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“Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality”

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Social construction theory in the field of sexuality proposed an extremely outrageous idea. It suggested that one of the last remaining outposts of the “natural” in our thinking was fluid and changeable, the product of human action and history rather than the invariant result of the body, biology or an innate sex drive.

Empirical and theoretical work on history of sexuality has grown dramatically in the last twenty years, for which social construction approaches plus the invigorating questions raised by social movements like feminism and lesbian and gay liberation are largely responsible. Indeed, the links between social construction theory and gay activism run very deep. Efforts to transform society inevitably raised questions about the past and the future, as they also called into question prevailing ideological frameworks for examining the “facts” about sex and gender.

This attempt to historicize sexuality has produced an innovative body of work to which historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and others have contributed in an unusual interdisciplinary conversation. Social construction theory has become the influential, some charge orthodox, framework in the new sex history. Its advantages (lest you’ve forgotten) can be immediately recognized through comparison with contemporary mainstream literature in sexology and biomedicine, seemingly archaic kingdoms in which the body and its imperatives still rule.

The very real advantages of social construction theory, however, and the enthusiasm it has generated make it all the more necessary to identify and explore current problems in social construction. In doing so, this paper attempts to

differentiate between problems which are generated by common misunderstandings of social construction theory – and thus which are more easily resolved – and intellectual problems embedded in the social construction framework for which no quick and easy solution can be found.

TRUE CONFESSIONS OF A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST

In the sometimes heated debates that have gone on about essentialism and social construction, the word “essentialist”, to some ears, sounds increasingly pejorative – a dirty word, a contemptuous put-down, a characterization of being hopelessly out of date. Yet we need to start this discussion by recognizing that we have all been brought up to think about sexuality in essentialist ways.

Essentialism can take several forms in the study of sexuality: a belief that human behavior is “natural”, predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanisms and thus not subject to change; or the notion that human behaviors which show some similarity in form are the same, an expression of an underlying human drive or tendency. Behaviors that share an outward similarity can be assumed to share an underlying essence and meaning.

The development of science and social science in Euro-America in the past century can be characterized by a general movement away from essentialist frameworks toward perspectives that, although called by various names, are constructionist. These new frameworks have challenged the “natural” status of many

domains, presenting the possibility of a truly *social* inquiry as well as suggesting that human actions have been and continue to be subject to historical forces and, thus, to change. Gender and sexuality have been the very last domains to have their natural, biologized status called into question. For all of us, essentialism was our first way of thinking about sexuality and still remains the hegemonic one in the culture.

The novelty of constructionist approaches in sexuality explains several things: the volatile reaction to it (among heterosexuals, too, not just lesbians and gays); the residual essentialism in all of us, even those trying to work in a social construction frame; and the difficulty in adopting a consistent rather than a partial constructionist approach. Some use the words "social construction", yet their analytic frames show – unbeknownst to them – many remaining essentialist elements. This leads to the phenomenon of somewhat unattractive, if triumphant, "essentialist tendencies" in their colleagues' work. Seen in a more generous light, this scrutiny is an attempt to clarify the assumptions we use in doing our work and make them explicit.

The dominance of essentialist approaches also explains why there are a few self-proclaimed essentialists. Only those who depart from the dominant system have cause to label themselves; those who work within it remain more unselfconscious. For the same reasons that heterosexuals do not classify themselves or have a developed awareness of "heterosexual identity", essentialists have had less reason to name themselves and reflect on their practice than social constructionists.

The chief virtue of social construction theory is the new questions it encourages us to ask. Social construction is not a dogma, a religion, or an article of faith. If and when in the course of these discussions it becomes reified, its value is lost. Social construction theory does not predict a particular answer: whether something we call "gay identity" existed in the seventeenth or nineteenth century, in London or in Polynesia, or whether nineteenth-century female romantic friendship or crossing-women are properly called "lesbian", is a matter for empirical examination. Contemporary gay identity might exist

in other times and cultures or it might not; its construction could be the same as we know it now, or radically different. Construction theory does not have a stake in the answer, but it is committed to asking the questions and to challenging assumptions which impair our ability to even imagine these questions. Construction theory is against premature closure, and its price is tolerating ambiguity.

