psychotherapy clients was viewed. Suddenly, what

had been ambiguous had an external refernce point, a *cause*. The value of such a unitary phenomenon is significant; it offers a rational explanation for what appears to be and reduces the anxiety (for both therapist and client) that comes with ambiguity and uncertainty.

The essentialist perspective has had a significant impact upon the manner in which we train clinicians and offer guidance to established practitioners. In my capacity as the resident resource on LGB issues in psychotherapy for the interns at a local university, I typically began every training session with an explanation of the concept of sexual orientation and discussed ways to assist clients in understanding theirs. As our understanding of the construct of sexual orientation changed through the years, this part of the lecture became longer and more complicated, as more factors had to be taken into account. Finally, I arrived at the point where I wondered if helping a client self-categorize with respect to sexual orientation—even if the categories were themselves elaborately constructed, allowing plenty of room for individual variation—was the primary goal or if the goal should instead be to help clients understand their own experiences and then to develop personal phenomenologies that fit that understanding.

For the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities, the essentialist view of sexual orientation has served as the organizational cornerstone. That what we experience as LGB individuals is normative for a minority, and that it comes about as likely the result of innate factors, has been unassailable truth to the LGB movements. Considering that sexual orientation may be motivated by conscious choice approaches heresy and leaves us vulnerable to the attacks of those in our society who would sanction discrimination based upon sexual orientation. As has been pointed out in chapter 1, the death of the "antigay discrimination" legislative movement, which amounted to little more than the attempt legally to codify religious prejudice but that required an extraordinary amount of resources to fight nonetheless, is a direct result of the U.S. Supreme Court's finding that "sexual orientation" does refer to discrete categories, likely based upon intrinsic factors.

The essentialist perspective has significant implications for how LGB individuals are viewed by the dominant society. We are a culture whose tolerance for ambiguity and complexity is low. When it comes to explanations for complicated phenomena, we like our rationales to be simple and linear. To suggest that sexual orientation may be experienced by most people as internally driven but that it may be more fluid for others

takes the construct out of the domain of dichotomies and makes it more difficult to understand and describe succinctly. In a culture that values fast food, rapid pain relief, and instantaneous transmission of information, the complexities associated with a multifaceted method of explaining sexual orientation may be overwhelming. As a result, the recent past has seen the proliferation of studies that attempted to find biogenetic evidence to prove the physiological predisposition to or the determinants of sexual orientation. It seems that many would welcome a conclusive etiologic explanation for same-sex sexual orientation; LGB individuals and their parents could all breathe a collective sigh of relief, knowing that no one did anything "wrong"—it just happened.

Studying the causes of lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations, however, reinforces the incorrect assumption that there is something wrong with them in the first place. Does it really make a difference, even if it were possible to discover a physiological basis? Doesn't this search for a biological "cause" open the door to a biological "cure"? How about putting an equivalent amount of effort into determining the causes of bigotry, which seems to be the primary problem affecting LGB individuals?

Were we to abandon the essentialist view of sexual orientation altogether, would we not risk making ourselves vulnerable to those just waiting to say, "See, we told you it was a choice; now we can help them choose differently or at the very least deny them the *special rights* they have been seeking." This is a social policy issue, which carries a significant impact on lesbian, gay, and bisexual psychotherapy clients and their therapists. The very term "choice," when applied to LGB individuals, demeans and trivializes what we have construed as a core aspect of our identities. We think of choices in terms of what we will have for dinner, where we will go on vacation—not whom we will love or how we will experience ourselves doing it. For those whose experience of sexual orientation truly matches the essentialist model, the suggestion that sexual orientation may be chosen adds insult to the injury of social stigmatization.

It cannot be denied that there is a large number of LGB clients in psychotherapy for whom an essentialist perspective is useful. For the client who is unambivalent about her or his sexual orientation and has been waiting only for the "reparenting" experience of psychotherapy to offer support and permission for the exploration of what has been identified as "the true self," essentialist theory is probably a suffcent paradigm. But, coming to terms with sexual orientation is often not so straightforward.

Many clients present with ambivalence about their experiences of attraction or describe instances in which their life choices are at odds with their sexual phenomenology, thus creating dilemmas for which there are no easy answers. Therapists do clients a disservice by offering an uncritical, knee-jerk response to any number of issues, from the request to change sexual orientation to the gay man who is heterosexually married and needs support in deciding whether to remain so.

Clinical and Cultural Dilemmas

The essentialist perspective, then, has served the needs of a developing LGB culture and its psychology. Further, its fundamental assumption—that there is a core, intrinsic component of identity, namely same-sex erotic and affectional attraction, that waits to be unearthed after having been buried under the internalization of antigay social proscription—is highly consonant with the phenomenology of many, if not most, individuals who ultimately self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Most of the guidance offered to practitioners from a gay-affirmative perspective recommends taking into account a number of therapeutic axioms relative to the normative life experiences of LGB individuals and the effects of stigma upon the psyche, *as if* sexual orientation in and of itself were an independently quantifiable construct (Garnets et al., 1991). Essentialist theory has been useful in two ways. First, the education of practitioners about the true "nature" of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals and their life experiences has been a central element to the practice of LGB-affirmative psychotherapy. Second, a "positive" essentialism has been needed to counteract the "negative" essentialism so prevalent in psychological history and still present in our sociocultural milieu.

From a clinical perspective, the essentialist position offers a great deal of knowledge, from an ever-expanding database, about what same-sex orientation really *is*. The APA's 1991 survey on bias in psychotherapy with lesbian and gay clients is the only random sample to date of practitioners' experiences in work with lesbian and gay clients. This study revealed a wide range of attitudes and beliefs about sexual orientation. The themes from this study have formed the basis of an ongoing project to develop practice guidelines for psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. The survey itself suggested that there was a sizable number of practitioners who still considered homosexuality to be a mental illness

and who would be likely to attribute any client issues to the client's sexual orientation, regardless of the evidence. Further, some survey participants demonstrated an insensitivity to the potentially harmful effects of social stigma and its concomitant potential to cause emotional distress. Last, many respondents acknowledged a lack of awareness about the normative life experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and the special challenges many of them face. For instance, LGB people of color are often doubly stigmatized, in their communities of color and in the LGB community itself. The particular challenges faced by LGB and questioning youth, and their families of origin, need to be considered by the therapist who wishes to practice in a competent manner with these populations. Finally, the definition and structure of the LGB individual's chosen family and the importance he or she ascribes to the LGB community are factors the clinician should consider.

Perhaps the most visible function of the gay-affirmative essentialist perspective has been the neutralizing of the homonegative essentialist position. The rise of a gay-affirmative psychotherapy in the early 1980s has predictably sparked a homonegative coalition of mental health professionals and religious groups who cling to the hope that they can advance an agenda proving that homosexuality is indeed a mental disorder. The inherent fallacies of this position have been debated elsewhere (Gonsiorek, 1991; Haldeman, 1994). Nevertheless, the persistence of so-called reparative therapists highlights the essentialist position at its worst: that a client who is distressed about his or her sexual orientation may be met with an automatic response from a therapist who attempts to change the client's sexual orientation. The therapist in such a case fails adequately to examine the underlying reasons for the client's request because the request fits neatly into the therapist's preconceived notion that same-sex sexual orientation is a form of mental illness, rooted in arrested psychosexual development. Such antiquated theories are buttressed by the likes of Joseph Nicolosi, who contends that gay men cannot be participants in healthy relationships (Nicolosi, 1991), and Charles Socarides, who holds up the example of Jeffrey Dahmer as representative of gay men in general (Socarides, 1995). Such statements are designed to frighten and inflame rather than educate, but, judging from the ongoing market for conversion therapy they have managed to create, they achieve a certain measure of success.

Because of its relative simplicity and its linear nature, however, therapists who rely solely on the essentialist model may be inclined to certain

limitations. These limitations may be characterized as an uncritcal examination of the meanings that people attach to sexual orientation in their lives and the import of these meanings as they relate to major life decisions and events, as well as an inability to appreciate what some experience as the complex and fluid nature of sexual orientation itself.

Acknowledging that sexual orientation is other than fixed and immutable opens a veritable Pandora's box. The word "fluidity," when used in conjunction with sexual orientation, is typically pounced upon by those who harbor an essentialist antigay perspective (i.e., practitioners of sexual orientation conversion therapy or members of religious fundamentalist self-help groups). In their rush to distort the complexities of the discussion to serve their own political goals, advocates of so-called reparative treatments for homosexuality infer from any discussion of "fluidity" that, indeed, sexual orientation is chosen and therefore changeable. This reductionist misinterpretation has been used to persuade conflicted individuals to pursue conversion therapies, as well as to argue in the public arena that gay men and lesbians are undeserving of legal protection from discrimination, or "special rights," as the sound bite goes. This incorrectly diverts the argument from what it is really about, namely an institutionalization of prejudice and stigma on religious and trumped-up psychological grounds and attempts to lay the discussion at the doorstep of "choice."

This argument is a complicated one for professionals; for the voting public, it is nearly impenetrable. If we acknowledge that sexual orientation can be, in some instances, a "choice," then how do we protect ourselves from those who assert that it must be like gender or skin color in order to qualify for protection against discrimination? Perhaps sexual orientation does not need to be seen as parallel in immutability to gender and race in order to be viewed as legitimate. The foundation of the arguments against same-sex sexual orientation are, after all, rooted in social stigma. As social distance between the dominant culture and LGB individuals continues to diminish, it is less likely that LGB individuals will have to demonstrate that "I can't help it; I was born this way" before being accorded the same civil rights as others.

While this is a conversation more properly located in our examination of sexual orientation and social policy, its effects upon clinical practice are profound. During an unsuccessful campaign on the part of an antigay rights group in Washington State several years ago, I saw a number of patients who complained of anxiety and depression directly related to

the election. Many clients lost sleep wondering, "How could I continue to live in harmony with my nongay neighbors if I thought that they could vote against my having protection from discrimination?" The politics associated with these antigay essentialist theories have given rise to a peculiar sort of heterophobia, in which the dominant culture is cast as a generalized, potentially aversive agent. Small wonder, then, that we have been slow to consider other than essentialist perspectives relative to sexual orientation: there is simply too much at stake. To abandon our essentialist roots, particularly in the absence of any compelling biological data about the etiology of same-sex sexual orientation, sends us into an existential free fall. If we construe sexual orientation as complex and variable from individual to individual, we open ourselves up to a host of difficult questions.

Social Constructionism and Psychotherapy

The primary risk an essentialist perspective poses to the clinician is the development of an a priori agenda for the client, regardless of the implications for such an agenda in the client's life. A strict essentialist point of view would dictate that there is one "right" path for the individual and that the therapist's job is to set the client on it. Conversion therapists have long been the recipients of the justifiable criticism that their programs, which offer an automatic and uncritical response to the unhappy and confused gay client, ignore what is known about sexual orientation, as well the multitude of social introjects that could cause individuals to be uncomfortable about their sexual orientation. Likewise, however, the gay-affirmative therapist who dons a cheerleader's uniform for every ambivalent LGB client who seeks help may be missing some critically important and highly individual pieces of existential information.

For instance, what of the heterosexually married but gay-identified individual who comes to therapy seeking to resolve the fact that his emerging sense of identity does not fit with the life choices he has made? In this case, the therapist who offers uncritical encouragement for the client simply to "come out" and start leading a life that is congruent with his experience of self is as guilty of agenda-based treatment as is the conversion therapist. Essentialist thinking has encouraged some therapists, whether consciously or not, to develop agendas about people's lives. And,

while the agendas may be determined by a client's declaration of identity, they may not necessarily be in the client's best interest.

Let us return to the example of Steve from chapter 2. Purely essentialist conceptualization, assuming that Steve were relatively unambivalent about his emerging sense of sexuality, might suggest that the therapist's task is to assist Steve in uncovering his "true self" and ultimately living his life in accordance with this. This would likely mean that Steve would leave his family and start to live as an openly gay man, since such a life would be congruent with the manner in which he experiences his identity.

Social constructionism, however, complicates the process for Steve by requiring not only that he identify himself but that he also assign meanings to various aspects of identity and, if necessary, prioritize them. Therefore, this heterosexually married man's self-identification as gay does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that he should now leave his family. It is up to Steve to decide, with the therapist's assistance, what the relative meanings are of the seemingly contradictory roles of husband, father, and gay man. Steve may well arrive at the same conclusion on his own that the essentialist therapist would have imagined for him from the outset: that the chronically repressed homoerotic feelings, once awakened, now have assumed primary focus in the identity hierarchy and that he must, *at this time*, live as a gay man. I stress the temporal nature of this decision given that very little is carved in stone in our lives; the changes brought about by human growth and development require flexibility and the acknowledgment that whatever changes are instituted may not be permanent. Alternatively, it may be that Steve's sense of responsibility and loyalty to his family, and/or his own identification with the roles of husband and father, supersede whatever need or interest he may experience in living as a gay man. He may therefore choose to remain in his marriage, given his wife's willingness, either for a period of time or indefinitely.

How, then, is Steve to be perceived by the world around him? The negative essentialist would likely describe Steve as a "heterosexual man who has overcome his homosexual impulses," while the positive essentialist would characterize Steve as a gay man who has chosen to remain in his marriage. These assumptions may be irrelevant to Steve's experience of himself. Such a self-description may not be available to the outside world, or, if it is, it may not fit within any preconstrued models of sexual orientation.

Our role as therapists is not to predetermine treatment goals on the basis of our understanding of the client's essence but to assist people in making choices congruent with the meanings and values that they have assigned to their experiences of identity. Toward that end, there needs to be a greater inclusion of social constructionism in the discussion about sexual orientation. Stein points out:

> The virtual exclusion of much of the social constructionist argument from the biomedical sciences and the mental health field reinforces an intellectual position of unreflective adherence to essentialist assumptions. (1996, p. 96)

As a result, there are few references in the literature to this debate as it applies to the psychotherapeutic treatment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. Schippers (1989) describes an integration of the social constructionist perspective into psychotherapy. His approach calls for an existential inquiry into the client's personal meanings associated with homosexuality, as well as the meanings associated with coming out and the different ways through which the client's sense of same-sex sexual orientation might be expressed.

In his synthesis of essentialist and social constructionist views, Stein (1996) suggests conceptual applications for psychotherapy that combine elements of both theoretical approaches. He considers a series of dimensions that represent polar extremes of both theoretical positions, such as the universality/particularity, innate/constructed, fixed/mutable, and determined/chosen aspects of sexual orientation. Ultimately, Stein concludes that the clinician will invariably draw from both essentialist and social constructionist positions in approaching evaluation and treatment. The clinician develops a sensitivity to the individual's experience, which is the guiding principle in determining the relative mix of essentialism to social constructionism in the treatment. Above all, notes Stein, "the individual cannot be viewed as a psychological battlefield on which warring theories fight for ascendance" (Stein, 1996, p. 93).

In 1997, the American Psychological Association adopted a resolution intended to guide practice and inform the public with respect to the practice of sexual orientation conversion therapy. Titled "Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation" (APA, 1997), the resolution neither advocates nor forbids any particular type of treatment but calls upon all who treat LGB clients to be mindful of a number of ethical principles applicable to clinical work with these populations. The

resolution encourages a spirit of inquiry, rather than of judgement, and strongly reinforces the message that portrayals of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals as mentally ill because of their sexual orientation are to be rejected. In reminding practitioners that their treatments need to be free of discriminatory, unscientific biases, it issues a sobering warning to all who would operate from a negative-essentialist perspective: such practice is ethically questionable. This recognition can be expanded to include all who operate from a uniquely essentialist basis, regardless of their position on same-sex sexual orientation; the client's rights to self-determination need to be protected. When a therapist possesses an agenda in any direction, these rights are compromised.

The foregoing calls for an expanded discussion on the implications of integrating essentialist and social constructive perspectives in psychotherapy. Strictly essentialist approaches are likely to fail the therapist who seeks to locate sexual orientation in the individual client's phenomenology and sociocontext. Bringing a social constructionist perspective does not mean viewing the client's intrinsic experience of sexual orientation with skepticism, but it does mean refraining from using a "one size fits all" sexual orientation template. The assumptions we harbor about normative behavior need to be held in juxtaposition with clients' own assessments of what the experience of sexual orientation means in their lives, and what implications these meanings have for how those lives are lived. Frequently, it is only through thoughtful questioning and an openness to a number of outcomes that therapists are able to assist clients in coming to terms with what sexual orientation means in their lives.

Conclusion

The essentialist perspective in psychotherapy has provided firm grounding for the development of psychological understanding of sexual orientation. It is not to be dismissed, but it has too long been the unitary voice in psychological theory. LGB psychology is now solidly enough developed that it does not need the rigid structure of essentialism and can open itself up to complementary perspectives.

Social constructionism has long been absent from the discussion, in part because it was seen as jeopardizing the very underpinnings of LGB psychology. In addition, social constructionism requires that we not only tolerate ambiguity but embrace it—often a truly uncomfortable situa-

tion. Social constructionism creates chaos and mess where once there were neat categories; it derails simple, unitary explanations; it forces us to admit that the same choices we might make in our own lives would not necessarily be the choices of other, similarly constituted people. There is much about social constructionism one might wish to avoid. It makes our sacred cows secular, our safe spaces vulnerable, and our assumptions questionable. Yet, it is a perspective that is closer to reality. And therein lies its clinical utility: many, if not most lives, defy simple explanations. To use explanatory overlays in the service of reducing anxiety may provide symptomatic relief, but it ignores the complexity that really exists in most lives and deprives clients of employing their own meanings in order to accept, and live with, the ambiguity associated with them.

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Who Do *We* Want You to Be?

A Commentary on Essentialist and Social Constructionist Perspectives in Clinical Work

Suzanne Iasenza

As I read Glenda Russell and Janis Bohan's compelling and thought-provoking chapter on essentialist and social constructionist perspectives in clinical work, I began to reflect on my twenty years of clinical experience, much of which involved working with issues of sexual orientation. I experience myself as a social constructionist and as an essentialist in the therapy room at different times, depending on the patient and where I am in my own professional and personal development. My reading thus sparked an interest in how my therapeutic stances change and according to what criteria.

I ask different questions, as Bohan and Russell suggest, depending on the perspective I am using. They say that the essentialist asks, "Who are you?" and the social constructionist asks, "Who do you want to be?" So, for example, I may be the social constructionist with a confused adolescent who needs to explore possibilities without foreclosing on a particular identity. I would explore the "what ifs" of being with a man or woman, or both; of coming out or not; of impact on family, the prospect of having children, career choices—all part of who the client wants to be. Or, I may take a social constructionist position about the normality of fluidity and the multidimensionality of sexual orientation to help a heterosexual patient nonjudgmentally examine the homosexual parts of the self.

On the other hand, I may be the essentialist with a patient who is living a committed life with a same-sex partner but who is suffering from a homophobic family or social situation or from internalized homophobia. I would help such a person explore how to accept who he or she "really" is, or, more accurately, how to identify, protect, and defend the vulnerable homosexual parts of the self. I often use an essentialist stance with parents of gay children. Parents can usually accept their children's homosexuality more easily if they feel that their child had no choice, was born that way, and that they are not to blame for the way their child turned out.

Sometimes I use essentialist and social constructionist approaches with the same patient in a stage-like manner akin to Vivian Cass's coming-out model. I take an essentialist approach when the patient is first coming out to help the person overcome internalized homophobia and develop a healthy gay or lesbian identity. I use a social constructionist approach once the patient has the ego strength to feel safe and entitled to make choices about sexual orientation.

Thus, I use the essentialist or social constructionist approaches strategically, depending on the patient's developmental stage and goals.

My approach also varies with the same patient presentation, depending on where I am in my own professional and personal development. When I was in training as a psychologist, most of my teachers avoided discussion of sexuality and sexual orientation, which left trainees feeling inadequately prepared to explore these issues. As a result, much of my early work dealing with sexuality issues lacked the flexibility I have described. I am still detoxifying from years of analytically oriented clinical supervision, which, paradoxically, in theory acknowledges the inherent bisexuality of individuals but in practice labels pathological anything other than opposite-sex desire and behavior. Despite my own years of self-education and my personal acceptance of my homosexual and heterosexual parts, I have had to diligently unpack my knapsack of subtle prejudices, the homophobias and heterosexisms of everyday life that exist inside and outside the therapy room.

When I was less sure of my own lesbian identity, I once refused to work with a patient who wanted to explore changing her relationships from gay to heterosexual because I couldn't even entertain a social constructionist approach, one that suggests that one can be who one wants to be, especially if one wants to change from gay to straight. I saw such a request as homophobic. Maybe in some cases it is. I wouldn't refuse to

work with such a person now; I am no longer threatened by such a request. In my early years, due in equal parts to my own budding lesbian identity and to the lack of available training in dealing with same-sex erotic transference and countertransference, I was often reluctant, at best, to encourage female patients to share their erotic feelings and fantasies about me. I was especially uncomfortable doing so with heterosexual women for fear of being labeled a recruiter. My ability to use a social constructionist approach with these patients at that time was greatly limited.

Why am I making these professional and personal disclosures? Even though I use both essentialist and social constructionist interventions and support their use by my patients, I believe in the social constructionist idea that therapy is cocreated by therapist and patient, that both people determine what happens in therapy and what meanings become available for the patient's use. It is so important for the therapist's as well as the patient's own subjectivity to be understood and questioned. I place a high value on the cocreation of a nonjudgmental therapeutic context that is not only gay-affirmative but sex-positive, in which no sexual orientation is privileged, and in which we examine the effects of homophobia and heterosexism on gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual patients.

I offer a friendly amendment to Russell and Bohan's social constructionist question to the patient. We as therapists don't ask, "Who do you want to be?" Instead, we ask, "Who do *we* want you to be?"

As therapists, we can allow only those possibilities for our patients that we allow within our own conscious and unconscious subjective realities. Do I change my beliefs from patient to patient? I don't think so. I believe I take whatever position I think will help the patient reach his or her goals and that fits within the patient's belief system. This doesn't feel uncomfortable to me even if my own beliefs are different at the time, because I see these belief systems, essentialist or social constructionist, as fluid, able to change over the life span or within different contexts. In a way, I take a social constructionist approach to the holding of essentialist or social constructionist beliefs. And I advocate the strategic use of these approaches for myself, as well as for my patients.

In her latest book on lesbian relationships, Marny Hall (1998) interviewed happy long-term lesbian couples to see if she could identify characteristics these couples had in common. She found one overriding characteristic. All of these resilient couples were able to coauthor various stories about their relationship throughout the years that accommodated

the inevitable challenges and disappointments of couple life. Isn't this what we want for our patients? We want them to have the capacity to expand into any and all possibilities that support and enrich their lives.

I appreciated reading the examples of changing social contexts that are less homonegative, allowing LGB youth to embrace more fluid and noncategorical sexual and gender identities. What a powerful testament to the impact of social forces on individual behavior and identity development! It is striking, however, that all of the examples of shifting contexts involve youth, a time of life when experimentation and nonconformity are to be expected.

It would be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies of these social constructionist youth as they journey through adulthood, forming committed relationships, raising children, and developing satisfying career paths. Many of these roles are performed within much less homopositive contexts in which fluidity of sexual orientation is more suspect than gayness for many folks. How do these less hospitable contexts influence identity development, which flourished at an earlier time unfettered by social restrictions? And, on a larger scale, what will it take to shift adult cultural contexts so that they become more accepting of variability in sexual orientation?

I believe I detected a bias in chapter 2 in favor of social constructionism. This is especially apparent in the case of Steve, in which few if any advantages result from his essentialist viewpoint, yet there is almost too perfect a description of the social constructionist version. I assume that the authors used the case of Steve to illustrate the extreme disadvantages that are possible with a strict essentialist approach. There are, of course, advantages to the simplicity and stability that essentialism offers some people; most of my experience with essentialism has not produced the degree of negative consequences that are reported in the case of Steve.

An example is a recent patient, Ron, a thirty-five-year-old male, who believes he was born gay and has no choice regarding his sexual orientation but who feels compelled neither to discount his previous heterosexual relationships (prior to his coming out) nor to see himself as a failure for not living a gay life from the beginning. He recognizes that the context of homophobia and heterosexism in which he grew up delayed his coming out until he was on his own and in a supportive big-city gay environment. I find cases like Ron's to be more the norm than the exception; I frequently find that a belief in a core gay self coexists with an appreciation for the contexts that influence sexual identity development. I

chose not to take a social constructionist stance with Ron. He came in primarily to mourn the death of his lover; his sexual orientation was a nonissue for him. I don't believe in deconstructing categories just for deconstruction sake.

The strongest argument for adhering to an essentialist approach is the political benefit of believing that sexual orientation is biologically fixed. How can we discriminate against people on the basis of a trait they were born with and over which they have no control? However, I wouldn't separate the political and the clinical discussion, as Bohan and Russell have done. Many patients, especially lesbian and bisexual women, develop sexual identities that are intertwined with deeply held political beliefs. An example of this is another patient, Vanessa, a twenty-nine-year-old bisexual woman, who is conflicted about falling in love with a man because she misses the symbolic nonconformity that being with a woman afforded her. She relishes living outside the mainstream, questioning compulsory heterosexuality and marriage. I believe she won't let herself fully enjoy her relationship with this man until she finds a way to continue to challenge sexual politics in some other way.

I particularly liked the discussion about the different uses of sexual orientation labels by Sharon and Penny. It underscores the richness beneath labels and the various functions they serve; Sharon chooses different labels according to specific contexts, and Penny chooses one label that encompasses many contexts. Sharon's case illustrates the use of strategic labeling. In her case, use of the labels "lesbian relationship" and "lesbian mom" acknowledged and protected her lover and children, respectively, by making them visible.

A few months ago, producers for the television show *20/20* asked if I would be interested in being interviewed for a show on lesbian women's reactions to the news that the well-known lesbian sex therapist Joanne Loulan was dating a man. Joanne adamantly states in her interview segment that, even if she stays with her male partner, she will always keep the label "lesbian," because for her the label represents a central political and social commitment to the lesbian community that is more salient in determining her self-label than is her sexual/affectional affiliation at any given time.

I ultimately was not selected to be interviewed because the producer was searching for lesbian women who were upset about Joanne's crossing over to the other side. I was too social constructionist for the part, waxing eloquent in our phone conversation about sexual orientation

continua and the fluidity of sexual orientation over the life span. Though the producer admitted that my views were intellectually worthwhile, they did not fit into the conflict-oriented discourse that is primetime television's trademark. I was surprised the producers had so much difficulty finding disgruntled lesbians. Perhaps an appreciation for diversity of sexual orientations even within the lesbian community is emerging. Such appreciation is welcome and long overdue.

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Don't Look for Perfects
A Commentary on Clinical Work and Social Constructionism

Leonore Tiefer

Sexual Orientation: Oppression or Identity?

Writing this commentary raises a great irony for me. As a deep social constructionist, I see sexual orientation as an idea that emerged near the end of the nineteenth century as part of the new profession of psychiatry's effort to busy itself segmenting the behavioral and intrapsychic world into neat little boxes of normal and abnormal. In my mind, the categories of heterosexual and homosexual cannot be separated from their historical origins—everything else is rationalization and a more or less disguised fulfillment of that original psychiatric phase.

Fast-forward to 1998. I am writing this commentary as a clinician, that is, a person who must and does think in terms of normal and abnormal (or else be a total hypocrite) in her or his work. People consult me and listen to me because they have confidence that I can offer advice and insight based on some understanding of normal and abnormal. The social changes of the past third of a century have erased the normal/abnormal dichotomy from sophisticated clinical discussions of "sexual orientation." Now, the term is merely descriptive—whom does one love and desire, a person of the same sex or a person of the other sex (or both)? The reality of the categories is taken for granted, and the big controversies are about etiology (which some might argue is a sign that the normal/abnormal dichotomy has *not* really been erased from sophisticated clinical discussions!).

In any event, as an up-to-date sex and couples clinician, I hold notions of abnormal and normal that have been relocated from questioning the sex of a patient's partner (in reality or fantasy) to examining whether my patients are satisfied, related, happy, functional, avoiding self-destructive patterns, and so on. When I discuss and explore sexual orientation with patients nowadays, it is presumably not in any way to privilege one flavor over another; all are equally "normal."

But, as a social constructionist, I am still stuck back in the nineteenth century. I can't see the notion of "sexual orientation" except as part of the construction of the abnormal, the "clinical gaze." What is the reason to have categories, except to compare and contrast? The situation is like that for gender and race, where the only interest seems to be in perpetuating difference. The social constructionist sees physical, behavioral, and experiential variations that are stuffed, for social purposes, into Procrustean beds. And yet I am a clinician. What to do, what to do? People come in, confused, unhappy, angry, blaming, guilty. What to do with the issue of sexual orientation?

Accepting Paradox

Jeffrey Weeks, one of the clearest and most prolific voices in recent decades on the history of sexuality and sexual orientation, has taken on this question in his recent book, *Invented Moralities* (1995). In a chapter titled "Necessary Fictions," Weeks discusses "the paradoxes of identity" (p. 86) at some length. He argues that, while sexual identity offers secure placement in familiar and recognized categories, the truth of individual lives tells a more discontinuous and chaotic story. Sexual identity, he argues, is something people put together in their own lives, rather than a label slapped on after simply noting their instincts. He says,

> It is something that has to be worked on, invented and reinvented in accord with the changing rhythms, demands, opportunities and closures of a complex world." (P. 90)

Moreover, he says,

> We apparently need a sense of the essential self to provide a grounding for our actions, to ward off existential fear and anxiety, and to provide a springboard for action. . . . Sexual identities are fictions—but necessary fictions. (P. 98)

My clinical ear perks up. "Fear" and "anxiety," after all, are my coin of the realm. Weeks's observation, which accords for the most part with my clinical experience, offers me a way out of my dilemma. As a clinician, after all, I am in the business of reducing anxiety, not exacerbating it, of serving, not proselytizing. I can accept that, *at this point in history*, in part (but only in part) because of the influence of early sexologists and psychiatrists, most people need a sexual identity. There may be exceptions—the sexual experimentalist, the sexual migrant, the incorrigibly oppositional—but, for the most part, a sexual identity is part of the modern personality, required for important choices and decisions, part of the important modern business of impression management.

Weeks goes on to argue that, although sexual identities may have emerged as forms of social control, they can become avenues of individual and political liberation. Campaigns around sexual identity can contribute to the discourses of human rights and community solidarity, both important components of the contemporary progressive agenda. In a statement I'd like to see on t-shirts and in dissertations, Weeks proposes that "the erotic offers a space of possibility for exploring, and positively affirming, the different ways of being human" (p. 59).

But, back to the clinical. If Weeks (and other progressive GLBT theorists) can affirm ideas of sexual identity/orientation while simultaneously rescuing them from their tainted historical origins and from reification, where does that leave the clinician?

New York Insights

Doing therapy in New York City is a blessing at this point, in more ways than one. First, there are people practicing sexual identity construction and expression in every possible way, and, as a therapist I can be a resource coordinator and safe space: "Read this memoir, visit that art exhibit, read this magazine, attend that lecture, go to this movie, read that newspaper." For the unadventurous patient, I have New York souvenirs of all these developments in my office to stimulate reflection. In the same way that I can recruit a wide variety of resources to deal with relationship anxieties without privileging marriage or monogamy, I can direct the patient who is questioning his or her sexual identity to local resources and then facilitate brief or lengthy personal processing of those experiences.