UNHELPFUL CRITICISMS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THEORY

The ways in which social construction theory intersects with sexual politics and our daily social and personal lives gives the discussion surrounding it a special volatility and charge, often disguised in more intellectual, though still legitimate, concerns. It is evident that many problems with social construction theory remain to be worked out. However, there is a class of criticisms of social construction theory which is based on a misunderstanding and even possibly intentional misreading of it. These criticisms do not advance the development of our discussion, because they set up false problems and draw attention from legitimate questions. Before moving on to genuine problems in social construction theory, I would like to identify unhelpful and misguided ways of phrasing the issues.

Some critics contend that social construction theory implies that sexual identity, or more to the point, lesbian and gay identity is somehow fictional, trivial, unimportant, or not real, because it is socially constructed. The punch line "it's *only* socially constructed" is a characteristic remark of these critics, revealing their belief that only biologically determined phenomena could have any significance in human social life. This is an odd position for historians and social scientists to take. Social construction approaches call attention to the paradox between the historically variable ways in which culture and society construct seemingly stable reality and experience: here, the ways in which the prevailing sexual system seems natural and inevitable to its natives, and for many individuals the expression of some deeply felt essence.

To explain how reality is constructed does not imply that it is not real for the persons living it – or trivial, unimportant, or ephemeral, though it is also true that the insight of construction, when absorbed by the natives (that is, us) has the potential to subvert the natural status of the sexual system and cause us to question and rethink our experience of essential identity.

Other variants of this misreading suggest that individual sexual identity is easily changeable, much like a new outfit plucked from the closet at whim; that individuals have conscious control over sexual identity; and that large scale cultural formations regarding sexuality are easily changed. Since social constructionists have said nothing of the kind, one is at first puzzled by the enormity of this misunderstanding, but the explanation for it is perhaps to be found in the special status of sex in our culture and our thought.¹

An analogy from anthropology is useful here. It is commonplace for anthropologists to say that human behavior is socially or culturally constructed, by which we mean that human behavior is learned and not intrinsic or essentially determined. But to suggest that any feature of human life, for example, national or ethnic identity, is socially constructed is not to say that it is trivial. Nor is it to say that entire cultures can transform themselves overnight, or that individuals socialized in one cultural tradition can acculturate at whim to another.

This criticism of social construction confuses the individual level with the cultural level: that sexuality is constructed at the level of culture and history through complex interactions which we are now trying to understand does not mean that individuals have an open-ended ability to construct themselves, or to reconstruct themselves multiple times in adulthood. (This is not to deny individuals' experiences of sexual malleability and change, which are probably considerably more extensive than our cultural frames and our own biographical narratives admit.) The specialness of sex is highlighted by this comparison, since a quite ordinary and accepted insight about cultural construction in most areas of human life seems very difficult to understand without distortion when applied to sexuality. When we come to sex, our minds

grind to a halt: normal distinctions become incomprehensible, and ordinary logic flies out of the window.

A third major misreading of construction theory concerns continuity and change. In contrast to essentialism's assumption of continuity in behavior and subjective meaning, social construction appears much more receptive to the possibility of change, discontinuity and rupture. Some critics have exaggerated this characterization, claiming that constructionist theory predicts only discontinuity and, thus, any demonstration of historical or social continuity proves that construction theory is wrong.

The openness to recognizing difference in behavior and subjective meaning, however, in no way commits the researcher to always finding it, nor does it rule out the discovery of similarity. The very nature of historical and cultural change makes it likely that peoples closely related by time and space will show many continuities.

We should be especially attentive to these types of criticisms of social construction theory (especially signaled by the comment "it's *only* socially constructed"), because the continual demand to address misreadings of the theory is unhelpful and needs to be put to rest. Energy would be better spent in exploring three genuine and difficult theoretical issues: (1) degrees of social construction theory; (2) the instability of sexuality as a category; and (3) the role of the body.

DIFFERENT DEGREES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The widespread use of social construction as a term and as a paradigm obscures the fact that constructionist writers have used this term in diverse ways. It is true that all reject trans-historical and transcultural definitions of sexuality and suggest instead that sexuality is mediated by historical and cultural factors. But a close reading of constructionist texts shows that social construction spans a theoretical field of what might be constructed, ranging from sexual acts, sexual identities, sexual communities, the direction of sexual desire (object

choice) to sexual impulse or sexuality itself.

At minimum, all social construction approaches adopt the view that physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods. Because a sexual act does not carry with it a universal social meaning, it follows that the relationship between sexual acts and sexual identities is not a fixed one, and it is projected from the observer's time and place to others at great peril. Cultures provide widely different categories, schemata, and labels for framing sexual and affective experiences. The relationship of sexual act and identity to sexual community is equally variable and complex. These distinctions, then, between sexual acts, identities, and communities are widely employed by constructionist writers.

A further step in social construction theory posits that even the direction sexual desire itself, for example, object choice or hetero/homosexuality, is not intrinsic or inherent in the individual but is constructed. Not all constructionists take this step; for some, the direction of desire and erotic interest are fixed, although the behavioral *form* this interest takes will be constructed by prevailing cultural frames, as will the subjective experience of the individual and the social significance attached to it by others.

The most radical form of constructionist theory² is willing to entertain the idea that there is no essential, undifferentiated sexual impulse, "sex drive" or "lust", which resides in the body due to physiological functioning and sensation. Sexual impulse itself is constructed by culture and history. In this case, an important constructionist question concerns the origins of these impulses, since they are no longer assumed to be intrinsic or, perhaps, even necessary. This position, of course, contrasts sharply with more middle-ground constructionist theory which implicitly accepts an inherent sexual impulse which is then constructed in terms of acts, identity, community, and object choice. The contrast between middle-ground and radical positions makes it evident that constructionists may well have arguments with each other, as well as with essentialists. Each degree of social

construction points to different questions and assumptions, possibly to different methods, and perhaps to different answers.

The increasing popularity (perhaps even faddishness in some circles) of the term "social construction", however, made it appear that social construction is a unitary and singular approach and that all social construction writers share the same paradigm. But a review of social construction literature, which makes its first distinct appearance in the mid-1970s, as well as its forerunners in the 1960s, shows a gradual development of the ability to imagine that sexuality is constructed. The intellectual history of social construction is a complex one, and the moments offered here are for purposes of illustration, not comprehensive review.³

Intellectual precursors to constructionist approaches, for example, include anthropologists doing cross-cultural work on sexuality in the 1960s.⁴ They assumed that culture encouraged or discouraged the expression of specific sexual acts and relationships. Oral-genital contact, for example, might be a part of normal heterosexuality in one group but taboo in another; female homosexuality might be severely punished in one tribe yet tolerated in another. However, these anthropologists accepted without question the existence of universal categories like heterosexual and homosexual, male and female sexuality and sex drive. Culture shaped sexual expression and customs, but the basic material to work with—a kind of sexual Play Doh—was the same everywhere, a naturalized category and thus never open to investigation. Although we can recognize this work as a precursor to social construction theory, it clearly contains many essentialist elements.

The struggle to move away from essentialist and naturalizing ways of thinking about sexuality was a difficult one. Mary McIntosh's 1968 essay on the homosexual role appears to us as a landmark article, offering many suggestive insights about the historical construction of sexuality in England.⁵ But her observations vanished like pebbles in a pond, until they were engaged with by mid-1970s writers, clearly motivated by the questions of feminism and gay liberation. An identifiably constructionist approach dates from this period, not before.

Early work in lesbian and gay history attempted to retrieve and revive documents (and lives) which had been lost or been made invisible. These lives were first conceived of as lesbian or gay, and the enterprise akin to a search for historical roots, an attempt to document the existence of gay people and experience. This was history against the grain, against the heterosexist narrative: in short, activist history and history as political work. To their credit, researchers who had started this enterprise from a firm point of fixed sexual categories began to consider other ways of looking at their material and more expansive questions to ask. Jonathan Katz's work is one example of this process, since his first book, *Gay American History*, is very much in the "gay ancestors" tradition.⁶ In the course of researching his second book, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, he began to consider that sexual acts reported in American colonial documents from the seventeenth century, for example sodomy, might not be equivalent to contemporary homosexuality.⁷ Sodomy – then understood as any unnatural, non-reproductive sexual act – was a temptation and sin to which anyone, male or female, could fall victim, as to envy or theft. Although the documents amply show discovery and punishment, colonial society did not seem to conceive of a unique type of person – a homosexual – who engaged in these acts, nor did it provide a homosexual identity on a cultural level or anything resembling a homosexual subculture on a social level.