Second, New York and my practice are both full of geographical immigrants, and immigration is a powerful metaphor, as well as a reality, for everyone in the city. I talk with my patients at length about change and choice, using the metaphor of immigration. It allows us to reflect on the longing for comfort and familiarity at the same time that one is drawn toward the new and the challenging, and it highlights the importance and the stresses of new language and nonverbal forms of communication. It also brings up the obvious cross-cultural relativism of normalcy and deviance. Above all, it allows me to emphasize that social support is essential to successful living and to encourage patients to find congenial communities, whether related to their old identities, their new ones, or both.

In other words, as a New York therapist, I am let off the hook of the essentialist–social constructionist debate by positioning myself as a coordinator of resources and facilitator of reflection, rather than as an information booth of factual answers. Look around you, I say; this is a city of eight million stories. What story do you have to tell? What stories are told by others?

What about Steve?

The inadequacy of an abstract discussion of sexual identity and the clinician becomes apparent, however, as soon as we turn to particulars. Russell and Bohan, in chapter 2, present the case of "Steve, a white man of about forty years of age" who, despite a sexually successful and unconflicted marriage of twelve years, "has become increasingly interested in images of sexual encounters with men." Where does this lead us? My initial clinical response is that whenever a client talks about something he or she "has become increasingly interested in," *I* believe I am hearing about symptoms. Where they will lead remains to be seen and may not be known for quite some time.

I often see people who have "recently become interested in" crying and not getting out of bed, for example, or yelling at their friends and family, or ejaculating prematurely, or eating too much, or not completing projects they've committed themselves to. My clinical orientation is always to think of a *change* as a clue and to enlist the patient as a codetective with me in assembling all the other clues that might explain the recent change.

The unfailingly interesting part of being a clinician, and the part without which I would definitely be out the door, is how many surprises are involved in assembling the clues. A common surprise, of course, is that the initial presentation of the situation or symptom yields to a less straightforward and usually less socially acceptable story once the patient and I have had a little time to get used to each other and to feel safe together. So Steve, who admits that "he has always been at least vaguely excited by fantasies of sex with men," presents a few clues with this disclosure, and more will emerge as I learn about his sexual, cultural, romantic, family, occupational and health background over subsequent sessions.

The fact that Steve comes in with an agenda is a crucial aspect of my initial formulation of this case. His "goal for therapy is 'to discover [his] true sexual nature' . . . to find out once and for all whether he is gay." So the way I hear him now is that the symptom is no longer a change in his behavior (increasing fantasies about men); rather, his symptom is that he wants therapy to clarify his "true sexual nature." In the paradoxical way we clinicians think, my first reaction is that the *last* thing I am going to do is to gratify this wish. "Clarifying his sexual nature" is another clue, just a smokescreen, just the beginning. Rather, I begin to wonder what this man needs to know about himself and the world in order to make life decisions. Which decisions he is concerned about will be less important, I think, than when and how and why he makes them.

Steve reminds me of a patient who recently came to me when he was increasingly preoccupied with sexual fantasies about (as well as a budding sexual relationship with) his secretary. This was a conventional male supervisor-female supervisee situation, so sexual identity was not an issue for him, but the idea of "true sexual nature" was as the patient struggled to decide whether to leave his wife and pursue a young woman who seemed to represent his last hope for happiness. This man, of course, his history revealed, had managed to subvert every assertive move throughout his life and was now stuck in a job and life he detested. His secretary-lust was a current reenactment of a familiar longing. Was the case "really" about sex? It certainly felt that way to the man, and, indeed, the meaning of sex was a major part of what we talked about. But I was listening all the time to when and how and why this man makes all kinds of life decisions.

In discussing the case of Steve, then, we get into complicated terrain, including differing systems of therapy and the particulars of Steve's his-

tory. What is Steve worrying about as he worries about sexual identity? That's the meat of the matter, and there's no telling where the detective work will lead.

A Transsexual Case

My discussion of Steve may explain why although I am a social constructionist, and I do therapy, I don't do therapy *as* a social constructionist. I do my social constructionism as theory and analysis in front of the computer or the lectern, but when I am in session with my patients I am thinking about completely different things. Concepts, which seem so solid on paper, have a funny way of evaporating and transmogrifying when one is sitting face to face with someone and discussing the person's individual and unique life. I have enough to worry about without dwelling on the social meanings of concepts.

Let's take another story. I have seen many transsexuals over the past two decades, if I may define transsexuals as persons who come into therapy complaining that their subjective gender differs from their biological sex and stating that they want to begin a process of sex reassignment. Again, like Steve or the anxious middle-aged man just described, the initial statement of a problem is the beginning, but only the beginning, of a search for understanding that can take many twists and turns. Bobby, the name I'll give to a fiftyish transsexual I saw for many months, came into treatment very certain that his subjective gender differed from his biological sex but unsure what he should do about this. Like Steve, he initially said that his goal in therapy was to discover his "true" identity. By that it turned out he meant he wanted to learn whether his gender dysphoria was a mental problem, by which he meant the result of early dysfunctional family events (of which there were many), or a physical problem, by which he meant a genetic or hormonally ordained event that would be irreversible and about which he could have regret but not guilt.

The treatment, including utilization of many New York resources, evolved from this "truth by etiology" question as Bobby learned more about the transsexual world. Through meeting a variety of other "transgendered" people, he learned that he belonged to a sizable community interested in exploring both the performance and the subjectivity of gen-

der (though he would not use those terms). Our discussions focused on psychological identity as his related to middle age, work, family, religion, failures, and hopes as much or more than on gender per se. By the time we tapered off, Bobby had come out as transgendered to his family but not to his coworkers, and he was no longer contemplating hormonal or surgical treatment prior to his retirement, half a decade in the future.

Don't Look for Perfects

If forced to self-identify, I come out as a cognitive-behavioral therapist. I am very big on homework and on examining patterns of thinking. Maybe because I practice in New York (but probably because it is America in the 1990s), I see a lot of people I'd call "perfectionists." These people, like Steve in Glenda Russell and Janis Bohan's description, have, among other problems, a great need to have their thinking all neat and tidy. To no one's surprise, this leads to thinking in binary categories, or, in the language of cognitive therapy, to "all-or-nothing thinking." They either are successful or they are not; sexual or not; happy or not; anything or not. All-or-nothing thinking is related to depression, to guilt and self-blame, to masochism and self-destructive life patterns.

I have spent countless, and I mean hundreds and hundreds, of hours battling all-or-nothing thinking with my patients. Insofar as sexual orientation is taken as assignment to categories fixed in and by nature, I have no trouble resisting essentialism in the consulting room, since it is contrary to the rules of cognitive therapy to think in such simplistic, universalistic terms. But, that doesn't mean that people cannot eventually self-identify as gay or straight, theist or humanist, black or white as the result of reflection and self-examination. It simply means that binary thinking is regarded with suspicion unil proven otherwise. I accept Jeff Weeks' point that only through affirming the validity of marginalized identity can one find self-acceptance and the bonding that creates political change. If, after due reflection, a patient wishes to conclude that he or she is gay or straight or bisexual or sexually evolving, then it will have been as the result of discussing the advantages and disadvantages of such labels, generally, and for the person in particular.

The debate over essentialism and social constructionism cannot invade the therapy room with its "answers." The consulting room is a place

first and foremost for questions and reflection. What do you want to know? Why do you want to know? The perfect neatness of a simple answer rarely finds a chair of its own.

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Implications for Psychological Research and Theory Building

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As we discussed in chapter 2, psychology's approach to the topic of sexual orientation has been primarily essentialist in nature. In the previous section of the book we explored how this phenomenon affects clinical practice; here we examine its impact on psychological research and the development of psychological theory dealing with sexual orientation. As before, the aim here is to inquire how these areas of psychological work would differ were they approached from a constructionist orientation.

Essentialism and Psychological Research

The most fundamental critique of an essentialist approach to psychological research in this topic area challenges the foundational assumption that we know what sexual orientation is and that individuals can be neatly sorted into categories whose shared attributes or whose points of similarity and difference with other groups can be explored through the application of psychological research methods. Psychological research in its most common, positivist forms relies on sorting individuals into groups in order to develop general statements about those groups and to explain differences between or among groups.[1] However, when we consider the topic of sexual orientation, a substantial literature attests to the inadequacy of the assumption that people can be neatly sorted into sexual orientation categories. The inexact meaning of sexual orientation

posited by a constructionist model presents a profound challenge to essentialist-based attempts to understand the experience of variations in sexual orientation.

The Problem with Categories

We can begin to understand the complexity behind the superficially elementary construct of sexual orientation by questioning the most uncomplicated (and the most commonplace) contemporary rendition, namely the notion that people can be grouped into two categories on the basis of sexual orientation: homosexual and heterosexual. This conception of sexual orientation is the understanding that underpins most everyday conversations about the topic, as well as media presentations and political discussions about topics such as "gay rights," a "gay gene," and gays in the military. It is also the assumption undergirding research that compares gays and lesbians with heterosexual subjects or with each other. Further, it is this model that underlies the question, asked so frequently, about what proportion of the population is heterosexual or homosexual; to ask this question is to presume that it is possible to group people into these two categories and simply count them.[2]

As we considered in chapter 1, this categorical construal of sexual orientation fails to take into account the vast array of understandings to be found across cultures and across history. Perhaps more striking is the persistent popularity of this dichotomous portrayal given that, even within this culture, its inadequacy was established more than forty years ago, when Kinsey and his colleagues demonstrated that this binary depiction of sexual orientation is flawed.[3] Their work revealed, instead, a range of self-reported sexual orientation described not by discrete categories but by a seven-point continuum, ranging from exclusive homosexuality (six on Kinsey's scale), through varying degrees of bi- or ambisexuality (scores of five to one), to exclusive heterosexuality (zero on the scale) (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey et al., 1953).

Kinsey's work also suggested that sexual orientation is not entirely defined by sexuality per se; an individual's placement along the continuum reflected both overt and "psychic" reactions. In addition, Kinsey's findings indicated that people's self-defined positions along this continuum may change over time and that many subjects identified periods in their lives when their sexual orientation was quite different from how they

later identify themselves. Thus, sexual orientation as portrayed by Kinsey's work is composed not of discrete categories, whatever the number, but of vague, permeable, and potentially shifting "locations" along a continuum.

Since Kinsey's work, others have suggested even more complex understandings of sexual orientation. For example, Shiveley and DeCecco (1977) and Storms (1980) joined Kinsey in rejecting a dichotomy in favor of a continuum and further argued that not one but two continua are necessary: heterosexuality and homosexuality, they argued, are separate dimensions. Further, Shiveley & DeCecco presented physical/sexual interest and affectional attraction as independent phenomena; thus, an individual could experience intense emotional attractions to members of her or his own sex but sexual attraction primarily to members of the other sex or both emotional and sexual attractions only to those of one sex or to those of both sexes, and so forth.

In another variation on the theme of dimensionality, Klein and his colleagues (Klein, 1993; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolff, 1985) offered a view of sexual orientation as a multivariate and dynamic process. In this view, sexual orientation is best defined as a constellation of seven components: 1) sexual behavior; 2) emotional preference; 3) sexual fantasies; 4) sexual attraction; 5) social preference; 6) lifestyle, social world, and community; and 7) self-identification. Each of these can be rated along Kinsey's seven-point scale from zero (exclusively heterosexual) to six (exclusive homosexual). There may be little or no similarity among ratings on different variables, or they may be highly congruent. In addition, these ratings can be used to describe, independently, past, present, and ideal future positions along each dimension, allowing for variations in the ratings over time.

Using either of these models, there are uncounted possible categories into which individuals may fit, on the basis of the overall configuration of their ratings. The very notion of discrete categories becomes meaningless here, and the need to recognize the unique qualities of each individual's identity becomes apparent. A powerful illustration of the inadequacy of our usual categories is found in a growing body of research regarding men who have sex with men but do not identify as homosexual, gay, or even bisexual (e.g., Carballo-Dieguez, 1997; Peterson, 1995; Wong, Chng, & Choi, 1998). In certain communities, especially among Hispanic/Latino men, such behavior is common and is not taken as an indication of nonheterosexuality. In this instance, our insistence on the

usual categories has had a profoundly negative effect. Since these men do not identify as gay or bisexual, HIV/AIDS education directed at gay and bisexual men has no salience for them.

In addition to establishing the meaninglessness of discrete categories and the profound complexity of sexual orientation, a burgeoning body of work also acknowledges that people's understanding of their sexual orientation may shift over time. A substantial literature indicates that, for many people, sexual orientation is not the same today as it was in the past or might be in the future. For other individuals, self-labeled sexual orientation may remain the same even though this identification no longer meshes with current sexual activity and emotional commitments (e.g., Bart, 1993; Bridges & Croteau, 1994; Golden, 1987, 1994, 1996; Jennes, 1992; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rosenbluth, 1997; Rust, 1993; Schippers, 1989; Whisman, 1996).[4] Sexual orientation seen thus is embedded in personal and historical context and as such contradicts essentialist understandings of sexual orientation as an ahistorical and context-independent phenomenon.

Further, our employing these categories implies internal homogeneity that actually disguises important variations among the members of a given group—however that group is defined. The category "homosexual," for instance, is assumed to include both gay men and lesbians (and perhaps bisexuals), so conclusions drawn about the group are presumed to be applicable to all nonheterosexually identified individuals. This assumption ignores obvious variations within any group; for instance, the experience of being a lesbian is profoundly different from that of being a gay male (see, e. g., Bohan, 1996; Brown, 1995; Cass, 1990; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993; Gonsiorek, 1995). Similarly, those who came to a gay or lesbian identity during the intense, institutionalized homophobia of the McCarthy era surely forged a different sense of their identity than have those who came out into the political activism and the visible community of recent decades (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). Experiences of LGB identity are surely different for people of color, those who are poor, and others coping with multiple forms of oppression and for white, affluent, able-bodied LGBs (Bohan, 1996; Dworkin & Gutierrez, 1992; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993; Greene, 1994a, 1994b; Hidalgo, 1984; Morales, 1990; Tremble, Schneider, & Appathurai, 1989). The same variability can, of course, be attributed to heterosexual or bisexual individuals, whose experiences are equally widely varied.

The work summarized here indicates that the concept of sexual orientation as a simple dichotomy (or even trichotomy) of identities defined by sexual behavior and consistent over time is inadequate to the complexities of sexual orientation identity. Given these critical challenges to the customary perception of sexual orientation, it appears impossible to constitute discrete groups on the basis of sexual orientation in order to investigate the attributes of members of those groups or to compare them with others. To do so would require that we define precisely the criteria for membership in each category. This would mean determining, first, the variables to be selected to define sexual orientation and the rating on each required for membership in a group. Must one be a Kinsey "zero" to qualify as heterosexual, or will a "one" do? Or, to invoke Klein, on how many of the seven relevant variables must one reach a "zero"? Is sexual activity more crucial to this definition than is, say, social preference or self-identification? Why? Must one have always been a "zero"? Or, if one came to this identity only a few months ago but now feels quite certain, is that enough? How do we sort self-defined gay men or lesbians who have "occasional" heterosexual feelings or experiences (Kinsey's "four") but self-identify as heterosexual? How do we categorize a person who identifies as bisexual but is currently in a monogamous, committed heterosexual relationship? What if she or he is in a same-sex relationship? Such questions are legion and fundamentally unanswerable. We suggest that they also oversimplify human experiences and may indeed result in significant misunderstandings that can have concrete detrimental consequences. The inadequacy of HIV/AIDS education for heterosexually identified men who have sex with men is a case in point.

The Problem of Samples

In addition to the conceptual and pragmatic difficulties entailed in identifying discrete groups, another issue, of equal consequence, is self-protection and its impact on subjects' self-identification. In a world where LGB identities are stigmatized, we can readily anticipate that many individuals will be unwilling to reveal such self-labels. Therefore, the group identified as heterosexual might be more accurately described as consisting of open heterosexuals and closeted LGB individuals. The LGB group actually includes only that sample of individuals who self-identify

as lesbian, gay, or bisexual *and* who are willing to disclose this identification to the researcher.

Indeed, research on LGB topics has persistently—and understandably—relied on samples that are unavoidably biased. LGB identity is, in Goffman's (1963) words, a discreditable identity; that is, if the identity is known, the individual must pay the price of cultural stigma. Since hiding this identity protects one from the prejudice and discrimination evoked by stigma, many (perhaps most) LGBs remain invisible and are therefore not included in such samples. Commonly, samples are drawn from "out" members of college and university communities, a convenient sample for researchers but surely not a cross-section of the LGB population. Other frequent sources for subjects include LGB organizations and publications; known socializing locales, such as bars; and voluntary programs in the LGB community, such as community-based support groups. These samples of necessity do not include those who do not have access to or do not participate in such institutions and are therefore biased in ways we can only imagine.

Thus, we have a body of literature that focuses on that (perhaps exceedingly small) segment of the LGB population comprised of individuals who are visible to researchers through their presence in the university community or their connection to the LGB community and its institutions, and who are simultaneously willing to declare their sexual orientation to researchers. Conclusions drawn from such research are questionable as evidence about the experiences of LGBs as a group. The difficulties of accurate assessment render any research or theoretical project in this area open to question and make comparability across projects even more problematic (Brown, 1995; Patterson, 1995).

These theoretical and methodological difficulties notwithstanding, when we turn to the psychology literature on sexual orientation, we discover work premised on the assumption that it is possible to constitute well-defined, discrete, and internally homogeneous categories. This presumption is crucial for theory that contrasts LGB with heterosexual experience, and it is fundamental to research designs that aim to describe the psychological functioning of any single group or that draw comparisons among these groups. Yet, it is apparent that this premise is dubious; on the contrary, the very meaning of sexual orientation is itself in question.

Alternative Approaches to Psychological Research

The problems raised by research grounded in essentialist assumptions suggest the need for alternative approaches to asking questions about the experiences that constitute what we term sexual orientation. We explore several such alternatives, models that are not intrinsically construction-ist[5] but that move us beyond the confines of more traditional methods.

The Issue of Categories

From a constructionist perspective, the categories we use to define sexual orientation do not represent extant, free-standing realities. Rather, they are constructed of our attempts to understand reality and are actually a form of discourse imposed upon rather than descriptive of experience. Or, to apply a strong constructionist model, our discourse may actually create the phenomena it names. In this sense, the categories are in fact spoken into existence; people *do* identify, for example, as heterosexual, lesbian, and so forth, and the terms do describe that experience. The difficulty of disentangling the discourse from the "reality" it creates serves to reinforce the perception that these categories are descriptive rather than generative. Thus, these few, apparently simple labels disguise widely varying individual experiences, acting not only to ignore variation but perhaps also to shape and constrain individual experiences to the categories' confines.

A constructionist approach calls into question such categories—including the concept of sexual orientation itself. It also asks what purpose is served by the invocation of such categories. What understandings are perpetuated and what understandings are made invisible by their use? If our goal is to understand human experiences without simple reliance on the categories imposed by the normative discourse of sexual orientation identity, our research must create space for experiential narratives not encumbered by such categories. Complete freedom from the shaping force of narrative is, of course, impossible; an alternative narrative is also a narrative. However, it may be possible to take one step toward broadening our understanding of the phenomena we have collected under the rubric of "sexual orientation" by employing methods that do not rely on—or that actively dismantle—reified categories. In other words, a constructionist approach asks not what is the experience of being LGB or

how it differs from being heterosexual. Rather, it asks, How can we listen to the totality of individual experiences, rather than only those aspects of experience that fit neatly into identity categories? And how can we examine the ways in which these categories act to direct and define individual experiences?

A Few Examples

Let us consider two areas of research that reflect the essentialist assumptions we have discussed and explore how the same questions might be addressed from a perspective that reflects the constructionism critique of categories.

Research on Causation and the Problem of Categories

One of the most active (and most contentious) topics of current research on sexual orientation has to do with attempts to determine the etiology or cause of gay and lesbian identity. The most visible branch of this research pursues evidence about the biological underpinnings of sexual orientation (e.g., DeCecco & Parker, 1995; Hamer et al., 1993; Hu et al., 1995; LeVay, 1991). This work is clearly grounded in essentialist assumptions; it assumes that sexual orientation is a real attribute of people and that the presence (or absence) of some particular biological event determines—or at least predisposes—the presence (or absence) of a particular manifestation of this attribute.

Addressed from a constructionist perspective, the question of causation couched in these terms is paradoxical, indeed. If there is no actual attribute but only a term imposed upon (and disguising) a plethora of experiences, then searching for the cause of such an attribute makes no sense. Indeed, the existence of widely discrepant identities points up the bankruptcy of such questions. Consider, for example, the case of bisexually identified individuals. Do they have brain structures halfway between those of gay and heterosexual men? Do those structures change when they are in same-sex rather than other-sex relationships? If sexual orientation changes over time, does this reflect atrophy or hypertrophy of that structure? If there is a genetic basis for sexual orientation, do bisexual individuals have half of that particular marker? Consider the example of a man who identifies as gay but has intercourse with women; is

the genetic message turned on and off under such circumstances? Even more telling is the testimony of history and of other cultures where sexual orientation did or does not exist as an element of cultural discourse.

Such questions expose the difficulty of seeking determinants of phenomena that exist only in their narrative creation—only as categories imposed upon experience—and not as actual entities. We might well, on the other hand, employ a constructionist analysis to search for the "cause" of people's claiming one or another categorical sexual orientation identity. Asking such a question implies two levels of analysis. First, what is the source of these categories; where do they come from and what purpose do they serve? And, second, how do the categories act to "cause" individuals to identify themselves in terms of one or another category?

Research addressing these questions can be very fruitful in challenging us to think differently about sexual orientation. Much of this work is qualitative in nature, its goal to describe the variety of human experience rather than to distill from large samples a version of the average human experience. In keeping with constructionist principles, that experience is understood in terms of the creation of narratives, of discourse, of constructs that shape and give meaning to one's life. For example, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) explored the situation where women change their identification from heterosexual to lesbian. These researchers examined the question of how these women manage a shift between such apparently essentialist categories, a shift that implies fluidity not acknowledged in standard essentialist renditions. The research was based on extensive interviews that allowed participants to explain in their own words how they accomplished this move. No attempt was made to identify a cause for either their earlier or their new identity. Rather, these researchers strove to understand the women's experience of how this process played out in their lives. Kitzinger and Wilkinson discovered that these women employed changing narratives to mediate the shift; in effect, women constructed particular scripts for themselves as heterosexuals and effectively edited and reconstructed those scripts as they accommodated to a shifting sexual orientation identity.

These cases illustrate the individual creation of understandings sometimes referred to as construc*tivism*—the phenomenological parallel to social constructionism—which was introduced in chapter 2. Note that these two are fundamentally inseparable, since the creation of individual narratives reflects and reinforces (socially constructed) cultural cate-

gories. A social constructionist analysis might inquire how this occurs—that is, how cultural forces act to shape individual narratives and individual experience.

While compatible with constructionism, this study retained the categories "lesbian" and "heterosexual." The limitations imposed by such categories were evident in participants' responses. The very fact that this change in identity required the development of a new narrative reinforces the notion that it is a shift between differing and incompatible categories. In order fully to overcome such limitations, it is useful to develop means for avoiding or dismantling these categories. For example, we might provide open-ended self-identification opportunities that ask participants to describe (rather than categorize) their own sense of sexual/affectional identity. Along these lines, in a series of recommendations directed especially at those who study adolescents, Battle (undated) recommended that researchers avoid asking participants to label their sexual orientation and focus on feelings and actions instead.

Illustrative of the impact such methodological changes might have is research by Herek and Glunt (1995), who asked participants to provide their own terms to define their sexual orientation. They found that the terms participants use—"queer" rather than "gay," for instance—point to very different experiences. The studies mentioned earlier that dealt with men who have sex with men point to a related conclusion: insisting that people claim a standard sexual orientation identity may badly distort the lived experience of some individuals. Clearly, individuals' personal understandings of their feelings, actions, and identities tell us far more than does their employment of predefined and restrictive categories.

A constructionist analysis of these findings would highlight how they demonstrate the importance of vantage point. That is, different approaches yield vastly different results, illustrating that perspective influences what is taken as true. This realization, in turn, points to the necessity for reflexivity in psychological research. It is incumbent on researchers to be alert to their own position vis-à-vis the topic at hand and to be conscientious in including such awareness in research reports. Further, constructionism suggests that, even where constructionist research resembles essentialist studies on the surface (for example, we are still asking subjects to identify themselves in terms of categories of sexual orientation), how we talk about our subject matter is quite different. We might ask, for instance, about the origins of these labels and their differential

meanings. What purpose does their existence and their varying meanings serve and for whom?

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Research on Reparative Therapy and
the Question of Fluidity

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Yet another area where essentialist views of sexual orientation have driven research is the topic of reparative therapy. A body of research on this topic has advocated reparative therapy and declared it successful (e.g., Masters & Johnson, 1979; Pattison & Pattison, 1980; Nicolosi, 1991; Socarides, 1975, 1978); the bulk of organized psychology's response has entailed a critique of reparative therapy and the research supporting it (e.g., Blair, 1982; Coleman, 1978; Davison, 1991; Haldeman, 1991; Murphy, 1992; Silverstein, 1991). The work that supports reparative therapy has been criticized on methodological, theoretical, and ethical grounds. The methodological critiques point to flawed definitions of sexual orientation, poor sample choice, subject attrition, ill-defined or inappropriate criteria for "success," and absence of follow-up. Ethical critiques highlight the homophobia and heterosexism that underlie the very existence of reparative therapy. Why, they insist, should we try to "repair" a quality that we have asserted is in no way pathological? In addition, reparative therapy is criticized for the potential negative effects of imposing a judgment of psychopathology on nonheterosexual identity.

It is the theoretical critiques, in particular, that are at odds with constructionist analysis. These challenges focus on the notion of change, asserting that sexual orientation (whatever its cause) is fixed and that attempts to alter it are futile at best and psychologically damaging at worst. However, to the degree that our conceptual models and research designs *presume* stability of sexual orientation, we are unable to examine the possibility of change, whether spontaneous or induced.

In contrast to this standard assumption of fixedness, some researchers have allowed for the possibility of change in sexual orientation and have found remarkable fluidity among participants. For example, Golden (1987, 1994, 1996), in a series of qualitative studies, explored changing sexual orientation identity among college-age and older women. She found that many of her participants had altered their identity over time and that many others anticipated that such a change might happen in the future. Kitzinger and Wilkinson's (1995) work, discussed earlier, also

explores such change, as does Bart's (1993) exploration of the "tenacity of lesbian identity" among women currently in heterosexual relationships. Whisman (1996) conducted an extensive study of women and men who identify as homosexual, using open-ended questions to assess the degree to which sexual orientation was chosen. Many participants reported having had both heterosexual and same-sex relationships, and many had actively chosen their current sexual orientation identity.

To the degree that some individuals do change their sexual orientation identities over time, the argument for immutability ignores the experience of some segment of the population. Further, it ignores the possibility that the stability of sexual orientation identity experienced by many (perhaps most) people is a function not of some intrinsic attribute of themselves but of the coercive nature of socially constructed categories.

It is important to acknowledge that attention to such findings may undermine arguments for the immutability of sexual orientation, arguments that serve as a key element in critiques of reparative therapy. However, this disregard comes at a cost. It not only makes invisible the experiences of some but is also open to challenge from those who oppose LGB rights. Interestingly, many of Whisman's (1996) participants were keenly aware of the political sensitivity of the issue of choice, often expressing explicit concern that their sense of having chosen their sexual orientation might be used against the LGB community.[6] This quandary—the conflict between acknowledging the reality of fluidity and retaining the politically expedient argument for immutability—clearly evokes the dilemmas first outlined in chapter 1.

If, as a means of acknowledging the complexity of sexual orientation and the potential for change, we aim to make space in our work for the diversity and fluidity of sexual orientation identities, we will need to develop methods that do not presume categorical identities and fixedness. The studies offered earlier as examples of work that meets this goal are qualitative interview projects. This is not meant to imply that more traditional quantitative methods are useless in moving us to more open and flexible understandings. Rather, it may often be possible to meld more traditional methods with approaches more in keeping with constructionist analyses. For example, research that explores the meaning to participants of sexual orientation—rather than the imposition of predetermined categories—might employ multidimensional definitions of sexual orientation, such as that employed in Klein's (Klein, 1993; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985) work, mentioned earlier. Allowances for fluidity

in sexual orientation might best be accomplished by longitudinal research. However, given the difficulties of longitudinal work, a compromise might be struck by asking participants to indicate their sexual orientation identity now, at some past time, and as expected in the future—a technique also advocated by Klein.

The Problem of Sample Bias

As long as we live in a society where nonheterosexual identity is both reified and stigmatized, it will remain impossible to obtain an unbiased sample of individuals who identify as LGB. However, many of the techniques we have suggested might encourage their broader participation in research. Where participants are asked not to categorize themselves but rather to describe their experience in an open-ended format, they can avoid the dreaded labels and thereby, arguably, some degree of stigma. Also helpful would be research designs that address topics other than LGB issues and that include such self-descriptions as a regular part of demographic data. This sort of format might provide a wide range of information about LGB experience while reducing the bias that comes from explicitly seeking subjects who identify as LGB. Clearly, participants might well not disclose LGB identity even in such circumstances; still, the opportunity for a more representative sample would be enhanced.

Essentialism, Constructionism, and Psychological Theory

We have discussed the fundamentally essentialist underpinnings of psychological research that deals with sexual orientation. Much of what was said previously applies to psychological theory, as well. In particular, theory that deals with sexual orientation has assumed that individuals belong to one or another category, that those categories are exclusive, and that one's belonging to a category—that is, one's sexual orientation identity—is present as a core aspect of personality to be discovered.

Similarly, assumptions of constructionism, discussed previously, are reflected in constructionist approaches to theory as well as to research. Thus, the very notion of sexual orientation—of identity based on the sex of one's partner—is seen as a socially created understanding, one that

imposes particular meanings on events rather than describes an independent reality. From this perspective, one's sexual orientation is not discovered but is constructed, using as materials the understandings, the categories, and the discourses available.

A Few Examples

Let us examine how these two renditions might play out in the development of psychological theories regarding sexual orientation.

Identity Development

Among the best known and most widely utilized theoretical frameworks in this topic area are models of LGB identity development and coming out (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989).[7] As portrayed in these models, identity development moves in a rather consistent manner through a series of stages that are characterized as generally quite predictable for most people, although individual variation is acknowledged. This process entails first recognizing incipient feelings that suggest an extant LGB identity, gradually coming to acknowledge and accept that identity as discovered, growing increasingly comfortable and even prideful about it, and then revealing it to others.

Perhaps best known among these models is that developed by Cass (1979). Despite significant changes in Cass' thinking in subsequent years (e.g., Cass 1984, 1990, 1996), this model is still routinely used as a basis for research on lesbian and gay identity development. In this early work, Cass described the evolution of gay and lesbian identity as a sequence of six stages. For each, if the challenge of the stage is not met, foreclosure may result, leaving the individual mired in a less-than-thorough embracing of her or his lesbian or gay identity. In the first stage, the individual is vaguely aware of same-sex feelings and wonders about the possibility of being gay or lesbian. In the second, she or he comes to accept these feelings as genuine and begins to consider the implications of this identity. The third stage is characterized by tolerance for and the fourth by comfortable acceptance of a gay or lesbian identity. In the fifth stage, the person claims lesbian or gay identity with pride, becoming deeply involved with the gay or lesbian community and celebrating gay and lesbian as perhaps superior to heterosexual identity. The sixth stage, identity syn-

thesis, involves a growing openness about one's gay or lesbian identity and comfort with heterosexual as well as gay and lesbian relationships.