Katz's second book marks a sharp departure from the first, in that records or accounts that document same-sex emotional or sexual relations are not taken as evidence of "gay" or "lesbian" people, but are treated as jumping off points for a whole series of questions about the meanings of these acts to the people who engaged in them and to the culture and time in which they lived.

The intellectual development reflected in Katz's work is not unique to him, but appears in many others' as well. And from this work came an impressive willingness to imagine: had the category "homosexual" or "lesbian" always existed? And if not, what was its point of origin and the conditions for development? If identical

physical acts had different subjective meanings, how was sexual meaning constructed? If sexual subcultures come into being, what leads to their formation? In these and other questions, researchers imagined what has become the foundation of lesbian and gay history.⁸

The intellectual history of social construction is a complex one. The point of briefly noting a few moments in its history here is simply to illustrate that social construction theorists and writers differ in their willingness to imagine *what* was constructed. For us, their differences suggest that we should avoid using "social construction" in such an undifferentiated way. As readers we should try to be clear about what each theorist or author imagines to be constructed. As writers and speakers, we should try to indicate more exactly what we mean by social construction in our own work.

THE INSTABILITY OF SEXUALITY AS A CATEGORY

Because they were tied to essentialist assumptions which posited biological and physiological factors as influential in determining the contours of sexuality, sexological and biomedical paradigms of sexuality nevertheless offered one advantage: sexuality enjoyed the status of a stable, ongoing, and cohesive entity. The constructionist paradigm more flexibly admits variability in behavior and motive over time and place. But to the extent that social construction theory grants that sexual acts, identities and even desire are mediated by cultural and historical factors, the object of study – sexuality – becomes evanescent and threatens to disappear. If sexuality is constructed differently at each time and place, can we use the term in a comparatively meaningful way? More to the point in lesbian and gay history, have constructionists undermined their own categories? Is there an "it" to study?

We have attempted to address the problem of false universalism by exercising more care in our terminology and conceptual categories: thus, in examining fellatio among Sambia adult men and teenage boys in the New Guinea highlands,⁹ it may be more appropriate to speak of

"same-sex" rather than "homosexual" acts or relations. The first term attempts to describe sexual behavior without assuming that its social and affective meaning is equivalent to that of contemporary society: New Guinea is not Amsterdam or Greenwich Village. This term and others like it encourage openness rather than premature closure in our thinking about the historical and cultural meaning of diverse sexual acts and identities. However, even with my care, I've already called these acts "sexual".

Here we may detect, despite genuine efforts toward conceptual and definitional openness, that even the new sex history has an ambivalent and more complex relationship to the idea of sexuality as a coherent category. Some social constructionists explicitly encourage the total deconstruction of the category of the sexual, for example, Foucault. Others have not taken this theoretical position, though it remains implicit in their work. For, if sexuality is constituted differently in different times and places, it follows that behaviors and relations seen as sexual by contemporary Euro-Americans may not be by others, and vice versa.¹⁰

Questioning the very category of sexuality, however, proves difficult. A student of mine agreed that it would be incorrect to call Sambia male initiation rites involving fellatio between older men and younger boys "homosexuality", but he was nevertheless convinced that this was experienced as a sexual act by those engaging in it. How did he know it was sexual, I asked? "Their cosmology posits that young boys grow to adulthood only through the ingestion of semen," he replied, "but you don't see them eating it with a bowl and a spoon." The move to question the category "sexuality" remain counterintuitive, therefore, and thus often results in an intellectual stance that can only be inconsistently or unconvincingly maintained. The attempt to deconstruct sexuality as a meaningful universal construct has also generated considerable backlash for reasons we will describe later.

Many other social constructionists assume, as perhaps it is easier to, that specific, core behaviors and physical relations are reliably understood as sexual, even though they occur in diverse cultures or historical periods. The

knowledge or assumption that behavior is indeed sexual serves as a guide to what must be studied or what might be safely ignored. To give up this assumption considerably widens the field of what might be the object of study, with both good and bad results. The often implicit assumptions about the sexual nature of physical acts or relations depend in turn on deeply embedded cultural frameworks that we use to think about the body.