Many have challenged the homogenizing quality, the male bias, and the implied invariant linearity of these models; many of these critiques are highly compatible with constructionist thought (e.g., Bohan, 1996; Brown, 1995; Cass, 1990; Sophie, 1986). A constructionist variation on the theme of LGB identity development looks remarkably different. Interestingly, Cass, whose early model, just described, is among the most widely cited essentialist models, has moved a very long way toward a more constructionist analysis in her recent work (1990, 1996). Among the notions she has proffered is that the categories employed in our understandings of sexual orientation and the meanings we attribute to those categories actually shape rather than simply describe the process of coming to an LGB identity. Thus, experiencing feelings of attraction to a member of one's own sex initiates a process that ushers the individual toward LGB identity. If or when such feelings are interpreted as signaling a gay or lesbian identity, the discourse describing that identity then becomes directive of subsequent experience and behavior.

Similar models have been offered by others, including Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995), whose work was mentioned earlier. In this model, women's movement from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity is mediated by changing scripts. To become a lesbian is to understand oneself in a particular way, and one's life narrative must be adapted to match new feelings. Jennes (1992) couched fluidity in terms of our ability to reassess the applicability of various categories as the meaning of those categories change. Thus, if one's understanding of the category, "lesbian" comes to encompass experiences that one has had, that opens the possibility of redefining one's sexual orientation identity as lesbian. Bart (1993) explored the situation where women who previously identified as lesbian refuse the label "heterosexual" even when they are in relationships with men.

In each of these cases, sexual orientation is understood not as an entity to be discovered but as a script to be written, a discourse to be claimed—and that discourse needn't be dictated either by previous identity or by current behavior. It can be argued that seeing sexual orientation as a fixed, essential quality of identity is simply one script among many possible. To the degree that one accepts this particular, essentialist rendering—an acceptance supported by contemporary social beliefs— one may understand, shape, and experience her or his own sexual orientation accordingly. An individual's certainty of the categorical and fixed

nature of sexual orientation, then, may be a result of claiming that script. Thus, previous experiences may be reframed to support such an interpretation,[8] and current behavior might be directed toward matching the parameters of the assumed identity. Clearly applicable here is the notion that the LGB community serves as the socializing agent for those who are newly coming to an LGB identity: it is here that one learns how to enact gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities (e.g., Esterberg, 1996; McIntosh, 1968).

Portrayals of sexual orientation such as those presented here fly in the face of traditional, essential renditions, but are very much in keeping with recent trends toward a narrative analysis of human experience (e.g., Crawford, 1995; Frantz & Stewart, 1994; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Park, 1992; Personal Narrative Group, 1989; Sarbin, 1986; White & Epston, 1990; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). Such understandings are best explored through the use of qualitative analyses, which in turn represent fundamental challenges to traditional psychological research methods, moving these models yet further from mainstream psychological understandings. Yet, they fit well the insights gained when research looks beyond fixed categories to individual experience.

The Conflation of Gender and Sexual Orientation

A second category of theoretical work in which a constructionist approach would challenge traditional essentialist understandings of sexual orientation has to do with the relationship of gender and sexual orientation. It is important to point out that gender here refers to those characteristics that are deemed appropriate to an individual because of her or his (biological) sex. Sex refers to male and female; gender refers to notions of "masculine" and "feminine," notions that vary widely across cultures.[9] Each society socializes its members to an appreciation of gender appropriateness so that individuals are quite aware of which attitudes, behaviors, interests, mannerisms, clothing, and so forth are deemed acceptable and proper to their sex.

The literature on the psychology of sexual orientation is rife with conflations of gender and sexual orientation. Even though we may assert for the record that the two are independent dimensions ("even football players can be gay"), in obvious and subtle ways the two are portrayed as correlated, codeterminant, or even coextensive. We see this, for example, in theory and research dealing with the causes of homosexual (primarily gay male) identity. Gay men report having been "effeminate" (gender) as

children, and this is taken as evidence of an early and lasting gay identity (sexual orientation) (e.g., Bailey, 1995; Bailey & Zucker, 1995). The search for biological underpinnings of sexual orientation appeals to animal research in which masculinized female rats who engage in male-typical behaviors (gender) are described as homosexual (sexual orientation) (e.g., DeCecco & Parker, 1995). The absence of a strong male role model is seen as hampering the development of normal masculinity (gender) and as thereby causing homosexuality (sexual orientation) (e.g., Bieber et al., 1962; Socarides, 1978). Attraction to one's own sex is attributed to the eroticization of difference, so that "effeminate" males (gender) are gay (sexual orientation); they are attracted to men, who are different from themselves, rather than to women, who are similar (D. Bem, 1997).

This tendency to conflate gender and sexual orientation is essentialist in its underpinnings. This is true in at least two respects. First, the attempt to attribute sexual orientation to biological causes implies the presence of an actual attribute whose presence relies on particular biological events. Second, the appeal to early gender role deviations is used to buttress the notion that sexual orientation is present at least from early childhood, simply awaiting discovery. Indeed, these two arguments are often coupled: early gender variation points to the role of predisposing biological events that trigger both gender deviation and nonheterosexual orientation—implying that the two are at least codetermined and perhaps synonymous.

A constructionist analysis of this same theme would point to the questions raised by cultural variations in gender. That is, behaviors seen as gender inappropriate in one culture (and thereby linked with nonheterosexual orientation) are not seen as gender deviance in another (e.g., Risman & Schwartz, 1988; Ross, 1985). Thus, a male who prefers skirts might be an example of gender violation for most people in this country and at this time, but it is not an issue of gender deviation in Scotland, among judges and priests who wear robes, or in earlier historical periods. If a particular biological event predisposes gender deviation and also homosexuality, how would that gene or brain structure mediate cross-cultural variations in what is deemed gender deviation? What would the brain of a gay Scot look like? Or a heterosexual Scot who wears skirts?

In addition, a constructionist analysis would point out that both of these notions—gender and sexual orientation—are themselves socially constructed understandings. Neither is an actual quality of individuals.

Rather, both are constructs superimposed upon complex phenomena, creating discrete categories of what can as well be understood as a seamless fabric of human experiences. Conflating the two reifies both gender and sexual orientation while at the same time concretizing a connection between them.

This critique of essentialist underpinnings of psychological theory leads to the common constructionist question, Why this understanding? Who benefits and how? This is a broad contextual question that reaches for a consideration of what purpose is served by understanding human experiences in terms of gender and sexual orientation categories when there is nothing about that experience that demands such categories.

It is instructive to explore how this question has been addressed in another literature—namely, feminist psychological considerations of the social construction of gender (e.g., Bohan, 1992, 1993; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, 1990; Kahn & Yoder, 1989; Mednick, 1989; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This work argues, in a position parallel to constructionist understandings of sexual orientation, that gender (feminine/masculine) is not a quality of individuals but a socially constructed notion, one imposed on experiences that have no intrinsic relation to the sex (male/female) of the individual. Further, the reification of gender categories has served to reinforce long-standing stereotypes that keep women entrapped in a narrow range of roles that are fundamentally devalued.

This feminist understanding of the uses of categories is enriched by a consideration of the work of Edward Sampson (1993a, 1993b), who has argued that our investment in establishing clear lines of group membership serves a function for those in power. By constructing well-defined distinctions between men and women and between whites and people of color, for instance, white men reinforce the notion of themselves as different from those others, who are constructed as inferior (because those in power have the power to construct others' identities as well as their own). Further, members of nondominant groups are constructed as "serviceable others," whose purpose is to bear an identity that meets the needs of the powerful and that continually recreates the elevated status of those in power (see also S. L. Bem, 1995; Butler, 1990).

Applied to the topic of sexual orientation, these arguments suggest why the creation of sexual orientation categories might serve the dominant group. By constructing identities for individuals who vary from the heterosexual norm, heterosexuality is reified as normative and non-

heterosexuality as deviant, thus serving the aim of reproducing hetero-sexual normativity. The controversy over "gay marriage" is a case in point. The vilification of same-sex unions reinscribes the notion that heterosexual marriage is a valuable institution whose boundaries must be protected from incursion by perverts—this in spite of evidence that heterosexual marriage is an institution already in significant peril. LGBs become the scapegoat, the serviceable others, whose role is as foil for the reassertion of heterosexual normativity.

Further, as Kitzinger (1987) has pointed out, constructing sexual ori-entation categories and granting them status as essential elements of identity silences any other meaning that might be conveyed by non-heterosexuality. For example, women's rejection of heterosexual patri-archy is disempowered by labeling women who make such a choice "les-bian" and thereby ignoring the political motivations for claiming non-heterosexuality.

A constructionist analysis would also query the connection between gender and sexual orientation in terms of its consequences. Why this conflation? What purpose is served and for whom by a construal that merges two phenomena, each of which is itself a meaning constructed by social exchange? Suzanne Pharr (1988), among others, has argued that this conflation indeed serves a purpose. It acts to regulate gender through the threat of homosexual baiting. As long as the two notions are seen as inextricable, the gendered behavior of all of us is constrained, be-cause any violation of gender appropriateness carries the risk of accusa-tions of homosexuality. Given the profound stigma—and even the very real danger—of being seen as LGB, this threat serves effectively to assure widespread adherence to gender norms (see also S. L. Bem, 1993; Hunter, 1993).

The obverse is also true: homosexuality is regulated by gender baiting. Gender bending by men is not only derogated by heterosexuals; LGBs also denigrate gender violations by men, often in the name of presenting an acceptable face to the heterosexual world. Gender deviation by women, on the other hand, is far more acceptable (within limits) among heterosexuals and may even be expected within some segments of lesbian communities. Clearly, both sexist and heterosexist dynamics are at work here: what is devalued is the feminine and the nonheterosexual. The complex and reciprocal relationships between our understandings of gender and of sexual orientation demonstrate the convoluted conse-quences of their conflation.

And why, we might ask, is compliance with gender norms so crucial? This question returns us to the feminist analysis and the work of Edward Sampson (1993a, 1993b), Sandra Bem (1993), and Judith Butler (1990), discussed earlier. Both sexual orientation categories and gender normativity, these analyses argue, benefit those in power: heterosexual males. The dismantling of either threatens to disrupt the system that maintains their position of dominance and others' status as serviceable others.

A Truce

Our discussion appears to reject out of hand all essentialist psychological approaches to sexual orientation. However, as we discussed in chapter 1, to do so would be to lose many profound benefits granted by such understandings. Paramount among these is the fact that many (perhaps most) individuals experience their sexual orientation identity as a core, essential element of themselves. To the degree that psychology's aim is to understand human experience, to flout this fact would be to sabotage our own intent. We will have little to offer those we strive to understand if we dismiss their experiences as an artifact of social discourse. However, social constructionism does not dismiss but rather strives to enrich both individual and collective understandings of experiences. In doing so, we open the possibility for evaluating differing perspectives for their implications and thereby expanding rather than delimiting individuals' experiences.

Constructionist perspectives clearly offer new directions that might lead us toward more flexible conceptualizations and thereby toward a more individualized understanding of the experiences we have named sexual orientation. The aim is not to make any discourse false—for what does false mean in this context?—but to broaden the discourses available to us. To do so leaves us with at least temporarily unresolvable quandaries.

NOTES

1. The preferred approach to psychological research is, in part, shaped by political as well as by philosophical forces. Designs based on the statistical description of groups or comparisons among groups offer the potential for relatively straightforward analyses that allow for quick movement from design to publica-

tion. Although space precludes our pursuing this discussion here, much has been written about how the politics of publication serve to shape the nature of research (e.g., Bakan, 1977; Caplan & Nelson, 1973; Diamond, 1989; Koch, 1981).

2. We return to the issue of our preoccupation with how many people are nonheterosexual in chapter 9 in order to explore its implications for public policy.

3. We are aware of the paradox of using positivist research to challenge an essentialist conception of sexual orientation. More crucial here than this methodological debate, however, is the "thought experiment" this research allows. That is, Kinsey's work suggests a different way of *thinking about* sexual orientation, one that highlights the inadequacy of simple categories.

4. The potential fluidity and shifting boundaries of sexual orientation categories is also currently under discussion in the lay literature (e.g., Clausen, 1990; Cotter, 1997; Faderman, 1998; Gideonse, 1997; Graff, 1997; Lipstadt, 1997; Martin & Lyon, 1997; Oakley-Melvin, 1997; Quinn, 1997).

5. Indeed, it is not possible to propose research methods that are intrinsically constructionist. Constructionism is a tool by which we analyze claims of truth, rather than a method of seeking truth.

6. Once again, this reluctance to acknowledge the possibility that, for some people, sexual orientation is chosen is found in the lay as well as in the professional literature (e.g. Gideonse, 1997; Van Gelder, 1991).

7. Interestingly, these models parallel rather closely models of ethnic identity development (e.g., Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979) and of feminist identity development (e.g., Downing & Roush, 1984; Hyde & Bargad, 1991). Recent constructionist analyses have challenged essentialist renditions of race (e.g., Colker, 1996; Diamond, 1994; Gould, 1994; Gutin, 1994; Lopez, 1997; Shreeve, 1994; Wills, 1994; Zuckerman, 1990) and gender (e.g., Bohan, 1992, 1993; Butler, 1990; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, 1990; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; West & Zimmerman, 1987), as ours does sexual orientation.

8. As an example, one of us recently had a student report that she knew she was heterosexual when, as a child, she was curious about the breasts of a woman in a magazine. This proved her heterosexuality, she argued, because it demonstrated her interest in how her own breasts would develop. It is not hard to imagine how a woman who identifies as lesbian would interpret the same curiosity as early evidence of her lesbian identity.

9. As noted previously, the distinction between sex and gender is currently an issue of considerable controversy. Here, however, some such distinction is essential in order to point out the disjunction possible between the two.

Bringing Psychology in from the Cold
*Framing Psychological Theory and Research
within a Social Constructionist
Psychology Approach*

Vivienne Cass

Introduction

In the last month I have counseled a number of people who appear to be oblivious to the sexual orientation categories that exist in our society. One of these, David, age 44, is a good example. Married for fifteen years with six children, he was having his first emotional and sexual relationship with another man. He described this as a "top-up" to the relationship with his wife, to whom he is close. Neither he nor his wife used the words "gay," "heterosexual," or "bisexual" to refer to his situation, nor did the conversation revolve around his "sexual orientation." They simply described what was happening and discussed issues in their own relationship.

No doubt my recent client list would leave many constructionists breathless with hope! Perhaps the concept of sexual orientation is becoming irrelevant to personal experience. Perhaps we really *are* beginning to understand relationships, emotions, and attractions without needing to label them as homosexual or heterosexual. However, for every David who comes to my office, I also see another ten individuals whose language is peppered with references to sexual orientation as they discuss sexualromantic attractions to people of a particular gender. Their psychological realities appear to be as "real" as those of David. Or are they?

An element of judgment, wafting through a great deal of construc-
tionist writing, suggests that the lived "sexual orientation experiences"
(attractions, identities, and struggles) of individuals are not a primary
consideration, that the focus for theorists and researchers should be on
sexual orientation as social *construct* and on the purposes such a concept
has for society. I have never felt at ease with what I see as this sociologi-
cally driven brand of constructionism. As a psychologist, looking at the
weight of the literature on cognitions, learned behaviors, motivations,
social behavior, and so on and drawing on my clinical experience, I find
the attention to the cultural and associated neglect of the psychological
disturbing.

Until recently, discussion about constructionist approaches to sexual
orientation has nearly always been led by nonpsychologists. This con-
cerns me, not because psychology missed out on the "debate" between
essentialism and constructionism (I consider we were largely to blame
for this), but because of what I see as the narrow sociocultural determin-
ism that now governs our constructionist discourse on sexual orienta-
tion.

Pervading the discussion is an assumption that the public messages
provided by Western culture about sexual orientation are directly repli-
cated or copied across into people's private lives (the so-called cultural
fax model of human behavior [D'Andrade, 1992; Strauss, 1992]).[1] Sup-
posedly, individuals become heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual be-
cause Western society teaches that these states of being are available. Yet
it would seem that this approach merely replaces the biological fax
model (i.e., people adopt sexual orientations because biological disposi-
tions demand it). Little attempt is made by either approach to address
the way sexual orientation as a public construct comes to be taken into
the private realm, into people's thoughts, actions, and feelings and sexual
arousal patterns. While there can be no doubting the significance of
adopting a constructionist approach to sexual orientation, its present su-
perficial understanding of human behavior can only be disturbing to
those cognizant of the complexity of behavioral change and develop-
ment.

That psychological reductionism and sociological models of human
behavior dominate constructionist commentary is a result, I believe, of
the psychological perspective being either absent from the discussion or
so timidly presented as to be easily discounted. This in itself is not sur-
prising, since psychologists are still trained in the paradigms of tradi-

tional (nonconstructionist and anticonstructionist) psychology. In addition, the constructionist psychology movement is still relatively unknown to the majority of psychologists, who are ignorant of its basic premises.

It is therefore pleasing to see the authors of this book examining the meaning of social constructionist thinking in terms of its implications for psychological theory and research. We need to educate psychologists about constructionist thought and provide examples of how training in traditional psychological theory and research methods can unwittingly lead to conclusions that have more to do with socially constructed notions than any objective "truth." Nevertheless, I must admit to wanting more. I don't want us to be satisfied with simply tacking psychological issues onto the present reading of constructionism. As stated, I believe that a sociologically driven version of constructionist thinking is inadequate when one is attempting to understand and explain all the complexities of what we call sexual orientation. The study of sexual orientation must surely include more than the identification of sexual orientation as social construct and consideration of the purpose such a construction holds for society. What about the clutch-at-the-heart experience of feeling romantically attached, the pleasure of sexual arousal, the sense of being lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, or gay, the growing awareness that one's sexualromantic attraction is directed towards a particular gender? These (psychological) experiences of sexual orientation seem to be too easily dismissed as "essentialist" (read: not relevant to the development of social theory) by many constructionists, whereas I maintain that as psychological realities they form an important part of the processes of social construction. These experiences are not essentialist remnants that require tolerance on our part but rather a significant *component* of the whole picture of sexual orientation. Hence I must admit to a little discomfort at talk of a truce in chapter 6. This seems to me to divide the lived psychological realities of individuals from constructionist critique, whereas I think it necessary to consider these realities from *within* a constructionist framework and to acknowledge their role in the processes of construction.

What would constructionist theory look like if it were to include the psychological as part of theory? Clearly, it would focus on *how* Western cultural knowledge about sexual orientation and other relevant concepts (such as the individual, attraction, or development) are translated into consistent, recurring, and desired behavioral patterns, identities, and rel-

evant phenomena that we commonly classify as sexual orientation. For me, as a psychologist, it isn't enough to know that sexual orientation is culturally constituted or even that there may be a biological predisposition to the direction of sexual attraction. This tells me little of the behaviors expressed as sexual orientation. And, while I am very interested in the diversity of behaviors that become subsumed under labels such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual," I am equally keen to understand how it is that Western cultural concepts about sexual orientation, knowledge that we perceive as "out there," become translated into thoughts, emotions, actions and physiological reactions of individuals that fit closely with those categories. I'm interested, too, in how social knowledge becomes translated into self-knowledge ("in here, about me") that provides an understanding of self as "gay," "bisexual," "heterosexual," and "lesbian." As a theorist I want to understand the way large- and small-group dynamics are also implicated in this process of construction, and how biological capacities might play a role. And, importantly, I see an urgent need to track the place of human agency in the construction of sexual orientations, since individuals and groups are not passive recipients of cultural directives but may engage quite actively and intentionally with their environments.

In other words, I see a need to more consciously incorporate the psychological into our constructionist reading of sexual orientation, to extend our focus beyond the sociology of knowledge (Berger, 1970) that underlies sociologically based constructionism, to what might be called the *psychology of knowledge,* the way people at both the individual and the collective levels construct their behaviors from the social knowledge of their cultural environment.

Further, I think we need to get beyond the unspoken belief that social theory, as perhaps a more abstract level of thought, is also a "higher" or "better" level of critique than psychological analysis. There is no doubt that much of the psychological literature on sexual orientation in the past twenty years has come from a blinkered approach, written as if the whole constructionist argument did not exist. Blame our training if you will. But it is time, surely, to move on. The first step in this, as taken in chapter 6, is to sweep current psychological theory and research through the lens of constructionist thought, looking at ways in which our research and approaches need to be changed in order to reflect cultural and anthropological data on sexual orientation. Yet, if we base this

much-needed educational program upon a psychologically reductionistic version of social constructionism, we will limit ourselves professionally and narrow psychological research to fit a model of human behavior that we do not, in fact, uphold.

There is, I believe, a need to go one step further and explore constructionist theory that *includes* the psychology of sexual orientation. We must draw upon sexual theory that recognizes psychological and biological influences and processes, framing these within the potent environment of sociocultural forces. Too often, it seems the psychological and biological are considered untouchable (out of a fear of getting into essentialist territory, perhaps?). Yet the clinician can easily attest to the significance of psychological needs, sexual arousal, and social and learning processes to the individual's construction of sexual orientation. I have seen clients whose strong needs for nurturing, independence, or control appeared to instruct their sexualromantic attractions. Others reveal how sexual arousal seems to have been reinforced through classic learning processes. And the acquisition of intimacy patterns can frequently be traced through childhood experiences.

This leads me to suggest social constructionist psychology as a more appropriate basis for our discussions in the future (eg, Averill, 1980; Bond, 1988; Cole, 1996; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Gergen, 1977, 1984, 1985; Sampson, 1977; Semin & Gergen, 1990; Shotter, 1989, 1991; Shweder & LeVine, 1992; Shweder, & Sullivan, 1993; Smith & Bond, 1993; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1992; Turner & Oakes, 1986).[2] Constructionist psychology has, I believe, the capacity to direct us to the kinds of theoretical and research questions touched on earlier, questions that not only allow us to access the depth of current psychological knowledge but also promise to bring innovation to constructionist perspectives and research on sexual orientation.[3]

I turn now to a brief outline of the main tenets of the constructionist psychology framework and use this as a basis for presenting what I consider to be a more fruitful approach to sexual orientation. I also comment on this approach in relation to issues raised in chapter 6.

Opening Up the Discussion: Social Constructionist Psychology

Sexualromantic Attractions as Psychological Realities

An underlying premise of constructionist psychology, stated previously in this book, is that *psychological functioning and, hence, human behavior, including sexual behavior, is never acultural or ahistorical but is strongly influenced, that is, constrained and directed, by the sociocultural environment in which people live at any time.* There are now considerable data (e.g., Blackwood, 1986; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Moghaddam, Taylor, & Wright, 1993; Rorty, 1980) to suggest that psychological states such as emotions, cognitions, personality, perceptions, needs, notions of self, and other aspects of general and sexual behavior are not universal phenomena but vary considerably across cultures and history. Hence, behaviors, including sexual behaviors, can be conceived as social constructions that arise from the relationship that people, individually and collectively, have with the specific sociocultural context in which they reside.

Quite obviously, this position is a radical departure from traditional (i.e., mainstream) psychology, which states that behavior arises from inner psychological mechanisms that exist within each individual and are located universally in all human beings regardless of where they live (the essentialist approach). Indeed, it can be difficult for those trained in traditional ideas to accept that individuals in some other cultures (to give some examples) do not experience anger or develop ideas of self and, closer to home, have no words in their language such as "homosexual" or "heterosexual" with which to classify behaviors we define as "sexual" and "romantic."

While it is apparent from this evidence that we cannot think in terms of objective universal realities about human behavior, it is possible to consider the idea of culture-specific *psychological realities*, behaviors that arise from the individual/culture interaction and are experienced as "real." In this sense, sexual orientation behaviors are psychological realities, a notion that brings me into conflict with ideas expressed in chapter 6. It is frequently stated in the previous chapter that there is no entity that *is* sexual orientation (hence, how can we look for causes and so on?). The authors are reiterating their point of chapter 2 that sexual orientation is not an objective entity, such as a mountain or rain (although even

these entities can be perceived differently within different cultures), that exists regardless of culture and history. Nevertheless, people in Western cultures experience *something* they define as sexual orientation. As such, I think we need to acknowledge sexual orientation behaviors that arise around that concept as *psychological realities,* as perceived and experienced "entities."

Of course, the interesting question is, What is that something? Here I found some confusion in the previous chapter. At times it seems that "human experience" is presented rather euphemistically as the content of sexual orientation; at others, it is claimed there is nothing at all and it is all just a sleight-of-hand on the part of society; then, at still other times, it is only identity that seems to be the focus. Further, the term "sexual orientation identities" is frequently used to mean "of the self" rather than the more commonly understood meaning of "self-image." This leads to its being applied in contexts that many readers would not, I think, recognize as common usage. I believe this confusion about the content of sexual orientation probably reflects the hesitancy many psychologists have, under the weight of sociological emphasis on sexual orientation as category, to move into the arena of behaviors that express the concept, that is, sexualromantic attraction. Why are we so timid about naming, let alone tackling, this topic? People, generally speaking, do not adopt sexual orientation identities of "homosexual," "heterosexual," and the like because it seems like a good idea at the time. They do so because they are trying to make sense of some aspect of themselves, that is, of behaviors that have been imbued with "sexual" and "romantic" meaning by society. When these behaviors (desires and attachment to others) are perceived to be persistent in their focus, they take on further psychosocial meaning that sees us call them *attractions.* When attractions are persistently directed toward others of a specific gender for any period of time (that is, they are seen to form some *pattern* of sexualromantic attraction), they are given the meaning of "sexual orientation." In the process of attempting to understand these attractions, most people come to adopt an *identity* that they perceive as making sense of their attraction behaviors. The vast majority of individuals in Western cultures identify sexualromantic attractions first and then create sexual orientation identities around their conceptions of those attractions.

In sum, I believe we should not hesitate to name sexualromantic attractions as the legitimate focus of our attention and to place them squarely in the sights of psychological theory and research. Both attrac-

tions and the identities arising from them represent psychological realities and hence need to be recognized as important components of the psychological content of sexual orientation. We must not be timid about including either of them in any constructionist analyses we undertake in regard to sexual orientation.

Indigenous Psychologies

Constructionist analyses should always begin with the understanding that *psychological realities, including sexual realities, are developed within the boundaries of the indigenous psychology of any sociocultural world*. An indigenous psychology is a network of psychological knowledge that exists within each sociocultural world and represents part of the total body of knowledge that makes up the culture of that world (Heelas & Lock, 1981; Smith & Bond, 1993).

Indigenous psychologies are continually evolving entities, the product of historical processes. They include all the information that each sociocultural environment takes to be the truth about human nature or psychology, everything from psychological concepts and processes to the reasons people act the way they do, the problems they experience, and even the solutions available. Hence, they define what the psychological realities are and guide psychological functioning to fit within these parameters. Those who live within any given sociocultural environment do not realize that these limitations exist because the indigenous psychology is so much a part of their thinking, having been learned from an early age, that they simply assume this is the way people are. Within the indigenous psychology of our own Western cultures there is a body of sexual knowledge that defines how people are sexually. This knowledge covers everything we take for granted about sexuality—including our notion of "sexual orientation." Therefore, we assume without question the existence of something called "sexual orientation." In our minds, we just "know" what it is, the behaviors that define it, how it develops, and what people with specific orientations do, think, and feel. Without realizing it, we're perceptually set to see sexual orientation in our world and assume that all people will develop and discover the "true" direction of their sexualromantic attractions (whether heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual). In other words, the Western indigenous psychology is the source of our essentialist beliefs about sexual orientation and sets the stage for the way we experience that something we call "sexual orientation."

The concept of indigenous psychologies is such a dense one that I believe it to be vastly superior to the idea of "scripts" that frequently is used by constructionist writers (and touched on in chapter 6). It reminds us that sexual knowledge is part of a broader network of nonsexual social information and concepts (e.g., "gender," "development," "self-actualization," and "maturity") that feed into our understanding of sexual orientation. Further, indigenous psychologies are themselves guided by other knowledge systems of each cultural world (e.g., spiritual knowledge). Only by considering an indigenous psychology within this total context can we understand fully the meaning of any of its component parts (i.e., sexual orientation).

Now, at this point sociologically based constructionist approaches appear to conclude their discussion of sexual orientation. However, for psychological theory and research, the concept of an indigenous psychology can only be the introduction to the story of how sexualromantic behaviors are constructed. While the indigenous psychology undoubtedly plays a significant role in prescribing boundaries for our sexual realities, it tells us little about the actual development and expression of these realities (that is, the psychological processes involved) and hence is unlikely to be the sole factor in the construction of sexual orientation behaviors and identities. Between societal teachings *about* sexual orientation and the *expression* of sexualromantic attractions, there is a lot of theoretical space to fill. Although not touched on in the previous chapter, this is fertile ground for psychological theory and research. To begin with, we might recognize that individuals, in the course of socialization, come to translate the knowledge that is their indigenous psychology into unique personal versions of that indigenous psychology (Strauss, 1992). Each of us in Western societies (or Western-influenced societies) not only has learned of the social representation (Moscovici, 1981) of "sexual orientation" but has also evolved his or her own specific interpretation or *cognitive schema* of that construct.[4] This schema is linked with other related schemas, providing each of us with a unique *personal semantic network*[5] around the notion of sexual orientation. For example, the schema for "heterosexual" may be linked with schemas for "married," "romance," and "success" in the thinking of one person, while for another it may be linked to schemas for "being accepted by others," "being in the closet," and "breadwinner." Hence, personal semantic networks provide each individual with a unique meaning in regard to the concept "sexual orientation." These meanings guide and motivate each individual to sexually act,

feel, and think in ways specific to his or her "sexual orientation" semantic network.

I note that in the previous chapter this personalization of the indigenous psychology is referred to as constructivism and perceived as a process that parallels constructionism. However, I take a quite different perspective, claiming that cognitive schemas and personal semantic networks are a significant *component* of the process of constructionism, not separate from or parallel to it.

It seems to me that cognitive schemas and personal semantic networks are an excellent place to start in our attempt to understand sexual orientation as psychological reality. For example, in looking at why some people adopt identities that appear to be at odds with their sexualromantic attractions, we might find that from their own perspective (personal semantic network) there is, in fact, no mismatch.

The Process of Social Construction

We have yet to address how the process of social construction occurs. Constructionist psychology proposes that *human behavior, development and change are the products of a complex process of reciprocal interaction engaged in between individuals (including their biological and psychological capacities and experiences) and their objective and subjective environments (including their indigenous psychologies).*

Reciprocal interaction refers to an ongoing relationship between individuals and their sociocultural environments in which each *simultaneously* influences and is influenced by the other (Berger & Luckmann, 1975; Gergen, 1984; Shweder, 1992) in the construction of sexual orientation. This relationship is a seamless one in which individuals cannot be neatly separated from their environments, one in which everything is *at the same time* involved in a process of *being* and *becoming*. Within this model, biological and psychological capacities and experiences within any individual are engaged in processes of reciprocal interaction with each other and, at the same time, with the sociocultural environment. In the sexual arena, biological capacities may include sexual arousal, genetic inheritance, physiological functioning, and physical limits, as well as the capacity for language and memory, while psychological capacities may incorporate fantasy, needs, motives, intimacy styles, cognitive schemas, learned behaviors, and so on.

On the basis of this model of reciprocal interaction, I am proposing that the "emergence" (construction) of sexual orientation behaviors (*including stability and changes in such behaviors*) occurs within these complex interaction processes, which are themselves products of historical processes (Birke, 1986). Since the model depicts a dynamic process of continuous interaction, "sexual orientation" behaviors as products or constructions immediately reenter the processes of interaction as part of the individual's experiences.

The analogy of baking a cake has sometimes been used to depict what I've outlined so far—that is, several different ingredients are mixed together, and a process of cooking blends these into a new entity, the cake (the pattern of sexual attraction, the sexual orientation identity, and so on). Introduce new ingredients into the mixture and you create a variation in the cake (or sexual orientation behaviors).

However, there are problems with the cake analogy, which is too simplistic to be applied to the construction of human behavior. For each of the "ingredients" in the reciprocal interaction process, we can identify several levels of complexity. Biological and psychological capacities range from simple specific functions to complex processes, while sociocultural worlds are diverse and multilayered. If we recognize that all levels of complexity can become engaged in the interaction process and that at any moment some levels may be involved while others may not, it's apparent that the cake analogy simply cannot depict the enormous complexity that exists. Nor can it present the idea of the cake's (e.g., sexual orientation identity, sexual attraction, romantic attachment) being both a product *and* a component of the cooking process, as constructionist psychology proposes.

The constructionist psychology model of sexual orientation presented here is significant to psychologists because it provides a place for their knowledge and skills in the task of understanding sexual orientation behaviors. Until now, it has been difficult for psychologists to see where their abilities as behavior specialists could be usefully applied within the constructionist approach. I hope that the model I have outlined encourages a greater and more innovative involvement than we have previously seen.

For example, we are now faced with the research question "to what *degree* do biology, psychology, and environment influence the construction of sexualromantic attractions?," a question that has immediate implications for psychological research and theory. It is now possible to imagine

countless different combinations of these factors interacting together to construct a broad spectrum of sexual orientation experiences. Psychologist practitioners are quite familiar with the variability in sexual orientation behaviors, yet they have struggled to have this recognized in the traditional literature on causation, which, as noted in chapter 6, has so often inferred homogeneity within each sexual orientation group. However, the model of sexual orientation outlined here recognizes both diversity *and* similarity (apparent or actual) in sexual orientation behaviors. It is conceivable, for example, that *apparently* similar sexualromantic behaviors and identities may be the result of similar reciprocal interaction processes involving similar "ingredients." Equally, quite different combinations of psychological, biological, and environmental factors can produce similar outcomes. Further, similarity may exist because it is encouraged by the Western indigenous psychology, which promotes the ideal of a unified self consistent with the images taught by the indigenous psychology. Cognitions, emotions, and actions that do not fit notions of self are ignored and incongruencies smoothed out. Conceivably, this could result in attractions and identities that look similar as individuals strive to match the pictures of sexual orientation proffered by our indigenous psychology.

This understanding of similarity places me somewhat at odds with the inference in chapter 6 that nothing is gained by considering the so-called sexual orientation groups (homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals) to be homogeneous in makeup. While acknowledging that the diversity within such groups is often ignored, I think it is inadvisable to suggest that studying the commonalities within the groups is somehow poor research. I propose that similarity of sexual orientation behaviors is constructed, just as is variability, and that we should see both aspects as requiring explanation.

I am aware that the reciprocal interaction model will be difficult to accept for those who equate psychological and biological influences with essentialist thought (with good reason, I might add). Nevertheless, I believe many psychologists have been uncomfortable with existing constructionist proposals that ignore not only the enormous complexity of human behavior but also the input of biological influences and psychological factors in its expression.

We need to be able to accommodate psychological and biological research into sexual orientation without feeling that we have succumbed to the essentialist approach. Take the case of research into genetic causes of

same-sex sexualromantic attractions (e.g., Bailey & Bell, 1993; Hamer et al., 1993). While concerns have been raised about the methodology used and the research is fraught with essentialist assumptions (DeCecco & Parker, 1995), I believe there is enough evidence for us to seriously consider the possibility that some genetic *influence* may contribute *in some men* to the construction of sexualromantic attraction toward men. The situation with women is less clear, but twin studies nevertheless suggest a degree of inheritance of homosexual attractions in both males and females. Now, we do not have to give up a constructionist perspective to accept these findings, as some appear to think. Within the process of reciprocal interaction between individual and environment, genetic predisposition, as an element of biological capacities, can be viewed as one line of influence that feeds into the bigger picture where psychological and cultural factors also play a significant role. There is no need to assume that all individuals must hold this biological capacity, or even that individuals with such a capacity are equal in the influence that it exerts. And we can theorize that even in those individuals who may have such a genetic predisposition, this must still be filtered through processes in which it interacts reciprocally with the other (environmental and psychological) influences. Hence, I see no problems in postulating a process of construction even while acknowledging a biological component of that process.

Intentionality and Sexual Orientation

My rather heretical notion is made more palatable if we consider another significant tenet of constructionist psychology, namely that *human beings actively and intentionally participate in the construction of their psychological and hence sexual realities*. Constructionist psychology rejects the traditional view of people as passive creatures who simply react to their environment and to their own biological or psychological capacities, adopting instead the idea of the dynamic, active, and intentional character of human beings. After all, as we psychologists well know, human beings have the capacity to monitor, attend to, select, organize, ignore, or in some way act upon their environmental givens (Gergen & Semin, 1990; Shweder, 1992) and do so quite readily at all times. Indeed, we must recognize that both individuals *and* environments have intentionality, that is, can act with purpose toward each other. It is this inten-

tional capacity that can be said to drive the process of reciprocal interaction (Berger, 1970; Emler, Ohana, & Dickinson, 1990; Shweder, 1992).[6]

Thus, the notion of intentionality allows us to perceive the individual as playing an active role in the construction of sexualromantic attractions—but within the bounds of factors such as the indigenous psychology, genetic inheritance, and cognitive schemas. Presumably, this intentionality can be moderated by the varying degrees (strength) of influence exerted by the environment and by the psychological and biological capacities, as well as different aspects of them. If so, some quite complex areas of research and theory are suggested, although I doubt we have the research methodology to explore them all.

However, the way in which individuals take an active role as they acquire, manage, influence, and are influenced by the knowledge of sexual orientation stored within their indigenous psychology should be within our research grasp. Drawing upon established areas of literature such as attributions, perceptions, and social influence, I see no reason why psychological research should not be able to make a valuable contribution to the issue of intentionality and sexual orientation.

Negotiated Relationships

While acknowledging the individual's capacity for intentional action, constructionist psychology also recognizes that *individual behaviors, including sexual orientation behaviors, cannot be understood separately from the social relationships in which they arise (remembering that such relationships are themselves part of the broader sociocultural context).*

I have found it useful to extend the idea of human intentionality to include that of *negotiated relationships* (Shotter, 1989). Within social relationships, individuals influence and are influenced by others. The unique qualities and responses one individual brings to the encounter influence the behavior of others present in the interchange, and the responses of these people, in turn, influence that individual. These social interchanges involve a process of negotiation, with each person altering cognitions, emotions, and actions in a negotiated response to others. Since individuals engage in multiple social interchanges with others as they go about their daily lives, they are constantly involved in processes of negotiation on many fronts. Out of this complex network of negotiated relationships the "self" is constructed.

I am proposing that *negotiated relationships are a significant site at which reciprocal interaction processes are played out. Hence, sexualromantic behaviors are experienced and constructed within the context of negotiated interpersonal relationships, whether these be actual or symbolic, individual or collective*. Our Western (or Western-influenced) social relationships inevitably incorporate the concept of sexual orientation (via the content of personal semantic networks, psychological and biological experiences, social assumptions, expressions of gender, social policies, institutional structures, and many other means). This knowledge becomes part of the negotiated process. For example, when people perceive another's behavior as fitting the notion of "sexualromantic attractions," they react (e.g., by actions, verbal exchanges, expectations) in ways that fit their perceptions. These reactions signal clear messages about how the individual's behavior is received and generate a negotiated response in return. A negotiated response sees an individual arrange his or her cognitive schemas, emotions, and actions around the other's reactions—rejecting, fitting in, rethinking, selecting, shifting beliefs, altering behaviors, revising, and so on. Other individuals present in the social exchange are, of course, simultaneously doing the same thing. Each individual's sexual orientation "realities" become part of this process of interpersonal reciprocal interaction, influencing and being influenced by others over the vast number of relationship networks in which each person participates. It is within this context of multiple negotiated relationships that I place the process of sexual orientation identity formation, whereby individuals form an understanding or self-image of themselves as "belonging" to a particular sexual orientation group. In this sense, the development of a "homosexual," "heterosexual," or "bisexual" identity can be understood as the process by which people translate their (indigenous) everyday understanding of homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual identity into self-knowledge, behaviors, beliefs, and experiences via the process of reciprocal interaction (Cass, 1996). This involves a shift from perceiving and experiencing the social categories from a third-person perspective ("some people are homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals") to a first-person perspective ("I am a homosexual/heterosexual/bisexual").[7]

By acknowledging identity formation as part of the reciprocal interaction process, we can describe sexual orientation identity as both product and component of that process. Feeding back into the process of sexual orientation construction, identity has the capacity to reinforce, enhance, and change the strength and direction of sexualromantic attractions

(Cass, 1990). Obviously, these processes are complex and may not be readily studied. Nevertheless, the point is made that the development of a sexual orientation identity *is* complex and not simply a matter of individuals attaching a societal label at some convenient time, as some constructionist writing seems to suggest. By placing these processes within the arena of negotiated relationships, I hope to open up the study of sexual orientation identity formation, which for some years has been hopelessly stagnant, unable to move beyond debating which theoretical model is superior. Imagine, for example, tracking the flow of language and cognitions during multiple negotiated relationships as identity acquisition takes place. What motivations and cognitive and emotional processes might we observe as someone negotiates an apparent incongruency between identity and attractions?

The narrative style, mentioned in chapter 6, has some relevance here, although I advocate a much more directed use of the approach. Since language is both a precondition and a condition of successful social interchange, it represents a significant component of the construction process. Hence, we might analyze conversations between individuals by searching for examples of identity statements and the ways these are negotiated. We might also ask questions to elicit talk that reveals personal semantic networks held about sexual orientation and observe these over time.

Stability and Change in Sexual Orientations

I have not yet addressed the issue raised in the previous chapter in regard to stability and flexibility of sexual orientations. As outlined in chapter 5, the subject of fixed sexual orientations has raised difficulties for constructionists, since this notion infers an essentialist quality to sexualromantic attractions. Yet, any suggestion that sexual orientations can be altered soon flushes out those people whose agenda is to push for the conversion of homosexuals and bisexuals to heterosexuality. Of course, the reality for most clinicians is that, in addition to seeing people who experience sexualromantic attractions that vary over time, they regularly encounter individuals who claim to have *only* felt sexualromantic attractions for those of one particular gender. Obviously, *both* patterns of attractions need to be recognized as significant psychological realities (regardless of our ideological stance on the matter). Unfortunately, the

stability of sexual orientation is often presented as belonging to the essentialist side, while flexibility is claimed by the constructionists as evidence for the construction of sexual orientation. This approach does no more for our understanding of the range of sexual orientation behaviors than biologically based research, which has focused attention *entirely* on the so-called exclusive homosexual attractions while ignoring the evidence that for some people sexualromantic attractions can also shift direction.

I (like many others, I'm sure), find this either/or approach unrealistic, restrictive, and, from a clinician's viewpoint, quite fruitless. Both change *and* stability, I suggest, need to be accommodated within any approach to sexual orientation. Yet, neither biologically nor sociologically based constructionist approaches have been able to do this successfully, leaving psychologists with a gaping theoretical (and clinical) hole. Within the constructionist psychology framework, however, I find there is no difficulty conceptualizing both stability and flexibility of sexualromantic attractions. Both qualities would be considered to arise out of the reciprocal interaction process. Remembering that this process is about *being* and *becoming*, I propose that *stability of sexualromantic attractions can be viewed as a sameness from moment to moment*, that is, *as a continuity of attractions over time that occurs when reciprocal interaction processes are similar from moment to moment.* In this sense, sexual orientation attractions are being reproduced in identical fashion over and over again.[8] Whether occurring in childhood or adulthood, this situation of sameness is described through the lens of our Western indigenous psychology as "behavioral consistency," "the inner self," "a trait," and so on. Alternatively, *a shift in sexual orientation behaviors would be predicted whenever a new element is introduced into the interaction process.*[9] I recently watched a young Indonesian man, with no concept of sexual orientation and diffuse "sexualromantic attractions" (apparently like many others in his village), gradually shift toward a Western, homosexual sexual orientation pattern after he came to stay in Australia society, lived with a "gay" man, and eventually accepted a Western view of sexual orientation.[10] The shift in culture presented a new component in the interaction process leading to new behavioral developments. Equally, a shift in psychological or biological capacities could also lead to a change in sexualromantic attractions (although it should not be inferred that all components of the reciprocal interaction process are equally amenable to change).

I should at this point say that in no way does this conception of change imply that it is easily achieved. When we put together the whole picture of reciprocal interaction and site this process within the multiple networks of negotiated relationships, it is clear that stability and change in sexualromantic attractions arises from a complex and multifaceted process that has ties to early as well as later development.

Research Focus and Ideology

In the previous chapter, the goal of research was presented as the development of an understanding of human experience without relying on use of the sexual orientation categories of "homosexual," "heterosexual," and "bisexual." It was emphasised that such labels were not accurate reflections of the many different expressions of sexual orientation behaviors (hence, the focus on a narrative methodology as a more suitable way of studying sexualromantic attractions). As such, their use in psychological research contributes to a perpetuation of the traditional belief that sexual orientation can be neatly divided into discrete "out-there" entities.

To a degree, I can endorse these sentiments, but I am concerned that this research directive will breed more of the timidity that I mentioned previously. We must be careful not to infer that there is any stand-alone behavior (in this case, sexualromantic attraction) that can be understood or studied outside the meanings given it by the indigenous psychology. Of course, we can study (and need to study) sexualromantic attractions and other relevant behaviors without linking these directly to a particular sexual orientation label. However, we must be careful not to make those labels into some form of ideological bogey. They are a component of our indigenous psychology and, as such, part of the whole process by which sexual orientations are constructed and given meaning.

Hence, I see no problems in studying groups of individuals who identify by one or another label, provided we work from the assumption that these identities are socially constructed. For example, it might be revealing to examine whether people who *identify as* heterosexual differ in pertinent personal semantic networks compared with those who *identify as* homosexual or bisexual. In this case, the comparison of homosexual-, heterosexual-, or bisexual-identified individuals is acceptable, provided we do not try to claim that any differences found are evidence for the groups being discrete "entities" in other respects.

I would prefer to see the examination of patterns of sexualromantic attractions held up as a goal, rather than *the* goal of research. The latter, I maintain, is to understand the psychology of knowledge and covers the study of *all* psychological realities that form part of what we call sexual orientation (identities, patterns of attractions, the relationship between identities and attractions, processes of social categorization, and so on). By keeping in mind that all of these realities are socially constructed, and by setting our work against the broad questions posed in chapter 5 regarding the purpose of the concept of sexual orientation, we can focus on sexual orientation as psychological reality and avoid the traditional (essentialist) trap of identifying it as objective entity.

With the goal of research focused on the psychology of knowledge, we shift attention away from the thorny question of who is a homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual and ask instead how the indigenous knowledge about sexual orientation is translated into personal knowledge, behaviors, and experiences. The difference in focus is breathtaking and offers psychologists an exciting vista from which to launch future research into sexual orientation. Within the framework outlined in this chapter I have suggested a number of areas where our skills and knowledge of human behavior can usefully be deployed to this end.

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

1. I use the term "behavior" in the psychological sense to mean all actions, emotions, cognitions, and processes, expressed consciously and unconsciously, overtly and covertly.

2. I do not mean to suggest a sociology-versus-psychology debate, which serves no purpose. I apply the terminology of constructionist *psychology* to a theoretical approach that has derived largely out of the thinking of social, cultural, and anthropological psychologists concerned by the neglect of psychological processes in constructionist writing.

3. While one can argue that current psychological knowledge has been obtained via traditional psychological methodology, I believe we can still learn from the vast body of information about human psychology.

4. Cognitive schemas are evolving units or "packets" of knowledge held by people about specific social constructs and experienced as a combination of thoughts and feelings (e.g., schemas of "getting up in the morning," "success," "love," "being a woman/man"). Schemas are unique to each individual and may vary in content from the social representation of the construct.

5. Personal semantic networks are loose hierarchical arrangements of cognitive schemas, which, taken as a whole, represent the meanings each person gives to his or her world. These meanings then operate as a guiding and, most important, *motivational* force in human behavior (D'Andrade, 1992).

6. The idea of human agency is another aspect of the constructionist process that cannot be explained by the analogy of the cake mentioned earlier.

7. This approach differs from those of other theorists of homosexual identity formation, who present models that track changes in overt behavior rather than the shift from social knowledge to self-understanding and self-knowledge. For me, stages of formation are markers for shifts in cognitions and related emotions and behaviors, in contrast to other models, which mark stages by different *events* (e.g., joining gay groups). Although I consider the criticism of events-based models of identity formation as mentioned in chapter 6 to be valid on the grounds that the stages are not necessarily linear, I maintain that this does not apply to models based on changes in self-knowledge, since this shift (and the attendant shifts in self-awareness, self-cognitions, and emotions) follows certain patterns of logic derived from our indigenous psychology, patterns that have a certain linearity to them. For example, perceiving one's own attractions to be directed toward members of the same sex is likely to initially raise the question, "Am I homosexual?" (at this historical time, anyway) but not the statement "I am proud to be gay." The social logic and cognitive decision-making styles of our indigenous psychology guides this order in our thinking (and would not, for instance, allow us to reverse the order of these self-statements).

8. In addition, since sexualromantic attractions become, in turn, an element of the interaction process, it might be hypothesized that this would lead to a strengthening of these attractions since the pleasurable aspects of sexual arousal and romantic attachment can act as powerful reinforcers of behaviour.

9. Unless strategies are introduced to return the interactional relationship to its original status.

10. This example brings into the discussion the issue of whether "sexual" and "emotional" behaviors in non-Western cultures can be described as "attractions" in the same way we use the term. This area requires more consideration than I have space for. Suffice to say at this point that constructionist psychology is not antiuniversalist, that is, opposed to finding that sexual behaviors are similar across sociocultural boundaries. Similarity may indicate that, within different societies, coincidently similar processes of construction occur or similar guiding sexual constructs exist. Historical events may also have led to the transfer of elements of one sociocultural environment to another. Equally, constructionist psychology is not antirelativist, that is, opposed to finding that behavior is quite distinct in different environments.

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Psychology of Sexual Orientation

Fritz Klein

Confusion abounds!

This book looks at some of the factors that make sexual orientation such a fuzzy and hard-to-grasp concept, one that keeps both the experts and the general population going around most of the time in circles. When it comes to sexual orientation, people are usually speaking on different levels and with different assumptions, which causes them not to understand one another. I am, therefore, delighted to contribute a chapter on the subject, one that I have studied, looked at, researched and talked about for more than 25 years.

Let me give you three examples that exemplify the difficulty of trying to get a consensus as to what sexual orientation is.

A couple of years ago, I gave a talk to the Amsterdam Bisexual Group in the Netherlands. The subject of the lecture was the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid.[1] The audience of about thirty bisexual women and men was attentive; although I spoke in English, they all understood the language as well as the import of the topic.

After finishing the talk, I invited questions and comments. The questions were the usual ones, until one young man of about thirty-five years of age stood up and told me that he disagreed with everything I had said. I was intrigued because I had found that a bisexual audience usually not only agrees with the premise of the Grid but feels that it was made for bisexuals specifically (which it was not).

Jaap, the young man, said that he completely disagreed with the Grid. He said that, although he does indeed have sex with both males and females on a regular basis, and though he is attracted to both men and

women, he considers himself gay and not bisexual. With that comment, he sat down.

Well, I thought before answering him, he really does not disagree with the Grid as much as he does with the labels of "gay" and "bisexual."

"I agree with you," I answered him. "You are gay. If you identify as gay, then that is what you are. No 'expert' can tell you differently. The Grid has seven variables, one of which is 'Self-Identification.' When a person fills out the KSOG, he is asked what number from one to seven fits closest on the continuum for each sexual orientation variable. In your case, you chose for the 'self-identification' variable a 'five' (mostly homosexual and more than incidentally heterosexual). What you are now saying with respect to the label of 'gay' as opposed to 'bisexual' is that, although you are attracted to and have sex with both sexes (two of the other variables), you consider yourself 'gay' and not 'bisexual.' If 'gay' is what suits you, then who am I to say you are not gay?"

Here was an example of the slippery slope of label definitions and the difficulty of trying to fit people into specific sexual orientation slots. In the young man's case, the rules for choosing among the three labels—straight, bi, or gay—were not obvious. He had surmised that I thought him bisexual, which I did not.

As a second example, consider a former patient of mine who had come to me because of sexual orientation confusion (in addition to some other clinical problems that are irrelevant to this discussion).

Joe B., a handsome, twenty-eight-year-old successful salesman, was engaged to get married. His fiancee knew of his attraction to and his sexual experience with other men, which had occurred over a long period of time. She had no problem with it. His main problem was that he lived a "straight" life. By that, he meant that he was extremely uncomfortable around "gay" men and a "gay" lifestyle. His friends were all straight, and he knew no gay or bisexual men.

"So which type of men do you go to bed with?" I asked one time. "If they are all straight, how come they have sex with you?"

"All men are naturally bi," he answered. "Under the right conditions, all men can be had."

Knowing his history well, I had to agree with him. At least in his world, that statement was true. All his long-term and short-term male sex partners were indeed "straight." They all lived in the straight world, lived with women, identified as straight, and so on. The fact that Joe was able also to have sexually intimate relations with these men does

not invalidate their belief that their sexual orientations were truly "straight."

But what is most interesting is that in Joe's world view and actual experience, all men are bisexual—not only potentially but in actuality when it relates to his male sex friends and male lovers. Even though they identify as straight and although he also sees them as "basically" straight, he realizes that they indeed are bisexual ("all men can be had under the right circumstances").

As a third example, I know a professor of sexology in a Midwestern University who states that there is no such thing as a "bisexual" person.

"All bisexuals are really lesbian or gay," she told me, although she knew that I had written extensively on bisexuality and had researched the subject for many years. It turns out that she had been married for twenty-five years and had two children before the breakup of her marriage. She then became completely lesbian in practice, attraction, and lifestyle. When I asked her about her marriage, her script now consisted of a past that did not truly represent herself. She had now found out who she "really" was, namely a "lesbian." In other words, she discounted her past history.

She then did what most people do—generalize their understanding of sexual orientation from their own histories and experiences. And although she was in fact a professor of sexology, she posited that past behavior was unimportant and that all bisexuals are "really" lesbian or gay. Not only that, all bisexuals are really only "transitional bisexuals." In addition, the transition is always from straight to gay—never the reverse.

In these three examples, people have claimed everything from a belief that all people are bisexual to a theory that bisexuality does not exist—one is either straight or gay. In addition, a self-identification as straight, bi, or lesbian/gay is definitely not a simple definition, and different people use different criteria to define these sexual orientation labels.

These are the problems that all people face in trying to make heads or tails of their own and other people's sexual orientation. Most experts in the field are also all over the map when it comes to definitions or understanding of this particular human phenomenon. The fact that there are so many definitions points to a confusion of terms.

Let me digress to relate how I came to study sexual orientation. In 1974 I wanted to write an article about bisexuality and found, to my surprise, that no literature existed on the subject. In order to do research and find a population to study, I began a discussion and support group

for bisexual people in my home in New York City. We met every week and discussed any issue that was brought up by the participants. I also handed out a questionnaire that investigated a number of variables on the subject. The answers to these questionnaires became one of the findings in *The Bisexual Option*, whose first edition was published in 1978. (The second edition was published by Haworth Press in 1993).

What I found fascinating was that every week we would have to talk about the meaning of bisexuality—who is bisexual, who is lesbian, gay, or straight. That was the start of my investigating the meaning of sexual orientation. How can one tell if you are bisexual if you do not know what sexual orientation is or what it means? The examples that were covered in chapter 6 are just few of the myriad problems that exist when we try to pin down sexual orientation and its concomitant identity.

I found that bisexuals who were somewhere on the continuum between the two poles of heterosexual and lesbian/homosexual had the most difficulty in defining themselves. The great majority of monosexuals were pretty clear about who they were. Bisexuals were not. The reasons were not difficult to find.

First of all, there were the myths that bisexuals had to live with: that they did not exist (they were really gay or lesbian), they were afraid to come out as lesbian/gay and were hiding behind the "bisexual" label, they were by definition neurotic and "fence sitters," that they could not love deeply (if at all), nor could they be monogamous.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the question of definition kept coming up all the time. It still does today, though we are many years into the "queer" movement. Bisexuals do not have a community to help define who they are, in contrast to the enormously large lesbian and gay communities. The bisexual community is tiny by comparison, although in the last number of years it has grown quite a bit. Still, bisexuals do have a great deal of trouble finding others like themselves.

I have found that, with the advent of the Internet, life is getting somewhat easier for the bisexual. For example, my Web page, Bisexual Options (http://www.bisexual.org), now includes personal ads from close to 5,000 bisexuals from all over the world who are trying to find others like themselves.

The question of who is bisexual and how one defines a bisexual is a question that I have always likened to how many angels dance on the head of a pin. In studying and researching sexual orientation, I have

found the terms "straight," "bi," and "lesbian/gay" to be confusing; they have far too many definitions to be meaningful.

I remember reading, in the 1970s, of a study of gay and lesbian people. The population consisted of people who had attended a gay dance at Columbia University in New York City. Although the authors found that a very high percentage of their subjects had had bisexual experiences, they never used the term "bisexual." The result was that the findings for gays and lesbians were mixed together with those for bisexuals. Whatever the findings were, the results did not consist of a homogeneous gay population. It was a flawed study at best.

So how does one separate out bisexuals from straights or gays? How does one study lesbians and gays without including bisexuals? The questions in this book try to make sense of sexual orientation, its definitions and its identities. It looks at the essentialist and the constructionist points of views.

In my research, I have tried to bypass these questions. I have dealt with stories that people related, on one hand, and with very defined populations, on the other. I have used the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, which helps separate my subjects into groups that are precisely defined and therefore are reproducible by other researchers.

As an example, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid uses the past year to define "the present time." Another researcher might wish to use a shorter or longer period for the present time. But both of us or any other researcher can duplicate any and all studies since we know exactly what each researcher used as definitions of each of the seven variables and the three time frames.

In creating the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, I ended up with seven variables:

A. Sexual attraction
B. Sexual behavior
C. Sexual fantasy
D. Emotional preference
E. Social preference
F. Heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian/homosexual lifestyle
G. Self-identification

This does not mean that one cannot add to this list or subtract items by consolidating some entries. But I have found these variables to be most

informative for the individual person as well as successful at teasing out different aspects of sexual orientation.

Several studies have looked at how well these seven variables forecast the values of the other variables (factor or dimensionality analyses). Most of the time, the twenty-one values seem to reflect three or four underlying factors. But, as a clinician, I find that every person's ratings tell a particular story, and all seven variables give me and the subject deeper insights. For example, much important information is conveyed when a subject assigns different values to the variables that make up one of the three or four academically derived factors.

In addition, the three time periods have shown again and again that sexual orientation is not fixed. It is fluid for many people, though not for all people. Over time, a person can move all the way across the spectrum, move part way, or go back and forth.

The lesbian professor felt that all bisexuals are transitory and that they all end up lesbian or gay. I believe that this is not true. I have found that people can be either straight or gay in an earlier period of their life and then move toward the middle of bisexuality. They can be transitional bisexuals, or they can become bisexual and remain so the rest of their lives.

I knew an artist who was in his forties before he had his first inkling that he was attracted also to women as well as to men. It did not take him long to develop a relationship with a woman, whom he ended up marrying. He is not monogamous (neither is she) and still has sexual relations with men from time to time. The question is, What are we going to do with his former "gay" identity? He was completely gay for most of his life and had for all his adult life as well as for most of his teen years a "gay" identity. He is now bisexual. He calls himself bisexual (self-identification). He no longer goes to gay bars, so, in addition to his self-identification, his lifestyle has drastically changed. His attraction to and his sexual behavior with women and his emotional preference, which at the present time is mostly toward females (his wife), have also changed.

I find that the question of a "hard-core" identity just does not apply. The question of how an identity is obtained is beside the point when we look at the variability and differences in different sexual orientation identities over time. The people who claim that a former "straight" identity was not "real" when a person becomes gay and has her or his "true"

identity sound very much like the professor of sexology introduced earlier.

People do feel that they are gay or straight or bisexual. But these feelings do change, and sometimes they change drastically. The question of labels is an old one; we have always liked to put people into specific boxes so that we can generalize about them. Labels are convenient and necessary; they are also misleading. They do not really describe a person.

With respect to sexual orientation, the three labels "straight," "bi," and "lesbian/gay" just do not describe people accurately. On the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, people fit into myriad combinations; to limit them to only a straight-gay dichotomy or even to add the option of bisexual just does not describe reality.

The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid has another use. Many people who fill it out say (sometimes out loud), "Aha!" It explains to them the various aspects of sexual orientation that they feel or have experienced. They begin to realize that sexual behavior is not the same as sexual fantasy, that loving one gender to a certain degree is not necessarily the same as wishing to socialize with that gender. They also go "Aha!" when they realize they have changed over time and that their ideal is no longer what it once was.

The Grid is also important when people wish to discuss their sexual orientation. If I were to say I was gay (or bisexual, or straight), a person hearing me would not have a clue as to what degree I am (or was) attracted to the same sex as opposed to the other one, with which sex I am emotionally close, and to what degree I socialize with men or with women. Saying one of the three words does not describe me at all; regardless of how I am labeled, I could be almost anything and have almost any sexual orientation characteristic.

The same can be said of my identity. Let us say I am gay and have a gay identity. What does that mean? Does it mean I never sleep with a woman? Does it mean I live in a gay ghetto? Does it mean I go to a gay church? In other words, is the lifestyle I lead the main criterion, or is it only one of the criteria? Does my sexual identity depend on sexual attraction? If so, does it include my past preference, which might be different? Anna Freud posited that the "true" criteria for sexual orientation is a person's sexual fantasy. I have found that to be only one of seven variables of sexual orientation. It becomes pretty clear that the sexual orientation water is quite muddy!

I have also found (as was also pointed out by Bohan and Russell in chapter 1) that different cultures look at homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality quite differently. The historical aspects of sexual orientation are varied and must be taken into account when discussing these concepts.

Understanding bisexuality is the key to understanding sexual orientation. On many sexual orientation measures, bisexuality is intermediate between homosexuality and heterosexuality, as it is in the widely used "Kinsey scale" (a bipolar scale ranging from 0 to 6; see Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; McWhirter, Sanders, & Reinisch, 1990). In a bipolar measure, the two poles can be only averaged, not combined (e.g., no one can be both tall and short according to the same measure at the same time). On other measures, bisexuality is a category applied to individuals who have high levels of sexual interest in both men and women. (This is analogous to the "androgynous" category of Bem's masculinity and femininity scales: Bem, 1981.) In this latter view, bisexuality is the combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality, not a compromise between the two.