THE ROLE OF THE BODY

Social construction's greatest strength lies in its violation of our folk knowledge and scientific ideologies that would frame sexuality as "natural", determined by biology and the body. This violation makes it possible, indeed compels us to raise questions that a naturalizing discourse would obscure and hide. Social constructionists have been even-handed in this endeavor, dethroning the body in all fields – in heterosexual history as well as in lesbian and gay history. At first, we greeted this development with good cheer, happy to be rid of the historical legacy of nineteenth-century spermatic and ovarian economies, women's innate sexual passivity, and the endless quest to find the hormonal cause of homosexuality. Yet the virtue of social construction may also be its vice.

Has social construction theory, particularly variants which see "sexual impulse", "sex drive", or "lust" as created, made no room for the body, its functions, and physiology? As sexual subjects, how do we reconcile constructionist theory with the body's visceral reality and our own experience of it? If our theory of sexuality becomes increasingly disembodied, does it reach the point of implausibility, even for us? And if we wish to incorporate the body within social construction theory, can we do so without returning to essentialism and biological determinism?

Let me discuss these points more concretely by giving an example from my own work in female circumcision. Although not a specifically lesbian or gay topic, it illuminates the difficulty of thinking about the relationship of sexuality to the body and has much to offer for other body issues.

Briefly, female circumcision¹¹ is an umbrella term for traditional customs carried out in various Middle Eastern and African countries. These customs involve the surgical alteration and removal of female genital tissue, usually performed by midwives and female kin. The procedures vary in severity and range from removing part or all of the clitoris (simple circumcision) to removing the labia (excision). In infibulation, the most radical form of surgery, the clitoris and labia are excised, and the vaginal opening is sutured to reduce its circumference, making heterosexual penetration impossible and thus guaranteeing virginity. These operations are done at different ages and for different reasons – to promote hygiene and fertility, to render women aesthetically more feminine and thus marriageable, and to promote virginity. It is important to understand that these procedures are widespread and in local terms thought to be required by religion or custom.¹²

In the past ten years, an intense conversation has developed between Western and Third-World feminists over these practices. It is not my goal here to thoroughly describe this debate, or to suggest, by examining Western views, that we enjoy a privileged vantage point or right to intervene. What interests me here is how we think about these practices and the body in less guarded moments.

First, we tend to think about the effect of these customs, particularly on sexual functioning. We draw on a physiological model of Masters and Johnson, which places the clitoris at the center of female sexual response and orgasm.¹³ We reason that removal of part or all of the clitoris interferes with orgasm, perhaps making it impossible. That is, we are universalizing a physiological finding made on American subjects without much thought.¹⁴ Could Sudanese women's responses be different?

If we are willing to consider that sexual response is more than physiology, we might ask what is known about female sexual experience in these cultures. The answer is not clear cut, in part due to the small number of studies done and the difficulty of doing them. A Sudanese gynecologist compared women with different degrees of circumcision in Khartoum, finding that women with milder degrees of circumcision

reported orgasm whereas women with severe degrees did not.¹⁵ But even this inquiry depends in eliciting a response to terms like "orgasm", whose subjective meaning is what is at issue. A highly-educated Sudanese woman who had been infibulated mused on this problem during our conversation in New York. Familiar with the Masters and Johnson framework which would suggest orgasm was unlikely, she asked me if she had experienced an orgasm. But how could I know?, short of resorting to the clearly inappropriate American adage: "if you have to ask, you haven't." She struggled to navigate the boundaries of culture and language, saying that perhaps she did, since she enjoyed sex with her husband and found the experience pleasurable.

Our response is complicated: still tied to a physiological frame, we think about different degrees of tissue removed, the possible nerves remaining under the excised clitoris, the transference of sexual response from one body zone to another. We strain to imagine a different scenario of pleasure, still plausible within our framework. Western feminists also think of what is familiar to us: women's accommodation to the lack of sexual pleasure and even active displeasure – rationalizations, protestations of satisfaction, low expectations. In viewing these customs, we oscillate between imagining the sexually familiar and the unfamiliar. Nor are we alone in our efforts to compare and contrast: another Sudanese woman familiar with Western culture found her situation far from unique. "You circumcise women, too," she said, "but you do it through Freudian theory, not through surgery. You are not so different from us."