In a study undertaken with Jim Weinrich (in press), I asked people across the sexual orientation spectrum about 1) the desirability of various sexual acts, 2) the desirability of various body parts, and 3) the desirability of different types of relationships. We wished to find out whether people of different sexual orientations react differently with respect to sexual acts, body parts, and types of relationship. Are there differences between bisexuals and straights, between female bisexuals and lesbians, between bisexual males and gays, or among bisexuals? We found three main results:

1. Bisexuals were more adventurous; they had a higher desire to participate in one-night stands, threesomes, and orgies as compared to both the heterosexuals and gays/lesbians.
2. Bisexuals are neither consistently intermediate between homosexuals and heterosexuals nor consistently similar to homosexuals and heterosexuals. Simple generalizations do not accurately describe the bisexual patterns.
3. Bi-heterosexuals are more sexually adventurous than might be expected from their position in the progression from pure heterosexual to pure homosexual, especially in anal sex.

Further, we found that the large bisexual population can be divided up into three distinct groups:

1. Bi-heterosexual
2. Bi-bisexual
3. Bi-gay/lesbian

Each group gave different responses and therefore could be looked at separately. However, it is clear that the bisexual population is a complex one, made up of many types and groups. It is this complexity that accounts for the fact that bisexuals do not consistently lie intermediate between the two poles of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The bi groups sometimes respond similarly to heterosexuals; sometimes their answers are similar to those of lesbians and gays.

On the other hand, in several workshops I have asked people to divide themselves into the five groups that we found in the study just mentioned—straight, bi-straight, bi-bi, bi-lesbian/gay, and lesbian/gay. It is remarkable that almost all individuals were able to seat themselves in one of these five groups without any difficulty. The ones who did have difficulty seemed to have difficulty in labeling themselves anything at all, rather than in knowing to which group they belonged.

This study supported the difficulty of labeling people as lesbian/gay, bisexual, or straight. Sexual orientation is more complex than simply applying one of two, three, or five labels. On the other hand, people have an innate sense of where they belong on the continuum, or grid. I trust that, with further research and new theories on this problem, we will continue to improve our understanding of this difficult and hazy subject.

NOTES

1. The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid is a self-report measure that portrays sexual orientation as a "multivariate, dynamic process" (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolff, 1985). Individuals apply a seven-point scale ranging from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality to each of seven variables related to sexual orientation (such as sexual behavior, emotional preference, lifestyle, and community). They also indicate current, past, and ideal future positions for each variable.

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Implications for Public Policy

Glenda M. Russell and Janis S. Bohan

One of the criticisms leveled against social constructionism is the charge that it lacks relevance to the real, material world (e.g., Bordo, 1990; Burman, 1990; Elshtain, 1982; Flax, 1990; Hartsock, 1983; Kitzinger, 1995; Weedon, 1987; Weisstein, 1993; Zita, 1988). In fact, this criticism misrepresents constructionism. To consider something as socially constructed does not divorce it from the everyday world; a phenomenon is no less something with which we must contend simply because we think of it as socially constructed. In the words of Efran and Fauber (1995), "The witches of Salem were created sheerly on the basis of attitude and belief, but they were [hanged] nevertheless, and with real rope!" (p. 286). Indeed, from a strong constructionist perspective, social constructions are not only relevant to but constitutive of our realities.

Further, because constructionism urges that there are no absolute epistemological criteria by which to determine the validity of an idea, we are forced to find other means for selecting among the many construals available. The selection of such means necessarily represents choices about which standards to privilege. That is, given that there are no predetermined or objective criteria for judging the validity of a construal, we must rely on subjectively determined standards for selecting among various frameworks and diverse construals. Here we suggest that subjective criteria of this sort derive from ethical and pragmatic considerations. In this chapter, then, we turn our attention to the implications for the sociopolitical arena of social constructionist and essentialist perspectives on sexual orientation.

There has been a long-standing relationship between psychology and the other mental health professions, on the one hand, and the public

policy interests of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, on the other (Melton, 1989). In this chapter, we explore some of the facets of the relationship between the public policy interests of psychology and of LGBs. In doing so, we highlight the reciprocal nature of that relationship—that is, the ways in which psychology and related professions have both influenced and been influenced by LGBs' efforts in sociopolitical arenas.

Evolution of a Dilemma

Psychology today finds itself in an odd position vis-à-vis the topic of sexual orientation. The discipline has relied on essentialist renditions of sexual orientation, which have served LGBs well in a number of ways. Yet, such understandings entail questionable assumptions that may, in the long run, seriously impede progress toward optimal conditions for those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Developments within Psychology

The removal, in 1973, of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's classification of mental disorders stands as a milestone in the relationship between the mental health professions and LGBs' public interests. That decision also illustrates the reciprocity between the professions and LGBs. Prior to the decision, the mental health professions were invoked to classify nonheterosexual orientations as problematic (Conrad & Schneider, 1985; Nardi, Sanders, & Marmor, 1994). The decision to depathologize homosexuality resulted from joint efforts of mental health professionals, especially those in psychiatry, and LGB activists (Bayer, 1981). The activism that occurred among psychiatrists and the activism that originated outside the discipline often were not well coordinated. Sometimes, in fact, the two groups seemed to be at odds with each other. Nonetheless, they were moving toward the same goal: the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.

The impact of that decision, of course, extended far beyond the boundaries of mental health fields. The decision to declassify is routinely cited in public debates about homosexuality. This makes sense in view of the observation that one of the prominent bases for negative attitudes

against LGBs has been the notion that nonheterosexual orientations reflect underlying psychopathology (e.g., Conrad & Schneider, 1985). When the 1973 decision is referred to in public debates, the authority of psychiatry (and, by extension, related professions) is drawn on to counter homonegative attitudes. An appeal to that same authority is made through references to the American Psychiatric Association's subsequent organizational commitment to LGB civil rights (Bayer, 1981).

Much of the empirical basis for the American Psychiatric Association's depathologization decision was found in research conducted by psychologists. For example, in her pioneer work, the psychologist Evelyn Hooker (1957) found that experienced psychologists could not differentiate between gay and heterosexual men in their responses to a battery of projective tests. Furthermore, gay men were indistinguishable from heterosexual men in assessments of mental health. Many consider Hooker's research to have been the first systematic approach to a subject matter that previously had been mired in clinical accounts that reflected homophobic bias (e.g., Coleman, 1982). Subsequent work employing different measures consistently reported similar results (e.g., Siegelman, 1972a, 1972b; Thompson, McCandless, & Strickland, 1971).

Since the decision to declassify, organized psychology has taken a number of stands related to LGB concerns within and outside the discipline. The American Psychological Association's (APA) earliest formal policy statement dealing with LGB issues, in 1975, supported the American Psychiatric Association's decision and urged "all mental health professionals to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientation." The statement also urged civil rights for LGBs as well as the repeal of sodomy laws (American Psychological Association, 1991a, p. 1). Subsequent policy statements issued by APA have included, nonexhaustively, those focused on child custody and placement, the employment rights of gay teachers, AIDS, the use of the ego-dystonic homosexuality diagnosis, hate crimes, Department of Defense policy on sexual orientation, and LGB youth in the schools (American Psychological Association, 1991a).

In addition, APA has created a standing committee and a number of task forces that deal with LGB interests. These groups collectively have issued research findings and guidelines dealing with such issues as heterosexual bias in language (American Psychological Association, 1991b) and bias in psychotherapy with lesbians and gay men (American Psychological Association, 1991c; Garnets et al., 1991). APA has contributed amicus

briefs in several cases involving LGB rights at the federal and the state court levels (Bersoff & Ogden, 1991). Finally, APA has participated in various educational efforts aimed at securing LGB rights (e.g., Freiberg, 1994), including issuing fact sheets on sexual orientation (American Psychological Association, undated a) and on reparative therapy (American Psychological Association, undated b). These fact sheets frequently are disseminated by various pro-LGB groups.

Despite such formal actions by organized psychology, psychologists have not been unanimous in their support of LGBs as people or as members of a social movement. One form of resistance to the change in psychology's approach to LGBs is the persistent argument in favor of reparative therapy—that is, attempts to change individuals with LGB orientations to a heterosexual orientation (Davison, 1976, 1991; Haldeman, 1991, 1994; Martin, 1984). Among the proponents of reparative therapy is the psychologist Joseph Nicolosi. Nicolosi has been quite visible in presenting notions that homosexuality is an abnormality in need of psychotherapeutic intervention (Nicolosi, 1991). He testified in favor of Colorado's antigay Amendment 2, asserting that the APA position on homosexuality is "largely political and not scientifically based" (Moses-Zirkes, 1993, p. 29). Nicolosi also has been a representative for the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), a professional group that argues for a redefinition of nonheterosexual orientations as pathological (Weiss, 1997).

Another psychologist, Paul Cameron, argues for a pathological view of LGBs and has been widely quoted by opponents of LGB rights. While Cameron's research findings have been used in a variety of political contexts, both he and his research methods have been sufficiently discredited that his value as an expert witness seems to have faded (Booth, 1992; Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991; Pietrzyk, 1994; Walter, 1985). Nonetheless, he continues to report findings of research on LGBs in professional journals (e.g., Cameron & Cameron, 1996).

Psychologists who are specifically opposed to LGB rights and organizations such as NARTH certainly are problematic in that they strive to reverse the positive changes that have occurred in organized psychology's approach to LGB rights. A far more subtle problem exists among psychologists in general, however. In the introduction, we addressed the issue of psychologists' lack of training with respect to sexual orientation. That lack, coupled with the extensive exposure to homonegativity that virtually everyone in this society experiences, puts psychologists in the

position of bringing, at the very least, subtle aspects of homophobia and heterosexism into their work. Similarly, as we discussed in chapter 2, the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder did not mean an immediate end to subtler versions of homophobia-heterosexism in our nosology or in our clinical practice. While progress with respect to psychology's approach to sexual orientation clearly has been made, by no means have we succeeded in eradicating homophobic and heterosexist influences from the discipline.

At the same time, we have only to look at how homosexuality has been dealt with in the field in the past to see that progress does not always develop in a linear fashion. While Freud, for example, treated the issue of homosexuality in different ways at different times, at no point was he as condemnatory as were some subsequent psychoanalytic theorists (Lewes, 1995). Given the aforementioned overt and subtle forms of resistance to positive change, it is not impossible to imagine that psychology could return to less progressive understandings of LGB orientations.

Developments in the Public Sphere

In many respects, changes in how psychology has dealt with sexual orientation have paralleled changes in how sexual orientation has been viewed in the broader society. In both spheres, sexual orientation has moved from the margins and become a somewhat more familiar concept. The concept has brought with it stereotypes and half-truths and misguided assumptions, as well as direct challenges to the status quo.

Interestingly, early post-Stonewall[1] LGB discourse was posed in terms of broad social liberation. Early LGB activists emphasized liberation from all restrictions on sexual expression between and among consenting adults. Gay liberation challenged the categories of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" even as its rhetoric was redefining and, to a certain extent, reifying those same categories. Early LGB activists emphasized basic social change and the common bonds between LGBs and members of other groups who encountered various forms of oppression (Adam, 1995; D'Emilio, 1992; Licata, 1985; Teal, 1971; Vaid, 1995). It was in and through the course of gay liberation's transformation into the movement for LGB civil rights that the goals changed. Decreasing emphasis was placed on broader social change; the focus shifted to securing civil rights for LGBs in particular.

This shift can be seen as representing the mainstreaming of the LGB movement. While that process occurred on a national level, important elements of the process can be traced by reference to a case study of a single community's experience with LGB rights. In 1974, Boulder, Colorado, was the site of the first referendum on LGB rights in the United States (predating by several years the Dade County, Florida, election in which Anita Bryant played a visible role) (Case, 1989). This story began with the Boulder city council's passage of a broad human rights ordinance that included protection against discrimination in employment on the basis of a number of dimensions, including age, sex, marital status, religion, race, and sexual preference. While some Boulderites objected to the ordinance in general, many objected specifically to the inclusion of sexual preference. The issue divided the community and ultimately resulted in the recall of one council member and the failure of the then-mayor's subsequent reelection bid. A citizen-initiated referendum was carried out, and Boulder's voters rejected the sexual preference provision at the polls.

During the debate on the inclusion of sexual preference in the ordinance, a discourse on LGB rights developed. It was a discourse that would be played out in many communities over the next couple of decades. The early discourse focused on "sexual preference," the term initially used in the ordinance and one that reflected the broad social critique that contributed to the human rights ordinance as it was proposed (C. Anderson, 1997; T. Fuller, personal communication, June 12, 1997). A study of the early dialogue on this section of the ordinance (Russell, Ramsey, & Wyatt, 1999) suggests that objections to the inclusion of sexual preference in the ordinance shifted the discourse in a striking way. Opponents of the sexual preference clause argued that sexual preference was not like other dimensions included in the ordinance. Those dimensions—sex and race being the two that were referred to most frequently—were innate qualities of the individual. Sexual preference, the argument continued, was a chosen behavior, not an inherent characteristic of the person. (This line of reasoning conveniently failed to note the ordinance's inclusion of other dimensions not viewed as inherent characteristics, with religion being perhaps the most obvious.) In response to this line of argument, the city council, months into the debates, "renamed the 'sexual *preference*' measure to [*sic*] the 'sexual *orientation*' ordinance" (Municipal Government History, 1974, p. 141, emphasis added).

In public discourse, those who supported the inclusion of sexual preference in the ordinance began to speak in terms of sexuality as a deeply rooted and even inherent human characteristic. Over the course of the campaign leading up to the referendum, the terms of the debate literally changed and divided the two sides on the issue—in regard both to discrimination and to the presumed origins of sexual orientation. People who were against the inclusion of the contested dimension in the ordinance continued to refer to it as "sexual preference." Those who worked to have the contested dimension included in the ordinance increasingly referred to it as "sexual orientation."

The implications of this linguistic debate are significant and continue to this day. The debate reflects differing positions on the question of the nature of sexual orientation, with those who favor LGB rights largely viewing sexual orientation as an inherent property of the individual and with those opposed to gay rights viewing sexual orientation as a mutable and chosen behavior. (This issue is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.)

It is no wonder that the presence in the public domain of such questions about the nature of sexual orientation meant that psychology's role in that debate became more influential. It was perhaps inevitable that psychology would ask questions and undertake research that were responsive to the public debate on LGB issues—namely questions of causation. It is also understandable that psychological research would be increasingly drawn upon to bolster both positions in the debate on LGB rights.

The Intersection of Psychology and the Public Domain

As psychology turned its attention to sexual orientation, it placed progressively more emphasis on understanding people who identified as other than heterosexual, defining and delimiting the categories of gay, lesbian, and bisexual. One way of understanding that progression is to view it alongside parallels in the LGB movement. There, increasing prominence was being given to the notion of LGBs as a minority group (D'Emilio, 1983, 1992; Vaid, 1995). Identity politics, a political perception that LGBs represent a distinct political class and have a specific set of political priorities (Anner, 1996; Phelan, 1989; Vaid, 1995), became ascendant in the movement. Together and reciprocally, these two trends—

in psychology and in the public domain—contributed to an increasing reification of the categories of lesbian, gay, and bisexual. That reification occurred not only in psychology and in public discourse but also in the minds of many LGBs.

Biological Determinism and the Issue of Choice

That these increasingly reified categories denoting sexual orientation would appeal to LGBs is hardly surprising. Earlier psychological construals of homosexuality—and that was the operative term—emphasized a problematic manifestation that represented variously an inhibition of normal psychosexual development, a symptom associated with other pathologies, a personality disorder, or an explicit perversion (e.g., Chauncey, 1982–1983; Lewes, 1995). While some classical theorists on sexual orientation suggested an innate disposition toward homosexuality (Lewes, 1995), the trend in the more recent literature that pathologizes homosexuality has been to focus on environmental determinants and/or on volition.[2] Over time, there has been a confluence of positions that pathologize homosexuality, with research and theory emphasizing environmental determinants and (especially) the volitional nature of nonheterosexual orientations. Conversely, there has been a joining of positions that offer more benign, nonpathological views of LGB orientations, with arguments for biologically based, innate, and unchosen identities.

This conceptual coupling, occurring as it has in psychology and in public discourse (Conrad, 1997), offers an implicit and apparently inextricable connection between biological explanations of and benign attitudes toward LGB orientations. One consequence of that coupling has been a relatively uncritical acceptance of biological explanations for LGB orientations. For individual LGBs, it is not a difficult choice to embrace biological explanations of their sexuality if those explanations come tightly packaged with affirming positions.

The appeal of biological explanations may be still greater because biological explanations of LGB orientations may allow LGBs to circumvent questions of choice and responsibility (Golden, 1994; Kitzinger, 1987; Lamb, 1996) in their sexual orientations. The confrontation with choice and responsibility necessitates moving through and resolving issues associated with internalized homophobia (Brown, 1986; de Monteflores, 1986; Gonsiorek, 1995; Kaufman & Raphael, 1996; Kominars, 1995; Ma-

lyon, 1982; Margolies, Becker, & Jackson-Brewer, 1987; Shidlo, 1994; Sophie, 1987). Doing so is challenging and difficult. In a society characterized by pervasive homophobia and heterosexism, virtually everyone is exposed to negative attitudes about LGB people. That, of course, includes people who themselves will come to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

To the degree that LGB persons internalize homonegativity and do not neutralize it, they will have negative feelings and/or ideas about what their sexual orientation means. To the degree that they believe a nonheterosexual orientation to be wrong (whether abnormal or immoral), it is more comfortable to understand orientation as something over which they have no control or choice. In other words, it may be simpler for some LGBs to accept begrudgingly their sexual orientation than to affirm their sexuality as a choice; the latter would require their sorting through the homonegativity they have internalized.

Those who identify as heterosexual may be similarly receptive to biological explanations of LGB orientation. An LGB person's sexual orientation may present a psychological and social dilemma for parents and other family members. One aspect of that dilemma for many involves guilt over having an LGB family member (Fairchild & Hayward, 1989; Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986). The guilt is rooted in homophobia and heterosexism and is intensified by notions of nonheterosexual orientations as pathological and rooted in negative environmental conditions of one kind or another. Parents wonder if they did something "wrong" to "cause" their children's sexual orientations. One way out of that (and, again, one that does not involve a primary confrontation of homonegativity) is to embrace a biological model of sexual orientation. The appeal of this model for family members is obvious in the following passage written by and for parents of LGBs:

> We lean toward a biological cause [for homosexuality] for two reasons. First, the latest and best research points that way. Second, it fits our experience.
>
> We also want to see an end to the blame game that raises its ugly head with alarming regularity. When energy is spent on establishing blame, little is done to resolve issues. But, more than this, we believe that our society will accept gayness only if the vast majority of its citizens see it as a naturally occurring event. If most people understand that a certain percentage of society will be gay no matter what their family background is, or what their sexual experiences were, then gay people have a better chance of living their lives free from fears of retaliation. . . . Parents could accept their

children's gay life style as easily as they now accept left-handedness. (Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986, pp. 29–30)

The same sort of process might occur in social contexts broader than the LGB's immediate family. It has been argued that construing categories of sexual orientation as biologically determined and therefore fixed and discrete eases the fears of heterosexual individuals. In the face of such determinism, they needn't fear that their own orientation might at some time shift toward nonheterosexuality (Ehrenreich, 1993; Udis-Kessler, 1990).

In addition, it has been observed that we "tend to show more compassion to those whose conditions we regard as being beyond their control" (Lamb, 1996, p. 76). In recent years, reductionist biological explanations have become a particularly favored means for assigning responsibility beyond the purview of the individual in general (see, e.g., Alper & Beckwith, 1993; Conrad, 1997; Dennett, 1984; Hofstadter, 1982; Lamb, 1996; Lippman, 1992; Nelkin & Lindee, 1995). Viewing nonheterosexual orientations as biologically determined allows basic questions about the legitimacy of those orientations to be sidestepped. Once again, homophobia and heterosexism in their most fundamental forms are not confronted directly. There is no direct challenge to the assumption that LGB orientations are wrong or, at least, inferior to heterosexual orientations. Instead, the public seems to move toward an acceptance of LGB orientations at least in part on the basis of the assumption that those orientations, although problematic, are rooted in biology and should therefore be tolerated.

Research has shown that heterosexuals who believe that LGB orientations are chosen, rather than biologically determined, are less supportive of LGB rights in general (e.g., Aguero, Block, & Byrne, 1984; Whitley, 1990). Such research typically is cited to demonstrate that a belief in biological causation results in more tolerant attitudes toward LGBs. That may, in fact, be the case. However, it may (also or alternatively) be the case that heterosexuals who support LGB issues have adopted the rather uncritical assumption of biological causation that is so commonly held by many LGBs and that is clearly an explicit aspect of LGB educational and campaign efforts.

Fundamentally, an uncritical acceptance of the very question of the origins—the etiology—of LGB orientations implies agreement that those orientations are problems in need of understanding. If LGB orien-

tations are truly normal and moral, if they are on a par with heterosexual orientations, then why do we need to refer to their causes at all? If they are good, healthy, and moral, then they are good, healthy, and moral regardless of their origins, even if they are actively chosen. Moreover, by seeking such explanations, we evade the possibility of confronting homophobia and heterosexism and take a back door to personal and social acceptance. The rush to embrace reductionist explanations of sexual orientation makes it less likely that we will fundamentally challenge homophobic and heterosexist beliefs—in ourselves or in the society at large. Left unchallenged, homophobia and heterosexism will continue to undermine individuals' views of themselves, psychological research, theories, clinical practice, and the movement for social change.

Furthermore, it is our contention that uncritical acceptance of biological models of LGB orientations reflects problems in at least three respects. First, acknowledging the legitimacy of the question of causation of LGB orientation reflects and extends the view of those orientations as problematic. It certainly can be argued that the question of the roots of sexual orientation is of intellectual interest in and of itself. If, however, our interests in this matter were purely intellectual, we would see as much time, money, and energy expended on the exploration of the causes of heterosexuality as are expended on the causes of LGB orientations. In fact, the real focus of research efforts might be toward understanding sexuality more generally. In the process of exploring LGB orientations so specifically, we continue to treat those orientations as the deviations, the anomalies, the phenomena in need of explanation—that in contrast to heterosexuality, which does not require study because it is viewed as normative and normal.

Second, the widely expected "proof" that LGB orientations are determined by biology is regarded in many quarters as a final answer to the social problems faced by LGBs (Nardi, 1993; Van Gelder, 1991). Once convinced that LGB orientations are biologically determined, the argument goes, people will be more willing to accept LGBs, and homophobic and heterosexist attitudes and practices will be significantly reduced. This argument is meant to deter whose who dismiss LGBs as displaying willful misbehavior or moral perversion and as likely to transmit these qualities to others. This argument rests on the observation, noted earlier, that heterosexuals who see LGB orientations as chosen are less supportive of LGB issues, and it ignores the question of the relationship between accepting biological models of causation and being supportive of LGB

rights. While some heterosexuals may increase their tolerance of LGBs if shown proof that LGB orientations are biologically determined, not all heterosexuals can be expected to respond so favorably. Homophobia is a complex set of attitudes and behaviors that reflect a variety of underlying functions and processes (e.g., Herek, 1984, 1986, 1995; Young-Bruehl, 1996). Even more important, the argument ignores the experiences of people in other groups who possess qualities that are widely regarded as biologically determined and who nonetheless are subject to various degrees of social disapprobation. Put another way, the fact that race is generally seen as a biologically rooted phenomenon has not eradicated racist attitudes and practices.[3]

A related problem exists with the belief that a proven biological basis to LGB orientations will substantially decrease homonegativity. Interestingly, this problem has already been voiced by those who work against the social legitimization of LGB orientations. Just because a phenomenon occurs in nature and has a biological basis or component does not mean it should be accepted. Alcoholism frequently is cited as an example of a phenomenon widely thought to have a genetic component (e.g., Conrad, 1997), but few would suggest that persons with significant problems with alcohol should continue to drink without restriction simply because their alcoholism has a genetic underpinning.[4]

A final dimension of concern related to the rapidity with which many people have embraced biological explanations of human sexualities is the effect that doing so has on the ability to reduce homophobia and heterosexism in any substantial way. LGBs and supportive heterosexuals currently live and make sense of their realities and experience some sense of relief in a social context that places heavy emphasis on biological explanations (e.g., Conrad, 1997). And, certainly, the processes that underlie our rapid acceptance of biological explanations are complex and multifaceted. For many LGBs, biological explanations fit their own experiences and are enormously compelling in that respect (Whisman, 1996). We return to this issue later in this chapter. All that having been said, it is nonetheless cause for concern that our move to quick acceptance of biological explanations often diminishes our ability to confront homonegativity in its more pervasive forms.

The Dilemma in the Public Domain:
The Amendment 2 Case

To illustrate how these issues play out in actual public policy debates, we explore several elements of discourse surrounding Colorado's Amendment 2. Amendment 2 was a citizen-initiated referendum, passed in Colorado in the 1992 general election, that repealed existing gay rights ordinances, and prohibited the enactment of new ones, at any governmental level (M. J. Gallagher, 1994; Niblock, 1993; Wagner, 1993). Amendment 2 was enjoined by a district court judge shortly before it was to have gone into effect. It was ultimately declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court on May 20, 1996. Amendment 2's judicial history illustrates one frame in the relationship between psychology and sexual orientation.

We use three documents to explore the complexities of this relationship. The first is an amicus curiae brief filed in the Amendment 2 case submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court by the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Colorado Psychological Association. The other two documents are the majority and minority opinions in the case, written by Justices Arthur Kennedy and Antonin Scalia, respectively.

Mental Health Professions Amicus Brief

The amicus brief filed by mental health organizations had as its purpose "to bring to this Court's attention the principal body of professional research pertinent to the questions posed in [the Amendment 2] case" (American Psychological Association et al., 1994, p. 2). The brief focused on two major sets of research: that having to do with the "nature of sexual orientation" (American Psychological Association et al., 1994, p. i) and that regarding the prejudice and discrimination that LGBs encounter.

The amicus brief, quoting the Colorado Supreme Court, viewed LGBs as an "independently identifiable group" (p. 7). There was a decidedly essentialist tone to the brief's representation of LGBs. The brief offered a developmental perspective on sexual orientation that emphasized its emergence by early adolescence, earlier childhood correlates, and familial and biological correlates (pp. 12–13). The section concluded that

sexual orientation is "far from being a voluntary choice" (p. 14) and that it is resistant to change (pp. 14–15).

The essentialist underpinnings notwithstanding, the brief broadened the description of sexual orientation when it suggested that "sexual orientation has a number of aspects" (p. 9). These include "experiencing an ongoing attraction to persons of a particular gender; developing a private personal identity or self-concept as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual; establishing a public identity based on sexual orientation; and identifying with a community of those who share the same sexual orientation" (p. 9). Clearly, this representation moved toward more narrative and social dimensions of sexual orientation.

The brief made a strong case for disavowing a simple relationship between sexual orientation and sexual behavior; the two were described as "distinct" (p. 10). Quoting from Haldeman (1994), the brief asserted:

> The fact that a person engages in same-sex sexual activity, other-sex sexual activity, both, or neither is not sufficient to determine his or her sexual orientation; indeed, "[a]ny definition of sexuality based solely on behavior is bound to be deficient and misleading." (American Psychological Association et al., 1994, p. 10)

The brief offered a final suggestion of the social dimensions of sexual orientation when it discussed prejudice and discrimination: "Homosexual orientation often becomes the *predominant* social identifier of gay people" (p. 18).

All told, the brief represented sexual orientation in a way that neither challenged the essentialist rendition nor totally ignored narrative and social dimensions. Certainly, the brief did not offer anything like a social constructionist critique of sexual orientation. When one reads the majority and minority opinions in the Amendment 2 case, one can appreciate why.

The Majority Ruling: LGBs as a Class of Persons

Speaking for the majority of the court, which ruled that Amendment 2 was unconstitutional, Justice Kennedy's opinion relied on an implicitly essentialist understanding of LGBs. LGBs represent a "class of persons" (*Romer v. Evans*, 116 S. Ct. [1996], p. 1622). These persons are identified "by a single trait" (p. 1622) and then denied the possibility of protection. The syllabus of the majority opinion concluded that Amendment 2 was a

"status-based classification of persons undertaken for its own sake, something the Equal Protection Clause does not permit" (pp. 162–162). Obviously, Kennedy used LGB categories as they were used in the APA amicus brief and as they are used in much of popular discourse. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the usage of these categories was found in the brief and in the majority opinion, both of which were supportive of LGBs in legal and social spheres.

The Minority Opinion: Homosexuality as Behavior

On the other hand, Justice Scalia's opinion, which was *not* supportive of LGB rights, relied primarily on a different type of discourse. In contrast to Kennedy, Scalia did not define LGBs as a class of people. He sidestepped the question of LGB identity and moved quickly to the notion of homosexual conduct (e.g., p. 1631). The exception is his reference to LGBs as a "politically powerful minority" (p. 1629). Scalia tried to finesse criticism that sexual conduct and sexual orientation are not entirely consistent by broadening the notion of conduct to refer to tendency or desire. In so doing, he made reference to the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision of 1987, which upheld the constitutionality of Georgia's sodomy law (Halley, 1993):

> But assuming that, in Amendment 2, a person of homosexual "orientation" is someone who does not engage in homosexual conduct but merely has a tendency or desire to do so, *Bowers* still suffices to establish a rational basis for the provision. If it is rational to criminalize the conduct, surely it is rational to deny special favor and protection to those with a self-avowed tendency or desire to engage in the conduct. Indeed, where criminal sanctions are not involved, homosexual "orientation" is an acceptable stand-in for homosexual conduct. (*Romer v. Evans*, 116 S. Ct. 1620 [1996], p. 1632)

The different approaches taken in these three documents illustrate the complexity of the intersection where psychology and public policy deal with sexual orientation. Arguments in support of LGB rights are framed in terms of LGB orientation. Arguments against LGB rights are framed in terms of homosexual conduct. The courts, like much of the public, find it easier to understand LGBs as an identifiable minority group. Once again, positive attitudes toward LGB rights are associated with implicitly essentialist views of LGBs. Negative positions toward LGB rights, in contrast, do not derive from an essentialist framework and, in fact,

often explicitly challenge essentialist renditions of sexual orientation. In the absence of a more basic critique of the two positions, one has the choice of siding with essentialism and supporting LGB rights or not siding with essentialism and not supporting LGB rights. For those who both question essentialist renditions of sexual orientation and support LGB rights, this is not a happy choice, and, indeed, it is one riddled with inconsistencies.

The Role of Homonegativity

Justice Kennedy, in his majority opinion, demonstrates an appreciation for the dynamics of homonegativity. Kennedy acknowledges the "animosity" (p. 1628) that is directed toward LGBs and that is at the root of Amendment 2 (p. 1628). He characterizes LGBs as a "politically unpopular group" (p. 1628). Kennedy's grasp of the homonegativity underlying Amendment 2 is apparent in this section of the final paragraph of his opinion:

> We must conclude that Amendment 2 classifies homosexuals not to further a proper legislative end but to make them unequal to everyone else. This Colorado cannot do. A State cannot so deem a class of persons a stranger to its laws. Amendment 2 violates the Equal Protection Clause, and the judgment of the Supreme Court of Colorado is affirmed. (P. 1629)

Thus, the presence of homonegativity not only is acknowledged in the majority opinion but is seen as the basis for the passage of Amendment 2. Homonegativity, therefore, is centrally implicated in the judicial finding that Amendment 2 is unconstitutional.

Scalia's dissenting opinion grants no allowance for homonegativity as a problem. If anything, the opinion may be viewed as an illustration of homonegativity. Scalia's opinion describes Amendment 2 as "a modest attempt by seemingly tolerant Coloradans to preserve traditional sexual mores against the efforts of a politically powerful minority to revise those mores through use of the laws" (p. 1629). Scalia goes on to criticize the majority of justices, saying their opinion contradicts the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision and "places the prestige of this institution behind the proposition that opposition to homosexuality is as reprehensible as racial or religious bias" (p. 1629). Clearly, Scalia does not view homopho-

bia and heterosexism on an equal plane with these biases. Moreover, Scalia—again referring to the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision—argues,

> If it is constitutionally permissible for a State to make homosexual conduct criminal, surely it is constitutionally permissible for a State to enact other laws merely *disfavoring* homosexual conduct. (P. 1631; emphasis in the original)

Our review of the three documents extends our original analysis: support of LGB rights is associated with an essentialist approach and, now, with a recognition of the existence and impact of homonegativity, as well. On the other hand, negative views on LGB rights are associated with a nonessentialist understanding of LGBs and with, at the very least, the denial that homonegativity is a problem. We see here yet another reason that those who support LGB rights are drawn to positions that tend to embody an essentialist approach to sexual orientation.

Homonegativity Defines the Discourse. It is interesting to examine the role of homonegativity, which plays a central role in each of the three arguments. The APA amicus brief and the Supreme Court's majority opinion recognize the role of homophobia and heterosexism in the origins of Amendment 2. If homonegativity exists and does so to such discernible and dramatic effect, then the group of people who are targeted by homonegativity obviously exists. Further, that group of people forms an identifiable (if often hidden) group. In this way, homonegativity—along with some history of nonheterosexual behavior (or, per Scalia, perhaps intent)—may be the factor that most clearly unites the otherwise heterogeneous group of individuals collectively known as LGBs.

Homonegativity, in a similar fashion, is one of the most significant underpinnings of arguments against LGB rights. Despite the emphasis on conduct rather than orientation, the homonegativity of those who oppose LGB rights effectively buttresses the notion of LGBs as a distinct category of people. Amendment 2, for example, relied on this notion. In proclaiming that a class of people had no access to "minority status, quota preferences, protected status or claim of discrimination" (quoted in Coukos, 1994, p. 584), the amendment demonstrated that such a group of people exists. It can be argued that Amendment 2 actually helped to refine the categories of sexual orientation, at least for those who lived in Colorado, in the public discourse. This occurred because

Amendment 2 targeted LGBs as a class of people, spoke in its campaign materials as if LGBs were a monolithic group (Russell, 1993), and gave the disparate LGBs in Colorado a common experience (Russell, 1995; Russell et al., 1995).

Another Dilemma: What We Don't Know Can Hurt Us

The Amendment 2 judicial case illustrates a second difficulty that can occur at the intersection of psychology and the public sphere. In this case, we see how vulnerable to criticism are the essentialist arguments so routinely put forth in the public arena.

Amendment 2 was initiated by Colorado for Family Values (CFV), which also directed the campaign for its passage. One of CFV's campaign materials was a double-sided flyer entitled, "Debate Points: The truth about 'sexual orientation'" (Colorado for Family Values, undated). The flyer consists of five affirmative statements, which are systematically scrutinized and found to be false. Taken collectively, these statements demonstrate how vulnerable some aspects of psychological theory and research are to attacks from those who oppose LGB rights.

Much of what the campaign flyer suggests in its debate points (if not in its more specific elaborations) is factually accurate. Two of the debate points, for example, deal with the fixity of sexual orientation: "Sexual orientation is a fixed part of who a person is" and "Once people discover their sexual orientation, they never leave it." As was discussed in chapter 8, research indicates that people's behavior does not always match the common understandings of the labels they use to describe themselves. We also know that some people's self-labeling changes over time. Nonetheless, when CFV concludes that these two debate points are false, it is difficult to argue otherwise—although psychology has largely assumed the position that CFV dismisses.

Two other debate points pose similar problems: "Sexual orientation is a precise and well-defined concept" and "The concept of sexual orientation is an accepted fact within the scientific community." Within and without the scientific community, sexual orientation is a concept that is both young and not well understood—a statement that can be made even within an essentialist framework. From a social constructionist position, the problems with the concept of sexual orientation, of course, are magnified.

Thus far, four of CFV's five debate points, positions routinely deployed in pro-LGB rhetoric, are as problematic as CFV suggests they are, although for different underlying reasons. The comments CFV makes to refute these four points are often misleading and in some cases unequivocally wrong. But the major points "work" as political persuasion because there is enough accuracy in them to be convincing to many readers. Offering a reasonable debate point makes readers very vulnerable to believing anything that follows, including, for example, this comment found under the "well-defined concept" debate point:

> One official definition used by anti-Amendment 2 activists defines 'sexual orientation' so broadly that if you shared an 'emotional attraction' with someone of the same gender, you could easily call yourself a homosexual.

As in this example, each debate point sounds reasonable and then gets packaged with untrue, half-true, provocative, or otherwise problematic material.

If we step back, we can see the same process at work in the flyer more generally. Four of the five debate points are arguably accurate. The fifth point is "Embracing the concept of sexual orientation is one of the most positive steps a community can take." As with the other affirmatively stated points, the flyer then goes on to debunk this one, asserting that embracing the concept of sexual orientation is a "Pandora's box" that provides "an open door to a variety of other sexual addictions—many far more perverted than even homosexuality." It is difficult to do anything with this debate point other than to acknowledge its fundamental indebtedness to homonegativity. The problem is that its shared context with the four other debate points makes it seem more plausible to readers.

We can see, then, that our essentialist positions, spoken with certainty and without our own ongoing critiques, make us vulnerable in the public arena. Whether we create the arguments on our own or in response to anti-LGB rhetoric, we often find ourselves in the position of making assertions that are not supportable. This position leaves us very vulnerable to attacks of the kind illustrated in CFV's flyer. Very often, our response to such attacks is to renew our efforts to "prove" our arguments, which, in turn, leaves us even more vulnerable.

What is often missing in the public discourse is any challenge to the *terms* of the debate. When we engage in arguments about issues of this sort, we imply that they are legitimate issues of debate. We, the authors,

suggest that they are not. Even within an essentialist framework, whether or not we have final answers to questions of sexual orientation, we do know how people should be treated. Even without knowing, with certainty, if sexual orientation is innate and fixed, we do know that it is not an ethical basis—nor should it be a legal one—for doing subtle or overt damage to people.

The Pervasive Impact of Homophobia and Heterosexism

An important implication of this analysis is the degree to which homophobia and heterosexism play roles in the experiences of LGBs and in the social construction of LGB identity, as well. At one level, that is hardly surprising; virtually all LGBs have in common the threat of encountering homonegativity. That is a common bond. At another level, homonegativity carries considerable weight in determining how LGBs define themselves and present themselves to the world.

Very often, the terms of the debate about LGB issues are set by those who disparage LGBs. We see that played out in the judicial aftermath of Amendment 2. Many of the positions put forth in the face of Amendment 2 were, by necessity, argued on grounds predefined by homonegativity. Although this position helped to overturn a blatantly homophobic amendment, there is a danger in embracing positions defined by one's opposition. When one's stance is so deeply embedded in reacting against homonegativity, that position, in order to be persuasive, often has to accept the terms of debate established within a homonegative framework—such as the insistence that sexual orientation is fixed and is not (ever) a choice. In the process, pro-LGB positions frequently carry an implicit homonegative adumbration. This may be especially so in the public domain, where there is little room for subtlety or reflection.

Psychology, in its effort to be of use in the public domain, often faces the same dilemma. Much of psychology's theory and research agenda related to LGB issues has been influenced by the need to respond to homonegative social forces. Consequently, psychological theory and research often display homonegative implications that go largely unquestioned. This is not to say that psychology should neglect areas of inquiry simply because they have been raised by those who stand against LGB interests. Rather, psychologists should exercise ongoing caution in an effort to avoid accepting others' terms of debate as much as possible. The field

is well advised to undertake an ongoing critique to discern and explicate the influence of policy considerations on theory and research. In that way, psychologists can undertake research that has a chance of affecting positive changes in the public realm while avoiding unquestioned homonegative assumptions and influences.

Psychological Research That Reflects Homonegative Assumptions

We address just two of many possible areas in the psychology of LGB issues where reflection on possible homonegative assumptions is warranted. The first concerns the question of the proportion of LGBs in the population. This question is not without legitimate scientific interest (e.g., Michaels, 1996; Rogers, 1993), and psychologists have offered useful data about the proportion of LGBs in the population and refuted claims that were based on seriously flawed research (e.g., Gebhard, 1972; Paul & Weinrich, 1982). However, much of the debate on the subject has had far more to do with political matters than with scientific ones (e.g., Painton, 1993; Rogers, 1993; Schmalz, 1993).

There are limits to the usefulness of efforts to determine the proportion of LGBs in the population. One limitation is rooted in the difficulty of counting LGBs when, as discussed in chapter 6, there is no clear consensus as to just who belongs in various categories—or, indeed, whether the categories exist except as discourse. This puts psychologists in the position of defending data whose validity is impossible to determine. At a subtler level, without explicitly stating otherwise, any participation in the numbers debate may be construed as a tacit agreement that the legitimacy of LGB rights would be weakened if LGBs were to constitute a smaller percentage of the population than was formerly thought. It behooves psychologists to consider the clarity of the position expressed in this editorial from a daily newspaper:

> [D]isputing the numbers at this point merely diverts attention from the real issue. Sexual orientation is not, never has been, and never will be a basis for denying the rights guaranteed, 100 percent, to every American. (Rights don't hinge on numbers, 1993)

Efforts to be and/or appear to be objective in reports of research findings often discourage psychologists from pointing out the political implica-

tions of research questions and findings. In evading these implications, psychologists may unwittingly convey an acceptance of the homonegative assumptions that underlie research claims regarding the proportion of LGBs in the population. Offering a critique of the public policy implications of research could be as valuable as the methodological critiques that psychologists routinely offer. From a constructionist perspective, research implications are as important as methodological questions (Russell & Bohan, 1999). Psychologists need to consider and psychological publications should suggest the reasons that a given research question is relevant and explain the author's position vis-à-vis the major assumptions that underlie a given line of inquiry.

A second area of LGB psychology that warrants critiques is research focused on the children of LGB parents. This work has demonstrated that children of LGB parents function as well as children of heterosexual parents and has thereby contributed to the well-being of children and their parents, including in the area of custody decisions. Its value is undisputed.

At the same time, research in this area often carries unchallenged homonegative assumptions rooted in the claims of those who would deny LGBs the right to have and care for their children. For example, one of the questions in this body of research concerns whether offspring of LGBs are more likely to become nonheterosexual themselves. Underlying this question is the assumption that increased chances of children's being other than heterosexual would constitute a negative outcome. Data that demonstrate that no such connection exists may be valuable in easing concerns about the impact of LGB parenting. However, in the absence of any explicit critique of the homophobic and heterosexist assumptions this question embodies, psychology may inadvertently reinforce those very assumptions.

Essentialism and the Movement

A final area in which psychology would benefit from a thoughtful analysis of the meaning and impact of our construal of sexual orientation is the relationship of the LGB rights movement to other oppressed groups. Two issues are of concern here: the movement's treatment of LGBs of color, and the movement's relationship to other civil rights movements.

Who's In and Who's Not

One of the unintended and often unnoticed consequences of our framing LGB psychology and the LGB social movement in essentialist terms is the creation of a hierarchy of "fit" for people who identify as LGB. Psychological models of LGB identity and the rhetoric of the movement often privilege the experience of white men at the expense of men of color and women (see chapter 6). In this respect, LGB psychology is not markedly different from psychology in general.

As regards the relative invisibility of women, most psychological models of LGB experience are based on the experience of white gay men. The androcentrism of these models has been widely criticized (e.g., Brown, 1995; Cass, 1990; Sophie, 1986; Whisman, 1996). Further, essentialist renditions of sexual orientation seem to be more appealing to gay men than to lesbians, who are more likely to resist such understandings (e.g., Bart, 1993; Golden, 1987, 1994, 1996; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Whisman, 1996). This difference in experience results in women's being left out of the rhetoric, especially where it relies on essentialist renditions of sexual orientation—which, as we have seen, is often the case both in psychology and in the public arena. Particularly subject to exclusion are women who experience their sexuality in more fluid terms and/or who have intentionally chosen to live their lives as lesbians (e.g., Golden, 1987, 1994, 1996; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Van Gelder, 1991; Whisman, 1996).

This latter group—women who have explicitly chosen to identify as lesbians—not only challenges assumptions about the genetic underpinnings and immutability of sexual orientation but challenges the structure of the patriarchy as well. Traditional rhetoric in the movement espouses the position that people's sexual orientation is not a negative reaction against one sex but, rather, a positive response to the members of another sex. For so-called political lesbians, the choice to be a lesbian also stands as a renunciation of sexist and patriarchal relationships. Theirs is an explicitly feminist position that, in many respects, has more in common with the ideology of early gay liberation, with its stress on freedom in the broadest terms, than with more recent movements for LGB civil rights (e.g., Vaid, 1995). It is a position that, in fact, is largely ignored within the contemporary LGB movement, perhaps partly because it calls into question the privileging of white male experience that has largely defined the meaning and rhetoric of the movement.

In a similar fashion, much of the movement's discourse does not offer a good fit for many LGBs of color. These models do not address or acknowledge the complexity of juggling multiple stigmatized identities and the effects of living in a racist society (Adams & Kimmel, 1997; Bohan, 1996; Chan, 1997; Greene, 1997; Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997; A. Smith, 1997; B. Smith, 1993; Trujillo, 1997). Nor do they address the difficulties that many people of color have in managing homonegativity in the contexts of their families and communities of color (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). The failure to address such differences creates an image of whiteness in the LGB community, rendering LGBs of color invisible and failing to take into account their particular strengths, coping strategies, and sources of resilience, along with the problems.

As an illustration of the impact of this homogenizing portrayal of LGBs, consider this element of the HIV/AIDS crisis. As discussed in chapter 6, many men who have sex with men do not identify as gay or bisexual; this phenomenon has been frequently noted in certain communities of color (e.g., Carrier, 1989; Carballo-Dieguez, 1997, Peterson, 1995; Wong, Chng, & Choi, 1998). Public health and prevention campaigns related to HIV/AIDS have largely failed to address this group of men, who often respond with indifference to educational campaigns aimed at bisexual and gay men because they do not identify with the target categories. It is not a coincidence that this problem has arisen disproportionately and its consequences have been particularly acute in communities of color, where the labels "gay" and "bisexual" may have less relevance for men who have sex with men.

Borrowing Models for the LGB Movement

The final issue we wish to consider in this chapter is how we construe the movement for LGB rights. To a large degree, we have adopted a view of the movement that parallels earlier movements for civil rights for people of color, with perhaps the strongest model being the movement for civil rights for African Americans. There are some significant parallels between the experiences of some people of color (some of whom are LGBs, of course) and some white LGBs. These parallels include the obvious—discrimination and hate crimes, for example—and the subtle—invisibility, for example.

Despite such parallels, there is a fundamental problem with the unexamined adoption of the LGB-as-minority position (D'Emilio, 1992). In

some quarters, the (white) LGB movement is seen as having coopted the position and rhetoric of people of color in the absence of a full understanding of the pervasive effects of racism on people of color and on white people. Alveda King, a civil rights activist and a niece of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has roundly criticized the equation of the movement for equal rights for LGBs with the movement for equal rights for African Americans: "No one is enslaving the homosexual or making them sit in the back of the bus. Homosexuality is . . . not a civil rights issue" (J. Gallagher, 1998, p. 33; see also Human Rights Commission, 1997).

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, on the other hand, has consistently drawn explicit parallels between the two movements. In a speech in 1993, for example, she said:

> I strongly believe that freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. As my husband, Martin Luther King Jr., said, "I have worked too long and hard against segregated public accommodations to end up segregating my moral concern. Justice is indivisible." Like Martin, I don't believe you can stand for freedom for one group of people and deny it to others. (King, 1993; see also Human Rights Commission, 1997)

As these comments suggest, there are differences among people of color as to the merits of equating the two movements. In any event, white LGBs might give careful consideration to the apparent ease with which this equation has been made. At its best, the (white) LGB movement has learned and borrowed from the collective expertise and wisdom of people of color and has participated in their struggle for equal rights. At its worst, the (white) LGB movement has undertaken a kind of intellectual colonialism that is underscored by the lack of a visible white LGB presence in undoing institutionalized and cultural racism.

In addition to these more general problems, the unquestioning acceptance of the LGB-as-minority-group framework raises some specific concerns. The use of the minority framework has given currency to the argument that gay and lesbian orientations are genetically determined, as it allowed LGBs to compare themselves to people of color, whose race is widely assumed to be a matter of genetics. That, in combination with some sense that choice in matters of sexual orientation would put LGBs at a political disadvantage, promoted the solidification of an essentialist framework in our discourse. It is a framework that strikes many people of color as gratuitous. The (white) LGB movement's failure to see

differences between race/ethnicity, on the one hand, and sexual orientation, on the other, highlights unexamined racism within the movement.

In addition, making quick claims about parallels between race and sexual orientation does not always play well in public debates. One frequent rejoinder is the observation that LGBs can hide their sexual orientation, while people of color cannot hide their race/ethnicity. In actuality, some people of color can hide their race, and that does not protect them from racism. Neither does hiding one's sexual orientation insulate an LGB person from the effects of homonegativity. Nonetheless, the drawing of easy parallels suggests a lack of understanding of the differences among oppressions that also have dynamics in common. Understanding the complexities of *both* would serve all movements for equal rights.

We have barely scratched the surface of the implications of the essentialist/social constructionist debate in the public policy realm. We have illustrated that those implications exist, go largely unexamined, and exert a profound influence on the lives of LGBs and heterosexuals. Similar critiques might be applied to myriad topics. Our hope is that this cursory examination of a few will stimulate reflection and discussion about others, as well.

NOTES

1. Stonewall refers to an uprising by gay and transvestite patrons, many of them people of color, at a Greenwich Village, New York City, bar during a police raid in 1969. While not the first revolt against gay oppression, it is widely regarded as the formal start of the movement for gay liberation.

2. As we discuss later, the very question of looking for a causal explanation—in essence, for an etiology—for LGB orientations reflects assumptions of pathology not typically associated with questions of heterosexuality (e.g., Katz, 1995; Pattatucci, 1992).

3. The distinct categories of race that people in the United States have taken for granted for so long have recently been called into question in the legal and social spheres (e.g., Colker, 1996; Cose, 1995; Flores, 1995; Lindgren, 1993; Morganthau, 1995; Wright, 1994).

4. This argument assumes an equation between alcoholism and LGB identity, an equation we reject.

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues in Public Policy
Some of the Relevance and Realities of Psychological Science

Allen M. Omoto

The preceding chapter, on the public policy implications of essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on sexual orientation, raised a number of interesting issues related to the interplay of psychological science and public policy. In the chapter, the authors discuss changes over time in understanding sexual orientation as recognized by mental health professionals and scholars, as well as some of the implications they see of a relatively essentialist understanding of sexual orientation for policy debates on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) rights. In particular, they focus a good deal of attention on ongoing conversations about the origin of sexual orientation and the consequences, again as they see them, of accepting biological or nonbiological (choice) causal explanations for homosexuality. Another thread that runs throughout the chapter is homonegativity as a widespread and pernicious phenomenon. Rampant heterosexism is seen as influencing the practice of psychology, the experiences of LGB people, and the choice of and approach to topics of research. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which this heterosexism should be tied to either essentialist or social constructionist perspectives, for indeed, both approaches can be seen simultaneously as the cause of and the antidote for societal homonegativity.

With this chapter as a starting point, I raise several broad questions about the nature of psychological science and public policy formulation. These questions concern the degree to which policy can and should be

informed by science as we know it and, pragmatically, the role that psychology currently plays in the process of policy development and implementation. From my perspective, social policies are too seldom informed by systematic, data-based empirical research. This issue, moreover, is not restricted to the contributions of psychology but extends to the social and behavioral sciences as a whole and is not limited to LGB issues. While regrettable, this is also a situation that presents tremendous opportunity for psychology. After responding specifically to the content of chapter 9, therefore, I offer some suggestions about the ways and points by which psychologists might consider actively participating in the formation of public policy.

Assumptions about Essentialist and Constructionist Perspectives

To address the authors' points directly, I begin by taking a metaperspective in examining their construction of essentialist assumptions. They suggest that LGB individuals and advocates have rushed to accept uncritically biological explanations for sexual orientation. Some serious consequences of this acceptance, as the authors see it, are that "[t]here is no direct challenge to the assumption that LGB orientations are wrong or, at least, inferior to heterosexual orientations" and that "we evade the possibility of confronting homophobia and heterosexism and take a back door to personal and social acceptance." With these statements, I think that the case has, perhaps, been overstated to a large degree.

On logical and scientific grounds, seeking to understand the causes of a phenomenon does not explicitly or even implicitly suggest anything about the value or meaning of the phenomenon. Hence, seeking to understand the causes of sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, need not imply that certain practices or "orientations" are problematic, inferior, or otherwise deviant. Indeed, one of the most famous investigations of sexual behavior, the seminal research by Kinsey and his colleagues (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey et al., 1953), simply described reported sexual behaviors, histories, and practices of a convenience sample of American adults. It is the cultural context that places or creates value on research findings and not the research findings themselves that are imbued with specific value or merit. There is no necessary link between establishing or accepting a biological explanation for sexual orien-

tation (or any particular explanation for that matter) and certain social policy consequences. Homonegativity can and should be challenged on many fronts, and to suggest that it will not be because biological explanations for sexual orientation may be in favor is to underestimate the creativity and persistence of both gay rights advocates and adversaries.

To belabor this point a bit further, the authors suggest that by embracing "reductionist explanations of sexual orientation," practitioners, researchers, and advocates fail to confront homophobia and heterosexism. I ask, "Why should this be so?" At a conceptual level, identifying the cause of something can be viewed as one piece of a bigger puzzle, with social change and activism neither depending on nor deriving from any particular explanation. In addition, the authors seem to assume that having an interest in questions about causes reflects a view of homosexuality as problematic or deviant. There is no logical or necessary connection between seeking causal explanations for phenomena and valuing those phenomena or judging them to be right, moral, or even normal. Some cognitive psychologists, for example, study how human memory works, not because it is problematic or abnormal, although memory failings and even exaggerated abilities often provide valuable counterpoint to research on "normal" cognitive functioning. Similarly, scholars from a variety of disciplines have focused attention on understanding interpersonal relationships, not because relationships are out of the ordinary but precisely because they are integral and interesting components of human existence.

In a true "scientific" sense, therefore, psychological researchers and theorists seek to explain and predict the full and broad range of human behavior, so focusing on homosexuality may be but one small step in moving toward a comprehensive understanding of sexual behavior, expression, and identity. Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that genetic determinants of homosexuality would be sought out without the (perhaps tacit) recognition that all sexual behavior is genetically influenced. In addition, and sadly, the tasks of formulating and implementing public policies often proceed without solid research bases or an array of supportive empirical findings. It confuses the issue, I think, to suggest that the nature of an explanation, or the seeking of an explanation, necessarily conveys meaning about the value or legitimacy of a public policy debate. These are separate and separable issues, and it seems advisable not to be seduced into viewing them as inherently or even strongly connected.

The Nature of Scientific Research and Discourse

Acknowledging the difference between scientific goals and the political motivations or implications of research points to a problem that is faced by all scientists, and perhaps psychologists especially—our current state of knowledge is always shifting, and, beyond that, we cannot possibly control the use (or misuse and misinterpretation) of published research findings. The nature of the discipline, and indeed the current construction of scientific enterprise, is that research findings are produced and disseminated, held up to scrutiny by other scholars, and refuted, built upon, or accepted into the scientific canon. (The issue of who controls the scientific canon certainly is debatable but also beyond the scope of my current points.) In addition, as a community of scholars, we pride ourselves on remaining open to new research questions, approaches, and findings and to permitting scientists to explore the research questions that most interest and excite them. Science of whatever stripe and the process of knowledge acquisition, including as derived from essentialist and constructionist roots, is slow, complicated, and controversial. This is true of work on sexual orientation as well as of work in other domains.

Thus, I am uncomfortable with the criticism from chapter 9 that suggests that essentialist research on sexual orientation is politically useful but problematic. In this regard, the authors discuss the tortured history of LGB civil rights struggles, including the history of the now infamous Amendment 2 in the state of Colorado. They suggest that essentialist research, and especially research focusing on biological determinants of sexual orientation, was used to advance the rights of LGB people but also was particularly vulnerable to attack from political groups that sought to limit or remove advances made by the LGB community.

My discomfort comes from the apparent assertion that research with essentialist ties will inevitably be open to attack and refutation and may ultimately hurt LGB causes more than research from other perspectives. It is inherent in the nature of current scientific discourse and intellectual pursuit that all research and conclusions are open for continuing debate and revision. This is true within and outside psychology and regardless of the particular epistemological orientation from which a research question or conclusion is derived. In short, "science" as it is currently and commonly understood is itself a social construction, but a construction that involves self-correction and continual revision. Said another way,

scientists do not typically seek and certainly do not claim essentialist explanations for phenomena but instead attempt to construct bodies of knowledge that are continually fine-tuned and honed through additional observation and interpretations by themselves and others. The suggestion that an essentialist perspective has the potential to impede the progress of LGB rights certainly may be accurate. But what is unsaid is that this impediment may be no greater and perhaps even less than it is for research and theory derived from other perspectives. Whatever one's epistemological orientation, there most certainly will be counterforces, conflicting evidence, and contrary conclusions from within and outside that orientation. In considering the policy implications of research on LGB issues, therefore, we may do well to consider how best to make sense of conflicting findings and how to present evidence that is compelling and able to withstand counter attack. Essentialist-leaning research may have been used previously (as in the Amendment 2 example detailed by the authors), but it shares the weakness particularly endemic to social and behavioral scientific research that unequivocal, definitive facts have yet to be firmly established.

To broaden the point a bit, I am less than sanguine that the problems identified as related to essentialist perspectives and research would be any less problematic for arguments and research derived from a social constructionist perspective, except for the fact that the validity of findings (and hence their veracity) can be more confidently asserted on prima facie grounds. As described in chapter 1, in fact, any and all experience may be equally good, valid, and real to a strong social constructionist. As such, it seems that the dangers and pitfalls of having opponents who are armed with research-based positions and data, or stronger opponents in a sense, loom large. Currently, the conservative Right counters many of the research-based arguments in favor of LGB rights (such as nondiscrimination legislation and nondiscriminatory adoption policies) on moral and ideological grounds rather than with empirical research, although citations to the work of Paul Cameron are occasionally made (despite the fact that his work is seriously flawed, as noted by Herek, 1998).

Shifting from an essentialist to a constructionist perspective may have the salutary effect of inviting greater discussion of issues within the LGB community, but at the same time it may open up greater possibilities for disagreement from LGB detractors and supporters. To some

constructionists, in fact, the science of experience may be the only currency to be exchanged or worthy of serious consideration; at the very least, there are likely not any clear criteria for deciding which particular standard(s) to privilege. Extending this logic still further, moreover, scientific and policy debates may be decided on the basis of case examples, exceptions to the rule, and nonnormative experiences because these become valid and equally as valuable as any other, even culturally shared or typical, experiences. As one example, there have long been organizations that purport to "cure" homosexuals, freeing them from what they claim to be destructive and unhappy lifestyles. Yet, recently, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution calling into question the practice of this so-called reparative or conversion therapy on ethical and scientific grounds (American Psychological Association, 1997). Aggregate and scientific data were brought to bear on this issue and helped to shape the terms of the debate and the form of the resolution. Nonetheless, in a series of recent full-page newspaper advertisements, the conservative Right has presented the nation with examples of former gays and lesbians who are now living "normal" and happy lives. From a strong constructionist perspective, these poster children of the "ex-gay" movement should legitimately influence public opinion, debate, and policy and, perhaps, to the same degree as the legions of "uncured" (and happy) homosexuals; at least, there is no clear indication for which type of evidence to favor. In short, it seems that adopting a strong constructionist perspective could well shift the standard for refuting any position in a direction that will not necessarily be helpful to current LGB causes and concerns.

Complicating this picture still further, what comes to be viewed as typical or normative, and indeed may be the basis of prescriptive or proscriptive public policy, must be considered in light of current understandings, practices, and discourse. That is, the current context influences the construction and "truth" that is privileged. This perspective is consistent with the "weaker" form of constructionism described in chapter 1, in which meaning rather than actual phenomena are shaped by cultural influences. To the extent that policy derives from cultural understanding and meanings, LGB concerns and those of many minority groups may have a difficult time being recognized as legitimate. Indeed, the passage of Amendment 2 in a popular vote probably speaks volumes about the social construction of homosexuality, civil rights, and their

nexus in the cultural context of the state of Colorado in 1992. Again, a constructionist perspective, at least in the current cultural climate in much of the United States, is unlikely to be useful to LGB causes and people.

Thus, it is debatable whether a constructionist perspective on sexual orientation and science in general is necessarily more favorable to queer-affirmative policy development. Russell and Bohan point out how an essentialist viewpoint and arguments may have hindered effective policy development, or at least been difficult to defend against the counter attacks of the conservative Right. As noted earlier, however, it seems that constructionist alternatives may be no better, and in fact may be worse, in terms of facilitating and promoting policies that support LGB people and their struggle for acceptance and equal rights.

Setting aside whether research is grounded in essentialist or constructionist assumptions, there is another point that should be made about research and its use in policy development. Specifically, how research is used by policymakers and nonscientists (or nonpsychologists) cannot be controlled or anticipated. When there is a debate in the literature about an issue or topic, for example, the roots of homosexuality or even essentialist versus constructionist premises, policymakers and nonexperts may be privy to only one side of the debate. This can happen deliberately or accidentally, although the effect is the same either way: the current state of scientific knowledge is misrepresented. In addition, technical and complicated portions of research or important qualifications to findings can be lost on nonexperts. Unfortunately, many policymakers are not psychologists or even trained in the social or behavioral sciences, so their ability to grasp the nuances of research findings may be limited. Again, the effect is a less than complete grounding for public policy, even when the intention is to use research to inform policy development. What is more, to the extent that research findings can be intentionally distorted (as some claim has been done on LGB issues), there may be no effective way for researchers to combat these distortions. Researchers may not learn about how their work has been misrepresented (until it is too late, if even then), "experts" who will refute a given position are relatively easy to come by, and unequivocal findings are rare. Thus, regardless of the epistemological perspective one adopts, the research literature may be seldom or accurately used in informing policy decisions and implementation.