If we give up physiological frames of thinking about circumcision and acknowledge that in these countries it is a culturally normative practice, we begin to entertain unsettling questions. Is female orgasm constructed? What are the conditions for it? Is it necessary? Is it a physiological potential, whose expression may be facilitated or curtailed? If curtailed, is that repression and injustice? Or is the construction of female orgasm open-ended, with no imperative for it to happen? Can sexual pleasure be constructed totally without orgasm for women? (And here I mean, can women in an entire culture experience sexual pleasure, though they

rarely or never experience orgasm?, not the more customary question we might ask in our own culture: can a single sexual episode be pleasurable, even though the woman has not experienced orgasm? These are very different questions.)

By now, even social constructionists, particularly women, are disturbed and upset. Abandoning or even detaching from a physiological frame makes us feel – to the extent that we questioned this practice – that we are now losing ground to object to it. It points up the tendency, even among social constructionists, to defend sexuality and sexual pleasure in terms of an essential right and the functioning of the body. More importantly, the discomfort we experience as the body slips away, or threatens to, in this particular case suggests that we need to explore the limitations of sexual theory which has no room for the body. As we consider restoring the body to social construction theory, we wonder if it is possible to be a materialist without sliding into essentialism? Are there ways to integrate bodily sensation and function into a social construction frame, while still acknowledging that human experience of the body is always mediated by culture and subjectivity, and without elevating the body as determinative? The answer will not be found in a return to essentialism, whether frank or disguised, but in exploring more sensitive and imaginative ways of considering the body.

As difficult as these problems may be, social constructionists do not grapple with theoretical issues about degrees of social construction, the object of study, or the meaning of the body in a vacuum. The new sex history is indebted to feminism and gay liberation for many of its insights, for non-academic settings which nurtured this work during the early stages of its development when the university disapproved, and for its intellectual urgency. These popular political movements created an audience of activist and self-reflective individuals who very much wanted to know and to use the knowledge to inform their activism. I mention this because some of the problems in social construction theory, particularly the critical reaction to it in the last few years in lesbian and gay political circles, originate in the meaning of this theory to

members of oppressed groups in the contemporary sexual hierarchy.¹⁶

THE SEXUAL SUBJECT'S DESIRE FOR HISTORY

A common motivation for fans of lesbian and gay history was a desire to reclaim the past and to insist on lesbian and gay visibility in every place and at every time. But the discoveries of the new sex historians have sometimes proved disturbing as researchers gave up their initial certainty about the existence of "gay people" and embarked on a more complicated discussion about the origins of gay identity in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. In these discussions, sexual acts could not be read as unproblematic indicators of homosexuality; and rather than an unchanging essence which defied legal and religious prohibitions, homosexuality increasingly came to be seen as a variable experience whose boundaries and subjectivity were shaped through complex negotiations between state institutions, individuals, and subcultures.

Variability, subjectivity, negotiation and change often violated the wish for a continuous history. If the point of gay history was to document an ancestry, a gay *Roots*, then for many activists this kind of gay history was frustrating, even a failure. The disappointment and anger at not being able to see oneself reflected in the mirror of history has fueled some of the criticism of social construction theory in the belief that a more essentialist perspective would permit the development of group history and solidarity.

In addition, it is common for mainstream lesbian and gay political and lobbying groups in the United States to use essentialist argument and rhetoric in advancing their case. Lesbians and gays are deserving of civil rights, they say, much like women, ethnic, and racial groups. This argument derives less from a self-conscious theoretical commitment to essentialism and more from the pervasiveness of essentialist frames in American culture, particularly in regard to race and ethnicity. In an ideological system that defines these groups as natural, real,

and organized according to relatively unchanging biological features, one obvious and powerful symbolic strategy is to claim an equal status for lesbians and gays. In this ideological and political context, it is to the advantage of all groups struggling for resources to stress not only group unity and historical privilege (butressed by and documented through histories of the ancestors), but their status as an essential group to which members have no choice in belonging. Fundamentalists and conservatives are fond of ridiculing the analogy between gay rights and minority rights: minorities are "real" groups to which members can't help but belong through their racial features, whereas no one has to be gay, if he or she simply refrains from sin and lust. Gays and lesbians do not constitute a natural group, right-wingers insist; they are just a bunch of perverts.