The Nature of Public Policy Formulation

To this point, I have discussed some of the potential pitfalls of leaning too heavily on "strong" constructionist approaches as the bases for policy development, as well as some of the inherent difficulties at the intersection of "science" and public policy. There is an ironic twist on these issues of connecting science and public policy. Specifically, while it seems to be an apparently good and self-evident idea to have policy informed by careful and systematic research efforts, it seems quite common in the policy realm for decisions to be made on the basis of personal experience or anecdote. Case examples, especially dramatic ones, sell causes and sway voters. Candidates run on single-issue platforms because of their personal experiences, such as politicians who advocate gun control because they are past victims of violent crime, and new laws, such as community disclosure and protection laws, are passed because of an individual's experience with recidivist criminal activities perpetrated by people recently released from prison. Personal experience is immediate, real, and intuitively valid, thereby making it more compelling. It has long been known to students of persuasion (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; McGuire, 1985) that case examples are more persuasive than base rate or normative information. By analogy, one that admittedly is likely an overstatement and simplification, constructions may function like case examples. They may be persuasive, but they may also be unique. And, in the end, they may actually already be the basis of a good deal of legislation. To assume that constructionist perspectives will be more helpful to LGB causes, therefore, may be misguided. At the very least, a corpus of empirically derived findings, derived from Popperian notions of science, are seldom used to inform policy debates and decisions.

Another reason that it is difficult to characterize how research has been incorporated in or should influence policy development is that there really is no rule for deciding what standards or findings to privilege when it comes to selecting or judging research. In the political realm, in fact, the answer may simply be to go with what "works." That is, politics are ultimately and essentially pragmatic, and usefulness may be the only criterion on which to judge what is "right," rather than any appeal to the best standard on the basis of theory, data, or aesthetics. In fact, it may be nothing more than coincidence in that the solution that worked best for LGB advocates in recent legislative and court fights has been to adopt an "essentialist" perspective on the causes of homosexuality. In other de-

bates on other issues, constructionist solutions may play better and be more effectively invoked or utilized. For example, in considering transgender issues and issues related to gender identity disorder, psychologists and others may find it advantageous to adopt and "push" a constructionist perspective to understanding these phenomena. Furthermore, it seems likely that, in many instances, gay men and lesbians (or homosexual-identified and bisexual-identified individuals, for that matter) are likely to have very different social constructions, not to mention the differences in social constructions that are likely to emerge among different subcultures of gay men and lesbians. Hence, the consistency of social constructions and, by implication, the unity of the LGB rights movement, cannot be assumed.

A broader point here is that intellectual discussion about essentialist and constructionist perspectives on homosexuality may be simply that— intellectual discussions to be hashed about among experts and with relatively few implications for policy development, except for what may be politically convenient or expedient at a given time. There is a gap, I think, between what we as psychological researchers, theorists, and even practitioners view as important or critical issues in the development of understanding sexual orientation and the concerns of lobbyists, activists, and politicians who work for LGB rights. As much as we bemoan the muddled state of good theory and data on LGB issues and then go on to introspect self-critically on the assumptions that may have contributed to this muddled state, we may lose sight of the crucial concerns of those on the social policy front lines. This is not to say that clear conceptual grounding of LGB issues is unimportant or that assumptions that have guided research should remain relatively unexamined. Rather, I simply wish to point out that the intellectual concerns of individuals within the field do not always match the pragmatic concerns of individuals not beholden to or steeped in our rhetoric and traditions. This is an important consideration as one moves from being a professional psychologist to a social activist, or even as one considers the public policy implications of different psychological perspectives on sexual orientation.

So far, the process of public policy formulation has been described as developed by nonexperts (in the sense of a specific content area such as psychology or LGB issues), only seldom influenced by systematic and organized research (in a conventional sense), influenced by case examples and dramatic events, and fundamentally responsive to the pragmatic concerns of its context and constituents. An additional point about

policy formulation and implementation is that the context that influences it is often responsive to the demands and constraints of time, money, partisanship, and public attitudes. From the point of view of advocates, as suggested earlier, what "works" may be what can best persuade policymakers and voters of the legitimacy and appropriateness of one's position. In terms of what "works" for policy development and implementation, however, the standards involve how best to actually approve legislation, enact a law, inform constituents or individuals who might be affected, and evaluate the effects of a policy. The picture here is of an imperfect political process subject to a variety of influences. While it is not unreasonable to question the assumptions that undergird theory and research in an area, this does not seem to be the place where the rubber meets the road in policy issues. Detailing these assumptions will certainly help scientists and other interested persons to understand biases inherent in their research and perhaps provide for more effective ways to combat biasing influences. In the realm of policy development, however, these issues may take a back seat to fundamental concerns about simply completing the task and implementing policy in a politically efficacious and timely manner.

Correlation or Causality: Links between Psychology and Public Policy

My final reactions to the chapter on the public policy implications of essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on sexual orientation revolve around potential causal connections between beliefs about the roots of homosexuality and support for LGB issues at a specific level, and between public policy and psychology at a broader level. In particular, I believe that the authors have traced important parallels at each of these levels, but questions about causal relationships remain open. I raise this issue because assuming causal connections on the basis of observed parallels may be problematic, especially for drawing conclusions about the individuals and points at which intervention should be directed in generating support for LGB issues. Second, assuming causal relationships at the broader level, where psychology and public policy intersect, may be seductive and reassuring in finding a place for psychology in the process of policy development, but it may be erroneous and lead psychologists to

ease up in their efforts to become "players" in policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

With respect to the first parallel, the authors and research (e.g., Aguero, Block, & Byrne, 1984; Whitley, 1990) suggest that beliefs that LGB orientations are chosen rather than biologically determined are related to less support for and even opposition to LGB rights. And, in complementary fashion, beliefs in biological or genetic determinants of LGB orientations are associated with benign or supportive stances on LGB issues; this belief provides the philosophical base for some advocacy and support efforts (as in the case of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, cited by Russell and Bohan in chapter 9). What is less clear in this research, however, is whether beliefs in biological determinants actually cause support for LGB rights or whether these beliefs about determinants come about as a way of justifying LGB support. Of course, at least one other alternative exists, that beliefs about determinants and LGB support are grounded in the same conceptual roots or have a common cause. (See, for examples, the work of Altemeyer, 1988; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Pratto et al., 1994.) The problem is the issue of interpreting causal relations from patterns of correlation. Two elements, A and B, may be correlated because A causes B or B causes A or because they are both caused by another element, C.

To the extent that the observed parallel or correlation between beliefs in genetic determinants (or an essentialist perspective) and support for LGB rights is understood in causal terms, it makes perfect sense that activists and scholars who labor on behalf of LGB-affirmative concerns should adopt an essentialist perspective in their work. To change attitudes and, ultimately, public policies, addressing the underlying cause of attitudes seems to be the most effective tack to take. Thus, the point of intervention for public information campaigns is located in people's understanding of the determinants of LGB orientations and in asserting either their genetic determinants (for pro-LGB advocates) or their mutable and nongenetic causes (for anti-LGB advocates).

On the other hand, if support for LGB rights precedes beliefs about the roots of sexual orientation or if both sets of beliefs are caused by some other underlying factor or attitude or personality constellation (such as social dominance, per Pratto et al., 1994, or authoritarianism, per Altemeyer, 1988; or even gender or gender beliefs, per Kite & Whitley, 1996; Oliver & Hyde, 1993), then the points of intervention should be

shifted. Instead of pursuing research and an "agenda" that seeks to establish the genetic causes of LGB orientations, for example, changing people's general orientation toward social groupings and social organization may be the preferred course of action. The simple point is that theories about cause imply types and points of intervention.

Russell and Bohan may be correct in asserting that contemporary LGB-affirmative activists have tended to adopt an essentialist perspective on sexual orientation, a perspective in which A causes B. LGB opponents, on the other hand, may have implicitly adopted a more social constructionist perspective to these issues, or one in which Z causes B. There are other possibilities, however, including the possibility that individuals who are working to combat LGB rights, rather than adopting a constructionist perspective, may simply be reversing the causal connection asserted by LGB supporters. That is, their starting point or cause may be attitudes toward LGB issues (the same "B" noted earlier), with a consequent effect on beliefs about the causes of homosexuality and bisexuality (whether or not genetic). As with LGB supporters, they seek to explain and change the perceived cause, in this case people's beliefs about LGB people and issues, and may assume that changing these beliefs will lead to a view of sexual orientation as less than genetically determined. Thus, a truly social constructionist view may not yet be represented on either side of the LGB rights debate. Consistent with the analysis just presented, a social constructionist perspective might be construed in terms of an "other cause" explanation (i.e., factor C affecting both A and B). In addition, however, and as also already alluded to, the debate on LGB rights might be expanded and psychology be able to productively contribute to it if a variety of "other cause" explanations, and especially some that are not of the social constructionist vein, were entertained.

The second parallel that is traced in chapter 9 is that between psychological science and public policy concerns. Psychology has been interested in the same issues as the courts, legislative initiatives, and the general public. But, this fact, or correlation, does not provide direct evidence that the two are causally linked. Yet the authors of chapter 9 suggest that "psychology and related professions have both influenced and been influenced by LGBs' efforts in sociopolitical arenas." A good deal of chapter 9 is also focused on the Colorado Amendment 2 court case and the ways in which psychology, and in particular organized psychology, may have influenced judicial decision making through the amicus brief it submitted in this case.

The issue of whether psychology and research in psychology reflect, lead, or follow from public discourse and debates, especially about sexual orientation, is an extremely interesting and complex one. I think that Russell and Bohan are correct to suggest that mutual influence occurs between the two, but I tend to believe that the direction of influence is asymmetrical, that public attitudes, concerns, and debates much more strongly affect the course of psychological research than the reverse. The parallels between the framing of the Amendment 2 Supreme Court decision (*Romer v. Evans*, 116 S. Ct., 1996), the language of the amicus brief submitted by the mental health professional organizations (American Psychological Association et al., 1994), and even public opinions and understandings of this issue are simply that. It is likely an overstatement to imbue psychology with much causal influence in affecting organized decision-making bodies (such as politicians and the courts) or, for that matter, the general public.

This is not to say that psychology and psychological research are irrelevant to public policy debates, development, and implementation. To the contrary, I believe that an important task for organized psychology and psychological researchers is to develop methods, skills, and forums to more effectively enter into policy debates. Currently, and particularly with respect to LGB issues, psychologists like to believe that we can and do influence public policy. Yet, despite the fact that the national major mental health professional organizations all removed homosexuality as a mental illness or disorder more than two decades ago, instances of institutional discrimination (e.g., the treatment of homosexuality by the military, job discrimination) and public disdain for LGB people still abound. If psychology were a major player in public policy or among the general public, one might suggest that greater progress should have been made on these issues over the past twenty-five years. It is probably more accurate, therefore, to characterize the history and terms of the Amendment 2 case discussed in chapter 9 as reflecting only a parallel to how sexual orientation issues have been treated within psychology than to assume profound causal influence of psychology on the courts.

Expanding Psychology's Contributions to Public Policy

In this final section, I offer a few observations about how psychological research and psychologists can begin to more reliably and strongly affect

public policy. My assumption here is that psychologists do indeed *want* to be involved in policy development and implementation. Moreover, there is likely much to be gained socially and economically from having policy built on the foundations of psychological research or as informed by psychological sensibilities. In some senses, then, psychologists *need* to be involved in public policy. The suggestions that I offer are simple and are likely to be obvious to many readers. My list is also certainly not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, I focus on three specific issues for professional psychologists who wish to influence LGB policies and public policy generally speaking: communication, research, and local involvement.

The first concern, involving communication, is relevant to public policy decisions and debates for which psychological research and data are available. In the case of many LGB issues, sound scientific evidence (as derived from whatever perspective) is simply not yet available. In other cases, however, psychological science has developed a corpus of knowledge that could be used to influence policies. For example, data on the stigmatization and victimization of LGB people exist, as does a body of knowledge about the differences (and lack of differences) between children raised by parents of the same and different genders. In the latter case, when data are available, policymakers may fail to access, understand, and use existing research findings. The communication problem, so to speak, involves professional psychologists who do not take the time or make the effort (or who do not have the ability) to communicate with policymakers or the public in cogent and compelling ways. In order to more strongly influence public policy, therefore, psychologists probably need to do a better job distilling and summarizing research findings, while also honing their skills in talking about psychological research in simple, persuasive, and memorable language. As noted earlier, most public policy decisions are made by nonexperts, certainly people with little psychological expertise. Bringing psychology into public policy, therefore, is likely to involve making it more accessible and understandable to individuals in positions to affect change. Instead of writing solely for other psychologists and publishing in academic journals, therefore, individuals may want to consider more concerted efforts at outreach to the public at large. In addition, research reports or summaries of sets of studies will probably need to be presented in more user-friendly formats involving shorter and less technical presentations.

With regard to the second issue, research, I suggest that psychologists, and especially those concerned about LGB issues, consider conducting research for the purpose (at least partially) of informing policy. Psychology's influence on public policy seems most often to have come about because "opportunities" for input, such as court challenges or legislative initiatives, presented themselves. Instead of passively waiting for these opportunities to arise, psychologists may wish to consider being more proactive on policy issues and making efforts to help set policy agendas. This, of course, may be difficult to do, especially to the extent that the conservative Right continues to push anti-LGB policies and legislation. But, to the extent that policy issues can be anticipated or even generated with data, then I think that psychologists are in a stronger position to enter the fray on public policy debates. In fact, a good deal of what government does, both locally and nationally, has cyclical or recurrent aspects to it (e.g., regular spending bills). Psychologists and others may be well positioned to pay attention to and take advantage of this predictability in attempting to shape rather than simply respond to policy issues. In the specific context of LGB concerns, psychological practitioners and researchers might also consider working directly with lobbying organizations and citizen groups to collect data that would be useful in making a case to voters, government officials, and others. I agree with Russell and Bohan that *who* defines the terms of debate on policy issues is critical. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that psychologists can bring their considerable skills to public policy issues by working in coordination with LGB activists not only to define the terms of debate but also to help set a LGB-affirmative policy agenda.

Finally, it must be remembered that many policymakers are elected officials or individuals who are accountable to some set or sets of constituents. At a more local or "hands-on" level, therefore, psychologists might choose to enter the political arena themselves or to involve themselves in community action boards and regulatory bodies. Individuals who do this, clearly, have very direct influence on policy development, implementation, and enforcement. By helping to inform and persuade constituents, however, psychologists can also indirectly influence policy development. What I am suggesting might be construed as a task of information dissemination and could occur through such "simple" means as letters to the editor of local newspapers, volunteer efforts, and informal discussions with friends and associates. When psychological research

exists on an issue or when psychological concerns are relevant, it may behoove clinicians, academics, and researchers interested in influencing public policy to help inform policymakers and citizens about relevant knowledge bases or concerns. In true grass-roots fashion, then, psychology may begin to play a larger role in public policy.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the political agenda for LGB people is ever-changing, dynamic, and influenced by current cultural understandings and norms. In that way, it is constructionist in nature. The fact that essentialist research can serve constructionist ends, however, may not be an oxymoron at all. Rather, it speaks to the pragmatic nature of policy development and may be more the rule than the exception when one works at the intersection of psychology and public policy.

In chapter 9, Russell and Bohan present a thorough treatment of essentialist and constructionist perspectives of sexual orientation in psychology and some of the implications they see for public policy debates. They do so by elucidating conceptual issues but also by providing case examples of "psychology in action," as in the Colorado Amendment 2 Supreme Court case. Their analysis is interesting and thought provoking, both because of its theoretical content and because of its many practical implications.

In this chapter, I have identified some of the assumptions made by Russell and Bohan and tried to describe the dangers of accepting these assumptions at face value. I described some of the implications of essentialist and constructionist perspectives for scientific research, as well as some of the elements of conventional science and research that may be particularly problematic for anyone interested in influencing public policy. I also discussed the constraints and practices of public policy formulation, with a particular eye toward their implications for how relatively essentialist or constructionist research might or might not be utilized. Finally, I discussed points of intervention and potential roles of psychology broadly defined (as opposed to the more narrow LGB psychology) in public policy formulation and implementation.

My hope is that psychologists and other interested readers will think seriously about the assumptions that underlie their own work and the research of others. Beyond that, I hope that readers will consider not only

the pitfalls but many of the opportunities available in becoming involved in public policy issues. We need to be clear about the assumptions inherent in our work and political positions, but we should recognize that the ways to affect meaningful social change and inform policy do not depend on these assumptions. As a discipline, psychology has a great deal to contribute to policy debates on LGB issues across a wide range of contexts and domains, including stigmatization and victimization, child rearing and family relationships, workplace issues, and general mental health concerns. And, not incidentally, much of what psychology currently can offer would, if taken seriously, likely lead to LGB-affirmative policies. Research and thought in these areas need not derive from exclusively essentialist or constructionist perspectives, but, even if they do, it does not necessarily diminish their value in informing public policy or sensitizing policy makers to important psychological concerns they should consider. The challenge is how not to become locked in debate about "appropriate" perspectives in theory and research on sexual orientation but to begin to acknowledge one's assumptions and their implications while positively affecting public policy and social change to improve the lives of all lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

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Afterword
The Conversation Continues

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> We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . . We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.
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> (Didion, 1979, p. 11)

Our goal in the preceding chapters has been to engage in conversations with scholars in the field to explore the meanings and implications of essentialist and constructionist perspectives on sexual orientation. Ideally, these conversations would contain more give-and-take, a continuation and expansion and revision of the themes each chapter has raised, followed by reciprocal comments from others in the conversation. While space limitations preclude such ongoing interaction here, we hope in this afterword to suggest some elements of how the discussion might continue from here.

   In this closing chapter, we raise additional issues—and variations on previously identified themes—to encourage further discussion of these matters. We do so by appealing to two sources of input. First, we highlight certain of trains of thought suggested by the authors included in this book. In particular, we focus on those themes that we failed to address earlier and that have led our own thinking in new directions and/or that provoked our disagreement. Second, we have asked several

colleagues to read and comment on our essays, and many of their responses have stimulated new questions and insights for us. Our aim here is to demonstrate the point we made at the beginning of this book: this is an ongoing conversation, which, like all good conversations, leads us in new directions and leaves us with new questions as well as with refined understandings. If our thinking had not changed as we read the comments of our colleagues and of these scholars, we would be thwarting our own purpose: to stimulate thought, rather than to foreclose the conversation by claiming a particular position as the sole legitimate one. Indeed, we have both agreed that if this book does not require serious revision in just a few years, it will have failed. We group these ideas-in-process into several key themes, realizing that these often overlap, hoping to leave the reader with some sense of the still fuzzy edges of this conversation.

Historical Context for Rethinking Sexual Orientation

To begin, let us consider the historical context in which these conversations are taking place. We agree with Doug Haldeman's suggestion that this is an "opportune time to examine long-held beliefs" about the psychology of sexual orientation, and we have found ourselves wondering just what factors contribute to its being a good time for such an examination to occur. It seems to us that it is far easier to undertake this exploration when the immediate climate for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals is relatively benign. It is a luxury to be able to ask the sorts of questions we ask here, a luxury born of some breathing room from immediate attack.

We think back to the circumstances under which earlier LGB theorists, researchers, and clinicians labored and are amazed by their ability to do the good work they did in such hostile climates. We wonder if essentialist positions rather naturally spring from hostile times. We agree with Omoto that no framework—essentialist, constructionist, or otherwise—is easily freed of homophobic and heterosexist influences. While we do not assume that essentialist approaches to LGB psychology inevitably have homophobic foundations, we think that Haldeman's observation is accurate; essentialism has served as the "cornerstone by which LGB people have defined and protected themselves." Even as we are grateful for the protection offered by an essentialist position, we note

that its self-protective function may sometimes obscure more expansive possibilities for LGBs.

If, as we suggest, essentialist discourse has often sprung from hostile environments and significant crises for LGB people, we wonder what the discourse on LGBs might look like had it been developed in climates far friendlier to LGBs. And we wonder whether discourse that was developed to serve us in crisis situations lingers even after the crises abate.

Even As We Speak . . .

As we are writing this afterword, religious right groups have been placing newspaper advertisements featuring people who refer to themselves as ex-gays and ex-lesbians and who suggest that homosexuality can be "cured." Allen Omoto refers to these ads, describing the "ex-gays" they portray as the "poster children" of the ex-gay movement. The LGB and ally communities' responses to these ads have emphasized the common (and essentialist) argument that homosexuality is not a choice. Once again, when under attack, we defend our position with an essentialist argument. In the process, we seem to accept the religious right's terms of debate—or at least, we fail to challenge them. Our response suggests that homosexuality is acceptable only if it is innate and not a choice; this is the homonegative kernel that rests in our response.

The Question of Choice

We are in full agreement with Haldeman's analysis of the religious right's assertion about choice: it

> incorrectly diverts the argument from what it is really about, namely an institutionalization of prejudice and stigma on religious and trumped-up psychological grounds, and attempts to lay it at the doorstep of 'choice.'

Elsewhere, Whisman makes the point that the religious right's and others' use of the choice argument rests on a notion of choice more consistent with a consumer decision than with ". . . matters of desire and emotion, which are matters of passion, not deliberation" (Whisman, 1996, p. 22).

One of the reasons we respond to the choice rhetoric so vehemently is its debasement of our human strivings for connectedness and love. One

wonders what would happen if we directed our response to that misrepresentation rather than tried to prove that homosexuality is inborn. Such debasement of meaningful human experiences feels invalidating to virtually all people, no matter what their sexual orientation. The argument for biological determinism privileges white gay male experiences, as we asserted in chapter 9. At the same time, we might keep in mind that, contrary to what opponents of civil rights for LGBs suggest, civil rights laws have been applied to matters of choice as well as to inborn qualities. Most people, in fact, have had some choice in the practice of religious beliefs, and most Americans (though admittedly not all) support the idea of free practice of religion.

The more we have conversed about the argument for choice as it is promulgated by those who are antagonistic to LGB interests, the more we are convinced that choice is not their fundamental concern. On the face of it, the assertion of choice demeans LGBs' relationships and trivializes their lives. But the assertion reflects a deeper issue as well. When pressed, opponents of LGB rights often concede that they would still reject nonheterosexual orientations even if those were proven to be biologically based. It is at this juncture that they often invoke comparisons to syndromes that have a presumed biological basis but are decidedly detrimental (e.g., alcoholism). Thus, the issue is not choice per se; even if not chosen, nonheterosexual orientations are unacceptable.

What really underlies the choice assertion as made by opponents of LGB rights is the moral condemnation of sexual orientations and practices that are not heterosexual. However, discrimination based on moral condemnation is less acceptable in a society whose rhetoric (if not always whose practices) embrace the separation of church and state. The use of the choice assertion allows these moral underpinnings to escape scrutiny and objection by proponents of human rights for LGBs. If we apply a constructionist analysis to this issue, we might ask why this particular moral stance is privileged in this discussion, rather than, say, an argument for individual liberty. Vaid (1998) has pointed to this deeper level of analysis in her discussion of claims for the benefits of reparative therapy: "the ex-gay games are not at all about sickness or sin but about politics and who will have the power to win the values wars" (p. 72). For those opposed to LGB rights, the issue is not the *cause* of nonheterosexual orientations but the *fact* of such orientations, whether emerging from choice, genetics, or any other source.

In his chapter on public policy, Omoto explores the question of causation, moving between the origins of nonheterosexual identity and the origins of homonegative attitudes. While we find this slippage problematic, his reflections seem to lead him to a conclusion similar to our own: to the extent that we are interested in social change, our questions must focus on the origins of homonegativity (indeed, of prejudice in general) rather than on the origins of those qualities deemed worthy of prejudicial treatment.

Philosophical Issues

A second theme that will benefit from further exploration has to do with the philosophical underpinnings of this discussion. Several topics deserving comment arise in these chapters and in our discussions with colleagues.

The Issue of Value-Neutrality

First, we have discussed previously the question of whether psychology is a value-free undertaking, asserting that it neither can nor should be. Further, we have argued that it is crucial that we recognize and acknowledge the value-laden character of our work and consider carefully its implications. The strongest challenge to this position from among our respondents comes from Omoto, who argues that the values imposed on the results of research come not from those results themselves but from society. We suggest two shortcomings to this argument. First, psychologists are themselves members of society and not separate from it; psychology is a discipline that operates within society and not in a vacuum. Hence, psychology and psychologists are bound to embody values present in the social context in which they are individually and collectively imbedded. Second, a considerable literature points to the ways in which our values as individuals, the paradigms and priorities of the discipline, and the sociohistorical context of our work shape every step of the research process, from defining the problem through designing and conducting the study to analyzing the data and applying results (e.g., Bakan, 1977; Caplan & Nelson, 1973; Gergen, 1973, 1979; Koch, 1981; Mishler, 1979; Unger, 1983; Wallston & Grady, 1985).

An example of how values become intertwined with apparently value-neutral topics can be seen in Omoto's reference to research that deals with memory. Omoto uses the example of memory research to illustrate the presumed neutrality of psychological inquiry. Research regarding human memory may have begun in a relatively nonpoliticized context with the goal of exploring a putatively universal phenomenon. In recent years, however, such research has become the focus of one of the most politicized debates in the discipline (deRivera & Sarbin, 1998)—and, indeed, in society at large. As the cultural climate has changed, so too have the meanings, implications, and critiques of memory research—an area once deemed the epitome of "pure" research.

In addition to questioning the very possibility of value-free research, we have argued that an acknowledgement of the value-laden nature of psychological work (whether it be clinical practice, theory and research, or public policy) demands that we be attentive to the reciprocal influence of psychology and society on each other—an interaction that Omoto also highlights. Further, we suggest that it is impossible to be sensitive to these issues without acknowledging the political influences on and the social impact of our own work. Although Omoto early on suggests that such concerns are beyond the scope of his chapter, we clearly agree with his later insistence that "who defines the terms of the debate in policy issues is crucial." We also agree wholeheartedly with his urging psychologists to recognize this reciprocity by claiming ownership of the impact of their work on individuals and on society. In this context, Omoto urges psychologists to find means for transmitting the results of their work to the public and to encourage their use in policy formation. This is a recommendation with which we thoroughly agree and a practice we have encouraged (Russell & Bohan, 1999).

Ontology, Epistemology, and Phenomenology

A second complex of philosophical issues in need of clarification has to do with the relationship among ontology, epistemology, and individual phenomenology. Throughout our essays—and especially in chapter 1—we have drawn a distinction between ontology and epistemology and between social constructionism and essentialism as regards the topic of sexual orientation. By way of review, an essentialist ontology asserts that sexual orientation is an actual, extant phenomenon. Constructionist ontology, in contrast, argues that the concept of sexual orientation repre-

sents meanings imposed on phenomena that could readily be understood in other ways. Further, we have suggested that socially constructed meanings, expressed in collective discourse or narratives, can actually shape not only what is taken as "knowledge" but what is seen as "reality" itself.

As regards essentialist and constructionist epistemologies, the former is grounded in positivism, which entails the assumption that it is possible objectively to observe, measure, and describe accurately a reality that exists independent of the act of observation. Social constructionism, on the other hand, argues that it is impossible to observe phenomena directly. Rather, our understandings are inevitably shaped by the particular perspective of our position. We do not discover reality; we *construct* understandings that we take as reality.

We have also—especially in chapter 6—commented on the question of the relationship between socially constructed understandings and individual phenomenology—that is, how socially defined meanings relate to individual experience. As this conversation has proceeded with colleagues and through the chapters in this book, we have become increasingly aware of the need to clarify the relationships among these dimensions of analysis and to explore their particular relevance to psychology.

First, as regards the relationship between ontology and epistemology, some of our colleagues, especially Elyse Morgan and Louise Silvern (both of whom are theoreticians at heart) have urged that psychology's preferred epistemology—namely positivism—privileges or even demands an essentialist ontology. Positivism requires the existence of actual phenomena that can be observed and measured; that is to say, positivism requires an ontology grounded in philosophical realism, or the assumption that things do, indeed, exist independent of our apprehension of them. Thus, to do psychological research from a positivist perspective, one must assume that the phenomenon of interest, such as sexual orientation, exists in order for it to be studied.

Further, experimental psychological research entails the assignment of individuals to groups whose differential treatment reveals the impact of particular variables that are systematically manipulated by the researcher. Statistical techniques in the social sciences are designed to compare groups in order to assess the differential impact on various groups of such environmental manipulations. Thus, psychological research demands the availability of discrete categories into which individuals can

be sorted, such as categories of sexual orientation, in order to compare those groups, using statistical methods.

The point here is that the conflation of essentialist ontology and positivist epistemology that we have pointed out as regards sexual orientation is anchored by fundamental assumptions, conventions, and methodological allegiances that undergird psychology as a field—at least insofar as psychology is understood to be a research discipline grounded in positivist epistemology. Our attempts to understand sexual orientation from the positivist perspective of traditional research psychology—the so-called received view—are thus unavoidably essentialist in character. The upshot of this is that, in traditional psychological models, sexual orientation identity is exposed to the experimenter's gaze, a perspective taken as an accurate depiction of sexual orientation experience.

Omoto's chapter reveals very clearly this connection between positivist epistemology and essentialist ontology. His commitment to (and, indeed, his faith in) a positivist model is evidenced in references to "findings" that are "accepted into the scientific cannon" and to "evidence that is compelling and able to withstand counterattack." It is stated directly in his assertion that science involves "self-correction and continual revision." Further, he is persuaded that essentialist perspectives lead to findings whose "validity (and hence their veracity) can be asserted on prima facie grounds." "Such research," he continues, "can lead to a comprehensive understanding of sexual behavior, expression, and identity." He takes these as denoting actual phenomena rather than as reifications of social constructs, an essentialist as well as a positivist position.

As is clear from our comments throughout this book, we are not persuaded that this acceptance of the received view is justified, either in terms of its unwavering essentialist underpinnings or in terms of its allegiance to positivism. Still, we are repeatedly made aware of how easily we slide into essentialist/positivist perspectives ourselves—the result, we argue, of a lifetime of residing in a culture whose fundamental understandings are essentialist and of years of training in a discipline grounded in both essentialist ontology and positivist epistemology.

The difficulty of escaping from this well-learned world view is reflected in the comments of several respondents in this volume. In some cases, despite respondents' striving to challenge the usual, categorical understanding of sexual orientation, their comments nonetheless seem to assume that sexual orientation exists as an actual phenomenon. For instance, Fritz Klein's discussion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities re-

flects the assumption that these identities are actual attributes of individuals—albeit ones far more complex than our usual understandings would imply. Similarly, in her discussion of the intricate web of factors that influence sexual orientation, Vivienne Cass appears to posit sexual orientation as a real thing whose origins can be best understood in terms of complex interactions among multiple variables. To be sure, Cass returns later to the assertion that, in studying sexual orientation identities, we must keep in mind that those identities are constructs rather than extant qualities. However, the earlier discussion appears to ease toward essentialist understandings, illustrating how easy such a slide is. In fact, it was only after reading Cass's chapter several times that we were able to identify what in our response to this section felt a bit odd. Despite our very extensive discussion of these matters, we must struggle not to succumb to the positivist/essentialist models in which we were trained.

A related difficulty is the temptation to equate social construction with socialization—that is, to suggest that the assertion that sexual orientation is a social construction is nothing more than insistence that sexual orientation is socialized (that is, is learned), rather than biologically determined. In this mistaken equation, arguments for biological origins are equated with essentialism. Since the predominant discourse couches this issue in terms of a biology-choice dichotomy, constructionism comes to be equated with choice. This confusion of social constructionism with socialization fails to recognize the distinction between the ontological domain (which might well entail discussions of what causes sexual orientation) with the epistemological domain (which seeks to explore how it is that we come to particular understandings of sexual orientation). Such reasoning appears in Omoto's discussion of the causes of LGB identity, imbedded in his consideration of negative attitudes toward LGBs.

Perhaps the difficulty here lies in the tendency to conflate causation with explanation. Social constructionism does not purport to explain (or even explore) the causes of phenomena we take as "real," such as sexual orientation. Rather, it seeks to explain why we take these phenomena as real. In this sense, as Omoto points out, each position is a construction. The social constructionist aim is to explore the contexts that warrant one construct over another.

A part of the issue here seems to be the complex interactions among the ontological and the epistemological elements of essentialism and constructionism. An appeal to strong constructionism, in particular,

highlights the argument that sexual orientation (as distinguished from sexual orientation identity) is not a free-standing phenomenon but a construct that emerges from discourse. This construct may itself create rather than depict so-called reality. When social discourse is internalized by the individual—a process that Cass rightly argues needs more study—the result is an identity reflecting this discourse. As Cass suggests, one element of this discourse is the "indigenous psychology" of the culture, which includes meanings attributed to various behaviors and experiences—such as sexual attractions and romantic attachments. We would simply add that such meanings and the indigenous psychology they reflect are themselves constructions.

Thus, sexual orientation is a social construct; the internalization of that construct and the meanings it carries form the basis for sexual orientation identity. And, as we discussed in chapters 1 and 5 and as Cass also notes, there is a reciprocity between these two constructs; individual meanings contribute to and are also informed by socially constructed understandings. Indeed, the "social" in social constructionism refers precisely to the creation of meaning through interpersonal exchange; each individual both influences and is influenced by the processes of social interaction.

External Constructs, Internal Experiences

In chapter 6 we explored briefly the distinction between social constructionism and constructivism; the latter—at least in some interpretations—focuses on individual phenomenology, whereas the former highlights shared meanings.[1] The issues raised in our conversations here and elsewhere point to an important direction for our further musings on these matters. How is it that collective meanings become internal ones? How are those shared understandings modified by individual phenomenology? Cass offers a model for this process, exploring how "indigenous psychologies" (which are themselves intertwined with external phenomena) shape psychological realities—a variation on our suggestion that social constructions inform individual phenomenology.

In her comments about psychological research and theory building, Cass urges that a constructionism emphasizing too strongly the social/historical determinants of experience threatens to disregard the psychological/phenomenological realm and its contribution to experi-

ences of sexual orientation. Doug Haldeman makes a related point in urging that attention to the individual's meaning-making is at the heart of clinical practice.

The Role of Agency

Closely related to this issue is the question of agency, specifically raised by Cass and implied by several other respondents. The concept of individual agency is one about which we have had a number of conversations and about which we lack agreement. This notion—the concept of the self-contained individual, autonomously directing her or his experience—is so much a part of Western culture (or indigenous psychology) that it is difficult to speak without resorting to notions of agency (e.g., Sampson, 1977, 1983, 1993a, 1993b). Deconstructing the idea of agency is a useful exercise for any psychologist and leads us to question a number of basic assumptions in the culture and in the discipline, a discussion which is beyond the scope of this book.[2]

Other related questions arise, as well. How can a social constructionist approach account for some individuals' defying cultural meanings? Or does such apparent defiance simply point to alternative social constructs that overwhelm the more obvious ones? For example, are the teens mentioned in chapter 9 really challenging existing categories of sexual orientation or, as Suzanne Iasenza suggests, might they simply be responding to another narrative, namely adolescent freedom from convention?[3]

The Phenomenology of Essentialism

A final topic within the general domain of philosophical issues has to do with one element of the phenomenology of sexual orientation identity, namely the sense of certainty that often accompanies such identity claims—the almost visceral sense of its truth that has been mentioned by several contributors to this volume. We have been wanting to return to the notion that experiences that are culturally situated seem to be self-evidently true expressions of a free-standing reality, rather than expressions of situated personal and social realities. We were unsure how to pursue this theme until one of us recently attended a funeral with a friend, for whom the event represented a cross-cultural experience. After the funeral, this friend commented that certain expressions of grief, unfamiliar to her, seemed to be "expected" of the mourners. In discussing

her observations, we agreed that expectations for expressions of grief are indeed one aspect of the cultural backdrop of this funeral. We also realized, however, that expectations for grieving are a part of all cultures; we are simply less aware of those imbedded in our own culture. When we observe the expressions of grief characteristic of our own culture, we take them at face value and do not question their authenticity. When we observe those characteristic of another culture, on the other hand, we fail to recognize that they are equally genuine expressions for members of that group. Rarely do we hear intracultural comments about grief that resemble the cross-cultural observations made by this friend.

A parallel can be drawn between this situation and sexual orientation. The phenomenological experience of sexual orientation identity may well be experienced as deeply as other important experiences, such as grief and its expression. However, this does not mean that sexual orientation identity is any less socially constructed—for all its subjective centrality—than is grief. Still, it is crucial to point out that when we say that sexual orientation (or grief) is socially constructed, this does not mean that we doubt its phenomenological reality—or, in Cass's words, its psychological reality—to the individual.

In a similar way, a parallel can be drawn between these experiences and experiences of social connectedness, which are also socially constructed. Different cultures promote and expect different expressions of social connection. In some cultures, such as our own, such connections are often experienced with considerable intensity, the paradigm case being "falling in love." Indeed, people often express the experience of falling in love in terms that sound essentialist and that mirror those used to describe the adoption of a sexual orientation identity. Using the language of self-discovery, people frequently speak of both falling in love and of coming out as "coming home" and as having everything finally fit. Common, also, is the sense that one "cannot help" falling in love, that the experience is beyond choice or intent—a feeling that also parallels many individuals' sense of sexual orientation identity.

We argue that such experiences of grief, social connection, and sexual orientation are not extralinguistic or culture-free phenomena. All are located within the discourse of specific cultural and historical contexts, and all tend to be experienced deeply in our own culture. To say this is the case does not for one moment deny that these experiences mean something—often a great deal—to individuals. To reiterate an extremely important point, to say that something is a reflection of socially con-

structed understandings does not deny the phenomenological realities associated with its enactment and expression.

The Privileging of Narrative

The notion of the shaping power of cultural and personal narratives leads us to another area in need of further discussion. As is apparent from our essays—and as Louise Silvern and Elyse Morgan have helped us to recognize more fully—a constructionist approach privileges narrative as a means of depicting and understanding experience. This is true for researchers and research participants, for therapists and clients, for policymakers and those they affect; all are seen as both creating and responding to narratives. This portrayal is quite different from traditional psychological understandings, which assume a parametric theory of the individual, constituted of measurable personal qualities and shaped by measurable environmental variables. Such a construal pays scant attention to meaning-making, which is underscored by a perspective that focuses on the creation of personal and collective narratives, and their role in shaping human experiences.

If, for the moment, we consider such narratives as expressions of social constructions, then the relationship between constructionism and narratives becomes clearer. Socially constructed understandings—as well as individual or phenomenological understandings—are expressed and conveyed by narratives, by discourse of various sorts. Such narratives depict what is commonly (or personally) "known" to be the case. Since socially constructed "knowledge," conveyed by collective narratives, does not come with a disclaimer indicating that it is a consensual agreement and not a re-presentation of external realities—it is not readily distinguishable from *the* (absolute) truth. That is, constructed understandings can be taken as self-evidently true. Such narratives (including, for example, Cass's indigenous psychologies) become, in essence, scripts for experience. The indigenous psychologies of a culture (purport to) tell its members how people *really are*, not how the culture simply *thinks* they are; they (presumably) tell us how to *be*, not how we (idiosyncratically) believe people are.

To be consistent with a constructionist analysis, of course, we must acknowledge that constructionism is itself just one among many possible forms of narrative. It is another discourse, one subject to the same claims

of locatedness as any other. Indeed, each argument offered in this book—by the authors and the participating scholars alike—is a situated narrative. As such, each can be taken as one among many ways of construing particular phenomena. An excellent example of this was provided by Iasenza, who pointed out that our emphasis on the coercive power of narrative in shaping individuals' sense of the immutability of sexual orientation is but one possible explanation of this phenomenon. Others might be that sexual orientation is indeed immutable, that people resist assuming LGB identities out of homophobia, that people are willing to change only if they become exceptionally uncomfortable, and many others.

"Truth" and Utility

The notion that many narratives are possible and, from a constructionist perspective, none can be demonstrated to be "true" in the usual sense returns us once again to the recurrent question of how we are to decide among possible understandings. We emphasized in our own chapters the importance of identifying criteria other than validity (in the positivist sense) for selecting among alternative construals, and many of the respondents reaffirm this necessity. Haldeman, Iasenza, and Tiefer all emphasize the value of choosing between essentialist and constructionist models in clinical work, depending on the client, the particular circumstances, and the goals of therapy. Iasenza highlights the additional—and, we think, very important—factor of the therapist's comfort with various understandings of sexual orientation.

A related point is made by Cass, who, while recognizing the conceptual utility of constructionism, argues that too rigid an adherence to constructionism may obscure the "psychological reality" of sexual orientation, sensitivity to which is crucial to understanding individual experience and group identity. Early in his chapter, Omoto extols the merits of science in arriving at valid "findings" whose demonstrable veracity anchors their legitimacy. However, later he turns to utility as a criterion for selecting one or another rendition of phenomena. It is "what works," he argues, that must direct policy initiatives and that may be at various times—as we have also claimed—essentialist or constructionist construals. Haldeman also emphasizes the utility of essentialist models and the

risk of constructionist arguments in the public policy domain, even as he suggests that we are mature enough as a discipline and a movement to transcend rigidly essentialist positions.[4]

The Problem of Incommensurate Narratives

It is useful to apply the notion of narrative to this question of how we select one understanding over another. In an analysis of this sort, Douglass (1997) has investigated the tactics used by anti-LGB forces in the 1991 campaign over Oregon's Measure 9 and contrasted those with the tactics of the pro-LGB forces. His narrative analysis indicated that the anti-LGB rhetoric was almost entirely conversational in nature—that is, it involved realistic-sounding scenarios with which typical people might identify. The anti-LGB activists did not rely on science for "proof"; they relied on stories. The pro-LGB campaign, on the other hand, abjured such prosaic strategies and turned instead to scientific evidence, data far removed from most voters' everyday understandings.

In his discussion of paradigms and their shifts, Kuhn (1970) pointed out that representatives of very different paradigms are often unable to talk with each other in any way that makes sense, because the terms employed by one side are entirely foreign to the other; in Kuhn's words, the paradigms are incommensurate. It is not that the two disagree; they are not even talking about the same thing. Fowler (1981) makes a similar point in regard to varying levels or forms of religious belief. By analogy, consider an argument between a physicist and an artist regarding the nature of the sky. Such debates are useless; neither side can persuade the other because the two are talking past rather than with each other. This seems to be the situation as regards equal rights for LGBs; it is clear that the two sides of this debate draw from entirely different discourses. Pro-LGB positions have been rooted in arguments from psychology and biology; anti-LGB positions have been founded on moral arguments, even if those arguments are often disguised. Pro-LGB forces' reliance on psychological research will never disprove a moral position; arguments from a moral position will never dissuade those committed to the validity of psychological evidence.

This analysis is strikingly reminiscent of the discussion in chapter 9 of the conflation of pro-LGB positions with essentialism. Here pro-LGB

forces relied on positivism (essentialism's epistemological kin), while anti-LGB tactics employed narrative (constructionism's epistemological partner).

In a broad sense, the issue in such debates is the utilization of very different discourses. To the degree that true conversation involves give-and-take between people each of whom (roughly) understands what the other means, genuine conversation between pro- and anti-LGB forces is not possible under these circumstances. Hence, persuasion by either side is unlikely. In keeping with this suggestion, Omoto urges psychologists to speak in a language that is understandable and persuasive to lay people rather than rely on the scientific jargon we use among ourselves (see also Russell & Bohan, 1999).

Psychology and Public Policy

Speaking more broadly, Omoto suggests that psychology's impact on public policy has been limited. When one considers the unfulfilled potential for psychology to influence public policy, it is difficult to disagree with Omoto's suggestion. Psychology's limited influence on public policy is especially obvious when one considers only formal avenues of influence, such as a legislative body's reliance on psychological information as the basis for the passage of a law or a court's use of psychological findings in determining a ruling.

On the other hand, when we broaden our notions of public policy and of influence, a different picture begins to emerge. Public policy is influenced by a large universe of factors, a universe that is unstable and wherein pathways of influence are not always straightforward. Within this vast network of interlocking influences, psychology and public policy are in reciprocal interaction, though the natures of these interactions and their influence are rarely clearcut. With Gergen, we "sense the profound degree to which the psychologist is linked in mutual communication with the surrounding culture" (Gergen, 1973, p. 310), and, we would add, through that culture, to public policy issues.

Especially when we consider less formal avenues whereby psychology influences public policy, this mutuality becomes clear. These avenues typically are circuitous and difficult to track. Despite their elusive nature, informal modes of influence on public policy should not be ignored by

psychologists. An obvious example of such influence is the impact of the decision to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder. It is doubtful that one could trace a single legislative or court decision directly to this action (and certainly not to the action in isolation). And yet, the declassification decision is cited with great frequency in the public discourse on equal rights of LGBs (Russell, Ramsey, & Wyatt, 1999). One could argue that these citations have no impact. Yet, even if one dismisses the potential influence of the decision on the general public, a case can be made that this action had a significant impact on LGBs. We cannot prove, for example, that declassification exerted a positive influence on the self-images of many LGBs and that such changes in self-image might have been a factor in some LGBs' willingness to be active and visible on behalf of LGB rights. Yet, while we cannot prove this within a positivist paradigm (though we do have considerable suggestion that such is the case from clinical data), we certainly would not be willing to forfeit the *possible* benefits of the declassification decision because we are unable to prove them. This hypothetical example is but one of countless possible avenues by which the declassification decision might influence public policy. It is important that psychologists consider informal, as well as formal, avenues of influence in the public domain.

A parallel situation exists on the other side of the debate for LGB rights. We have argued earlier that the anti-LGB position often is rooted in moral objections to homosexuality, objections not always explicit in the public discourse on gay rights. Research based on three separate campaigns against LGB rights over nearly two decades suggests that explicitly religious arguments are decreasing in number, although religious influences still underlie some nonreligious rhetoric (Russell, Ramsey, & Wyatt, 1999).

With respect to psychology's influence on the public domain, it is also important that we note negative influences on LGBs' interests effected in the name of the discipline. Omoto refers to the occasional use of Paul Cameron's research by those in opposition to full human rights for LGBs. In fact, Cameron's research has been cited quite extensively by opponents to LGB rights, especially when discussions have reached the level of formal campaigns ("Anti-gay adviser," 1985; Booth, 1992; Fettner, 1985; Pietrzyk, 1994; Walter, 1985). In Colorado's Amendment 2 campaign in 1992, Cameron's research, discredited as it was, formed the centerpiece of Colorado for Family Values' literature (see especially Colorado for

Family Values, 1992). In many respects, Cameron's research provides a psychological-sounding (if not a psychologically sound) disguise for underlying moral objections to homosexuality in the anti-LGB arsenal.

The Relationship of LGB and Minority Identities

Our friend and colleague Karen Raforth has challenged us to bring greater depth to the discussion of the relationship between civil rights movements for people of color and the movement for equal rights for LGBs. She pointed out that there has been limited exposition of the thoughts of LGBs of color on this issue, a situation that she suggests may be attributable to fundamentally racist limitations on the authority and "airtime" given to people of color, as well as to the fact that these questions cannot be addressed simplistically. In addition, people of color are underrepresented in both LGB leadership and in the LGB press (J. Gallagher, 1997). We were encouraged by her comments to pursue the topic further in this afterword.

In an article by John Gallagher (1997) on the relationship between concerns of LGBs and those of African Americans, the author Jewel Gomez argued that, when African Americans speak against equal rights for LGBs, their statements are understood solely in the context of their race:

> It's this black thing, not a religious thing. That's a problem around all issues with African-Americans. . . . You end up feeling singled out, as if there's a special way that black people are homophobic or that we have an extra power in our homophobia. (Quoted in J. Gallagher, 1997, p. 38)

Gomez further pointed out that religious right groups have made a point of highlighting anti-LGB remarks made by people of color in an effort to stifle the potential for building coalitions among oppressed groups.

At the same time, as Phil Wilson of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum points out, the (white) LGB movement does limited outreach to communities of color. Further, the playwright Brian Freeman argues that, despite the need for an ongoing coalition among these communities, efforts to strengthen ties between LGB and African American communities typically occur only in times of crisis (J. Gallagher, 1997). Without efforts at continuing cooperation, it is likely that

the needs of any given group will continue to be viewed as being at odds—if not indirect competition—with those of other groups.

Despite the limits to the relationship between African American and LGB communities, Gallagher pointed out that, in many respects, LGB interests have received considerable support from African Americans. Coretta Scott King and Jesse Jackson, two of the most prominent leaders African American leaders, have been consistently and vocally supportive of full rights for LGBs. Freeman asked and answered the question, "Who has the most consistent voting record on gay rights in Congress, 100 times better than the next group? The Congressional Black Caucus" (quoted in J. Gallagher, 1997, p. 38).

Karen Raforth suggests that white LGBs[5] need to reflect on how they address comparisons between homophobia/heterosexism and other forms of oppression. It is important to attend, for instance, to the fact that white LGBs' comparisons between racism and homonegativity typically emphasize similarities and underplay differences between the two prejudices. Dialogue between groups is not likely to occur when only our commonalities are understood. In addition, white LGBs and their supporters frequently refer to homonegativity as the last bigotry, asserting that it is socially unacceptable to engage in overtly racist speech or conduct, while overtly homonegative speech and actions are accepted. Perceptions of this sort suggest that racism has been eradicated and that all of our energies should be devoted to undoing homophobia and heterosexism. Such arguments belittle the continuing and pervasive presence of racism and the enormous toll it continues to exact.

We suggest that it behooves white LGBs to devote their energies to the eradication of all forms of social bigotry, not simply the elimination of homonegativity. Not only is this the right thing to do from an ethical perspective, but such a commitment would go far toward true coalition building. In addition, it would allow white LGBs to see more clearly the impact of oppression on their lives and to utilize their own race-based privilege more wisely. In the process, we might all move in the direction of enacting Audre Lorde's (1983) renowned and still important observation: there is no hierarchy of oppressions.

Issues in Psychotherapy

Yet another theme that emerges from this conversation relates to the clinical implications of the issues raised by our essays, especially but not solely the chapter on clinical practice. One topic that has emerged repeatedly is the dilemma with which we began: both essentialist and constructionist positions have merit in certain circumstances. The advantages, under some circumstances, of an essentialist approach to clinical work have been delineated by Haldeman, Iasenza, and Tiefer in their respective chapters. As Haldeman notes, the essentialist perspective has "insulated many lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals from the sting and burden of society's stigmatization of same-sex affectional and erotic attraction." We agree with this observation and similar ones made by the other two conversants in their discussions of clinical issues. At the same time, we have reservations about allowing essentialist conclusions to stand unchallenged in clinical work. Specifically, while clients undoubtedly find an essentialist perspective useful under certain circumstances, this perspective may carry implicit baggage that warrants further clinical exploration.

As we discussed in chapter 2, essentialist renditions of nonheterosexual orientations often carry residues of homonegativity. If homonegativity exists within the assumptive foundation of a person's essentialist perspective, then it may be a clinical disservice to ignore it. The presence of homonegativity—whether for the person who is LGB or for a family member—should be a signal for more clinical exploration and resolution. In many cases, it may be that a client's essentialist position is not founded on homonegative assumptions. Where it is present, however, the homophobia underlying an essentialist perspective is not always obvious. It may surface only in response to the therapist's invitation to the client to explore his or her essentialist position. Our concern is that, if therapists routinely accept clients' essentialist renditions at face value, they will not be in a position to work with clients toward uncovering homophobic assumptions should they be present.

While we emphasize the therapist's need to be aware of the potential presence of homonegative assumptions, we also emphasize that all good psychotherapy meets clients where they are. This invitation to explore essentialist assumptions is not posed in terms of an academic debate; there is little place for such debates in therapy, and this is no exception. Rather, therapists issue such invitations by their attentiveness to particular issues

and by the nature of the questions asked. Like most of what happens in psychotherapy, the issue is explored in the context of and through the client's phenomenological experience. It is in this context that the client and therapist work toward understanding the client's unique translations of what Cass terms indigenous psychology into their own more personal psychologies.

Further, while a therapist may offer the possibility of exploring the assumptions that underlie a client's essentialist positions, as is the case with any issue, it is ultimately up to the client to decide whether or not to do so. It is the client with whom ultimate decisions about the agenda and the timing of issues rest. Having said that, we would be concerned if a therapist did not address the underlying internalized homonegativity where a client presents with the desire to change a nonheterosexual orientation. Similarly, we would be concerned if a therapist did not consider the possibility of internalized homonegativity in (at least some) clients who take a strongly essentialist position regarding sexual orientation.

The very real possibility of such internalized homophobia rests in the fact that we all live in a society that condemns nonheterosexual identities and practices. We agree with Cass that the social does become personal and that, in the process, to a greater or lesser degree, the social is internalized (or not) and assimilated (or not) in ways that make sense within a specific individual's personal psychology. We also think that every aspect of our understanding this complex process represents a construction rather than an extralinguistic reality. Our conviction that therapists inevitably deal with social constructions in the therapy hour is rooted in this belief. No client exists outside of social contexts and those contexts influence what clients bring to therapy. This is the case for all clients and it is, therefore, an issue which all therapists encounter. At the same time, therapists also exist in and are influenced by multiple contexts, including their professional training. We suggest that the client's and the therapist's social contexts and the constructs imbedded in those contexts inevitably come into sessions. What varies among therapists in this regard is how much the therapist takes those contextual influences into account and how much the therapy actively focuses on them.

The multiple contexts that influence clients introduce countless factors that might be relevant in a given therapy situation. Psychology and related disciplines have proposed a variety of conceptual and methodological approaches to deal with the intricate imbeddedness of human beings in their worlds. There is some advantage to therapists' thinking

systematically about such factors: what is present, what is missing, where are strengths, where are problems? Cass's chapter offers one systematic method for doing so. It has the appeal of guiding a therapist to think in broad terms while encountering a client where she or he is. Another and even more complex approach to seeing clients in the broadest terms without losing their individuality can be found in clinical perspectives derived from General Systems Theory, such as the work of Silvern (1984).

For the clinician, these approaches can enhance the vision and allow more to be seen—as long as they are taken as guides to areas of possible interest rather than as rigid metatheoretical maps that obscure phenomena not explicitly contained in the map. (See Way, 1998, for a discussion of the uses and limits of metatheories.) Despite their undeniable utility, it is important to remember that they also exist as constructions rather than as a pure reflection of a reality we can grasp directly.

One final, fundamental statement about therapy with LGBs is warranted. A thought that occurred to us many times as we read and reread the installments in this conversation is this: good therapy with LGBs is marked by the same qualities as is good therapy in general. Nothing that we say about psychotherapy with LGBs should be taken to violate good principles of psychotherapy—a subject matter that, of course, has as many complexities as the issues we address here and about which volumes have been written. Rarely can a psychotherapist say something beyond the lived experience of a client without eliciting, at best, a confused smile or, at worst, a sense of having been gravely misunderstood.

The Centrality of Homophobia and Heterosexism

A final theme centers on a point we have distilled from our conversations with colleagues and the thoughts of this book's contributors. Beneath each of the topics we have addressed here lies a bedrock of homophobia and heterosexism. It is not only that homonegativities have undergirded anti-LGB positions. Rather, because, as Haldeman notes, the discourses of the LGB movement and LGB-affirmative psychology have been shaped largely in opposition to anti-LGB rhetoric, they, too, find their foundation in homophobia and heterosexism. Thus, pro-LGB narrative is laced with homophobia because it must contain or envelop the other

narrative in order to attack it. One of our readers, Carol Hathaway-Clark, offered a Trojan horse analogy: our best and most well-intended efforts—LGB-affirmative therapy, LGB-sensitive research, public policy initiatives—bring with them, hidden from view, the very meanings most inimical to LGBs' well-being.

We have discussed this phenomenon in each topic area and have returned to it earlier in this afterword; we will not belabor it further here except to suggest an alternative mode for construing a pro-LGB position, one that ameliorates if not eliminates this homonegative penumbra. The notion we explore here brings us back, also, to the question of whose purpose is served by the homophobia residing even in pro-LGB rhetoric—the answer to which is perhaps obvious—and by what dynamic that purpose is served.

The Disruptive Potential of LGB Experience

A key expression of the subtle homonegativity that underlies much pro-LGB narrative is the argument that "we are just like everyone else"—as if acceptance depends on that similarity, as if *only* if nonheterosexuals are just like heterosexuals should their lives be honored. The argument that we are all alike may seem to serve LGBs well by garnering acceptance from mainstream society. Indeed, as Haldeman and Omoto point out, the movement has achieved a degree of success largely because of such arguments.

However, such acceptance may come at a cost. First, it serves to reify sexual orientation categories by accepting the notion that there are discrete identities and that the task of those who do not belong to the dominant one is to mimic the identity of those who do. One of our readers, David Lilly, urged a recognition of how such an affirmation of the status quo serves to maintain the position of those in power, who, in turn, retain control over the very discourse that creates that power and preferentially distributes it to themselves. Thus, the reification of sexual orientation identity categories often serves to reinforce the superiority of heterosexuality (especially of heterosexual males) and to make of nonheterosexuals penitents, begging acceptance through the ablation of their distinctive characteristics.

In addition, if apart from oppression and its consequences LGBs are just like others, then it becomes victimization that defines LGB identity.

The problem with this narrative is that it can become a script for LGB lives. For example, consider the recent emphasis on suffering and suicide among LGB youth. This focus has had as its aim the recognition of the very real consequences of homophobia and heterosexism for young LGBs. Attention to these problems has served well as a mechanism for gathering attention and funding. However, our research indicates that such rhetoric may also have the effect of persuading some LGB teens that their lives are defined by suffering, inevitably suffused with psychological pain, harassment, and high-risk behaviors. Some may even feel that their identity as "authentic" LGBs relies on their engaging in these behaviors (Russell, Bohan, & Lilly, in press).

Beneath this argument that LGBs are just like heterosexuals lies the assurance that LGB identity is no threat to the social order. However, this assurance may act to the detriment of LGBs because it precludes laying claim to the critical power inherent in celebrating rather than denying difference and embracing rather than avoiding the disruptive potential of such difference. As an alternative to the ultimately self-abnegating mantra "we are just like everyone else," we might consider responding affirmatively to the assertion that LGB identity is a threat to the existing social order; rather than dismissing this claim, we might applaud it. Consider the potential value of asserting that LGB identity is indeed a challenge to the status quo in that it calls into question deeply entrenched beliefs about the nature of human experience and the ordering of society.

For example, nonheterosexuality serves as a superb foil for the deconstruction of gender. When women do not depend on men, when men can be in relationships not necessarily characterized by dominance and submission, when competition is not anathema to women nor is sensitivity to men, traditional gender roles must come into question.

As another example, the disruptive potential of LGB identity is magnified by a realization that sexual orientation is often fluid and is sometimes a product of conscious choice. This suggests that heterosexual identity might not represent a permanent, certain, and safe bastion of acceptability. Further, as more LGB people become visible, as more is learned about the quality and promise of their lives, it becomes increasingly possible that people who now identify as heterosexual might recognize LGB identity as a viable possibility, and might choose that identity over heterosexuality (Golden, 1996).

The possibility of sexual orientation's being chosen is highlighted by research indicating that some women do indeed choose lesbian identity

as a personal expression of feminist challenges to patriarchy and to women's place in heterosexual relationships. This is a profound commentary on the oppressive nature of heterosexuality: some people choose an identity that is pervasively denigrated rather than accede to heterosexist norms. Put differently, heterosexist norms support relationships that are so much less fulfilling to some women that they are rejected in favor of more satisfying—albeit stigmatized—lesbian relationships.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

We have not dwelt at any length in this book on issues of gender. However, as we consider lingering and emerging questions in this area, it seems worth raising the notion, also suggested by Herek (1986), Pharr (1988) and others, that it is not sexual orientation per se that represents so great a threat to society but the coercive weight of socially constructed notions of gender. Except for issues of gender, many questions we now ask regarding sexual orientation would be moot (see also Bohan, 1996).

Indeed, in many situations, sexual orientation is fundamentally a vehicle for incursions of gender. Were we less concerned about issues of gender propriety, variations in the sex of one's partner might well be deemed irrelevant. The very terms we used to designate sexual orientation (including that term itself) might disappear, to be replaced by others that depict some other aspect of human individuality as crucial. In a playful version of this argument, Martin (1994) also points to a core issue: our preoccupation with sexuality.

> I am inclined to believe that if we could someday remove the restricting effects of sexual orientation categories, and all traces of heterosexist bias, there still would be some people who report that from as early as they can remember they had exclusive attractions to one sex or the other and never for a moment experienced any variation in that. And under those circumstances it might perhaps be interesting to ask some of the research questions we now ask, like what makes those with exclusively homosexual attractions different from those with exclusively heterosexual attractions, in the same way we might research what makes someone love or loathe asparagus. *But we have to be very careful if we think that it is more important to do research on questions of sex than of asparagus.* We need to ask ourselves why we think so, what would it mean to us, and what conclusions we

might want to draw from the data. Because the answers to these last questions have *less to do with science and more to do with politics*. (P. 14)

Conclusion (or Not)

The very notion of concluding this conversation that we have portrayed and continue to envision as ongoing is perhaps oxymoronic. We have often talked about the perfect ending to this amorphous discussion of ideas that have no clear boundaries and no defined direction. We end each such conversation with one or the other of us saying, with fascination as well as from a realization that closure is nowhere at hand, "Dang!" (to borrow a colloquialism from one of our childhoods). This seems the best finish to a conversation that raises as many questions as it answers, that invites the delight as well as the frustration of exploring the unresolved and perhaps unresolvable questions of human experience.

Dang!

NOTES

1. Our colleagues have pointed out—and we have attempted to emphasize—that internal and external events are inseparable, especially from a constructionist perspective. Sampson (e.g., 1993a, 1993b) explores the false dichotomy between external events and internal experiences; our colleague Elyse Morgan has further encouraged us to challenge this dichotomy by speaking of the "co-creation" of phenomena and of the description or meaning given to them by individuals. Despite our agreement that the internal and external are fundamentally inseparable, for the sake of coherent (albeit deceptively categorical) discussion, we will approach the relation between these two as rhetorically distinguishable.

2. For those who want to tackle this exercise, we recommend Edward Sampson's work (especially 1993b). Speaking outside or beyond the construct of individual agency is an enormously challenging proposition.

3. Interestingly, the notion that nonheterosexual identities reflect resistance to conformity was voiced more than thirty years ago by the psychoanalyst Robert Lindner (see Escoffier, 1998). This is a theme to which we return later in this afterword.

4. Paradoxically, such strategic implementation of essentialism (or constructionism) is more in keeping with the ontology and epistemology represented by constructionism than with those entailed in essentialism and positivism. We see

here yet another of those oxymoronic moments when essentialism reinforces constructionism or vice versa.

5. We emphasize what white LGBs—rather than people of color, LGB or heterosexual—might do in the service of improving relationships between the LGB movement and the communities of people of color because it would be presumptuous of us and an enactment of our own privilege as white women to suggest what other groups should or should not do.

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