In such an arena, gay politicians and lobbyists find it helpful in the short run to respond with assertions about gays through the ages, to assert a claim to a natural group status, and to insist that being gay is an essential, inborn trait about which there is no choice. And, indeed, essentialist arguments about sexual identity can be extended to heterosexuals and used to good advantage: if sexual identity is inborn, or at least fixed by age three, then lesbian or gay schoolteachers pose no threat to students in terms of influencing their identity or development (in an undesirable way, the argument would seem to concede). By dint of repetition, ideas about gay essentialism were reinforced in the contemporary gay movement (though they were hardly unknown in American culture) and, more importantly, linked to group advancement, success, and self-affirmation. Therefore, arguments which opposed or undercut essentialist rhetoric about gay identity were increasingly unfamiliar and heretical, even perceived as damaging to gay interests. Within the lesbian and gay community's internal discussions and self-education, the failure to make a distinction between politically expedient ways of framing and argument and more complex descriptions of social relations promoted an increasingly rigid adherence to essentialism as an effective weapon against persecution.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF MARGINAL GROUPS TO DECONSTRUCTION

In a similar vein, it is ironic to note that in the war of ideas against heterosexual hegemony, social construction theory has become most influential only in the intellectual circles of oppositional groups. Social construction theory may be the new orthodoxy in feminist, progressive, and lesbian and gay history circles, but it has made a minimal impact on mainstream authorities and literatures in sexology and biomedicine. These groups continue their investigation and theorizing from the assumption that sexuality is essential. At most, the deviant status of homosexuality calls for inquiry into its etiology (whether hormonal, psychological, or sociological), but the causes of heterosexuality have attracted little interest. In traditional sexual science, heterosexuality remains an unexamined and naturalized category, and little in popular culture causes heterosexuals to consider their sexual identity or its origins and history.

In contrast, the social constructionist framework common in lesbian and gay history has become disseminated to a larger lesbian and gay public. Some wonder whether this constructionist perspective is helpful. What are its implications? Why should lesbians and gays have a developed consciousness that their sexual identities have been "constructed", when heterosexuals do not? Does this intellectual sophistication lead to a sense of group frailty instead of robustness? And does any history of construction inevitably pose the theoretical possibility of a future deconstruction, even disappearance, which is alarming and uncomfortable? The retorts of Dorothy Allison and Esther Newton at recent conferences – "deconstruct heterosexuality first!" and "I'll deconstruct when they deconstruct – reflect in their immediacy and robustness both anxiety about group dissolution and the improbability of such a development.

The tension here is identical to a tension felt within feminism, which simultaneously holds two somewhat contradictory goals. One goal is to attack the gender system and its primacy in organizing social life, but the second goal is to defend women as a group. Defending women or

advancing their interest (in equal pay, abortion rights, or child care, for example) emphasizes their status as a special group with a unique collective interest, distinct from men, thus replaying and perhaps reinforcing the very gender dichotomy crucial to the system of gender oppression.

The same irresolvable tension exists within the lesbian and gay movement, which on the one hand attacks a naturalized system of sexual hierarchy which categorizes and stabilizes desires and privileges some over others, and on the other hand defends the interest of "lesbian and gay people", which tends to reify identity and essential nature in a political process I've described. There is no solution here, since to abandon either goal for the other would be foolish. Real, live lesbians and gays need to be defended in an oppressive system, and the sexual hierarchy, which underlies that oppression, needs to be attacked on every level, particularly on the intellectual and conceptual levels where naturalized systems of domination draw so much of their energy. There is no easy solution here, but even an awareness of this tension can be helpful, since it powerfully contributes to the larger political and emotional climate in which social construction theory is received, and rightly so.

CONCLUSION

Social construction theory offered many radical possibilities in theorizing about sexuality. To take the next steps, we need to continue and deepen our discussions about its very real problems. These problems will not be resolved through discussions alone, though such discussion offer clarification, but through the course of continued research and investigation.

To the extent social construction theory strives for uncertainty through questioning assumptions rather than seeking closure, we need to tolerate ambiguity and fluidity. The future is less closed than we feared, but perhaps more open than we hoped. All movements of sexual liberation, including lesbian and gay, are built on imagining: imagining that things could be different, other, better than they are. Social

construction shares that imaginative impulse and thus is not a threat to the lesbian and gay movement, but very much of it.

Clearly, the tension between deconstructing systems of sexual hierarchy and defending lesbians and gays will be an ongoing one. In that case, we need to find a way to acknowledge more openly and respond more appropriately to the emotional responses social construction theory engenders, deeply felt responses about identity, community, solidarity, politics, and survival – in short, our lives.

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NOTES

- 1 Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex", in Carole S. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984): 267–319.
- 2 There is no suggestion here that the most radical forms of social construction theory are necessarily the best, although the exercise of totally

deconstructing one of the most essential categories, sexuality, often has an electrifying and energizing effect on one's thinking. Whether this degree of deconstruction can be plausibly maintained is another question, explored in a later section of this essay.

- 3 A more comprehensive account is offered in my review "An Intellectual and Political History of Social Construction Theory", unpublished manuscript.
- 4 For typical examples of this approach, see: Robert C. Suggs, *Marquesan Sexual Behavior* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1966); Marvin K. Opler, "Anthropological and Cross-Cultural Aspects of Homosexuality" in Judd Marmor (ed.), *Sexual Inversion* (New York: Basic Books, 1965): 108-23; William Davenport, "Sexual Patterns and their Regulation in a Society of the Southwest Pacific" in Frank A. Beach (ed.), *Sex and Behavior* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1965): 164-207.
- 5 Mary McIntosh, "The Homosexual Role", *Social Problems* 16 (1968): 182-91. Reprinted in Kenneth Plummer (ed.), *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Hutchinson, 1981).
- 6 Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976).
- 7 Jonathan Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).
- 8 One interesting question concerns the differential manifestation of social construction, theory in lesbian versus gay male history. The most contentious battles between essentialists and social constructionists have been conducted in gay, not lesbian history. At first glance, one might think this is so because social construction theory has had less impact on lesbian history and, indeed, there is less self-conscious invocation of constructionist frameworks in some of this work
An examination of the actual content, however, suggests widespread adherence to constructionist approaches in lesbian history. And essentialism, when it appears, often takes a different form, focusing less on the universality of sexual acts, as is the case in gay male history, and more on the universality of emotion and interpersonal relations. The reasons for these differences would be interesting to explore.
- 9 For an ethnographic account of these practices, see Gilbert Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981).
- 10 We have been sensitized to the dangers and limitations of imposing our categories and systems of meaning. The commitment to avoid ethnocentric readings of non-Western behavior, however, encounters another problem: the tendency in the cross-cultural literature to withhold and dismiss data about homosexuality, from combined motives of sexual reticence and homophobia. Similar problems occur in history. Knowing this, the alert reader is reluctant to accept the glib and formulaic dismissals that the behavior in question does not constitute homosexuality, and instead leaps at suggestive evidence, treating data which can only be seen as clues as definitive evidence instead. We need to chart a course between these extremes.
- 11 Although "female circumcision" is perhaps the most common Western term for these practices, many researchers in the field prefer the terms "female genital surgery" or "female genital operations". Female circumcision too easily suggests an analogy to male circumcision, whereas the procedures performed on women are usually far more serious in terms of the degree of bodily tissue removed and in the physical and psychological consequences.
- 12 For more detailed description and discussion of female circumcision, see: Asma El Dareer, *Women, Why Do You Weep? Circumcision and Its Consequences* (London: Zed Press, 1982); Olayinka Koso-Thomas, *The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication* (London: Zed Press, 1987); A. Verzin, "Sequelae of Female Circumcision", *Tropical Doctor* 5 (1975): 163-9; World Health Organization, Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office, *Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children* (Khartoum, February 1979); R. Cook, *Damage to Physical Health from Pharaonic Circumcision (Infibulation) of Females: A Review of the Medical Literature* (World Health Organization, Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 1976); Fran P. Hosken, *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, 3rd rev. ed. (Lexington, MA.: Women's International Network News, 1982).
- 13 William Masters and Virginia Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966).
- 14 Constructionists might well question whether the sexual response among even American women should be viewed as a function of physiology.
- 15 Ahmed Abu-el-Futuh Shandall, "Circumcision and Infibulation of Females: A General Consideration of the Problem and a Clinical Study of the Complications in Sudanese Women", *Sudan Medical Journal* 5 (1967): 178-207.
- 16 For a discussion of the concept of sexual hierarchy, see Gayle Rubin: 279-83 (in the original of "Thinking Sex").