

A Unified Theory on Homosexual Identity

E. M. Recio

SOC 495 : Social Construction of Sexuality

Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology Department
Drexel University, Philadelphia PA 19104

4th December 2000

Abstract

This essay attempts to identify the prominent problems of a strictly social constructionist theory as it pertains to homosexuality. One's sexuality is neither explicitly innate and immutable, nor as plastic and changeable as switching a dial. Social constructionist theories on homosexuality - and, indeed on sexuality in general - have concentrated on the latter in a milieu of social control. And while it is easier to understand the labelling and categorising of humans through historical study of the methods of social control, for laws controlling human actions, specifically sexual conduct, are written in well kept records, there is a lot to be gained by switching the focus to the victim in such cases, rather than *exclusively* focusing on the offenders.

What I propose is a partial redirection of the studies on "Queer" theory from the offender, the homophobe, to the victim, the homosexual. While maintaining the percept of cultural and temporal factors, we can explore the existence of a homosexual identity *if* we look towards the subject (the homosexual) in order to gain an understanding of his world view. Further this partial redirection leads us to unify a moderate Social Constructionist theory with a moderate essentialist theory.

1 Social Constructionist Theory

The social constructionist theory is a very broad blanket covering various subject from economics to one's eating habits. It seems to me that the term

1 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST THEORY

has been diluted to the point of being an amorphous social puzzle piece; used whenever the solution to a social problem is necessitated.

At its basic level all who ascribe to the social constructionist theories believe that sexuality is defined in a backdrop of temporal and cultural factors. In effect, physically similar sexual acts, such as sodomy, have different meanings and significance throughout various cultures and historical periods.[9, p. 43] A second widely shared belief of social constructionists is that humans have nothing which is innate, or immutable. Humans are a very plastic species - in other words, the individual is constructed from the society and times in which he lives; sexual behaviour is a product of social conditioning rather than biological factors.

As it pertains to sexuality, the radical social constructionist would look at the varying degrees of sexuality, from strict hetero sexuality to strict homosexuality, and would see a range of possibilities in between that seem to meld together - as the grey scale between white and black on opposite ends. According to radical social constructionists, homosexuality, or for that matter any deviance from the “normal” missionary position of heterosexual sex, as an identity emerged in the nineteenth century as a result of the dialectic of industrial capitalism.[5]

The ideology of industrial capitalism stems from a system of economic production and distribution of goods and services characterised by the private ownership of the means of production, the pursuit of profit, and the commodification of every aspect of life.[4] As a result, the homosexual subculture, began with the labelling of deviants who would not conform to the norms of propagating the ideology of industrial capitalism. For homosexual couples do not reproduce; hence they cannot perpetuate, nor replace themselves in the generational pool of possible labourers to be exploited by the bourgeoisie.

The attention then turns towards the bourgeoisie and their methods of social control to abate the homosexual subculture which they have just created. To see the “other” in relation to the “self” social constructionists have turned their attention towards the legislators and persons in power. By detailing the differences between the social control of possible homosexual acts and the actual target of the law, we can pull forth the intended meaning of the law.[10]

For example, Jeffrey Weeks states that, while laws were passed and enforced that outlawed “buggery” the targets of that law not only applied to homosexual sex, but also “between man and woman, man and beast.” As a result “there was therefore a crucial distinction between traditional concepts of buggery and modern concepts of homosexuality.”[10, p. 123]

The major problem with the pure social constructionist theories on homosexuality is its non-falsifiability. Much like pure Marxism, or pure Freudianism, it is difficult to ascertain the truth value of any statement if the theory is continually being revised with an *ad hoc* explanation.¹

Secondly, is the preeminent existence of historical research which shows the homosexuality existed prior to the nineteenth century.[5] There are a number of historical records which show that there was this sub-culture of men who preferred their own sex. According to Rictor Norton, the negative connotation of the homosexual orientation appeared throughout the world and history, in countries such as China, Japan, and Arabic nations. Words such as “woman-hater” or “man-hater” was associated with homosexual men and women respectively.

2 Essentialist Theory

The existence of the sex drive seems to be evident in ancient worlds as well as the modern world. Here is where the essentialist steps into his theory on homosexual orientations. Niclas Berggren identified the essentialist views into two mutually exclusive categories:[1]

1. Humans have a fixed sexual orientation, determined at birth, and it is that of perfect bisexuality. Social factors are irrelevant both for determining a person’s sexual orientations as well as for people’s understanding of this concept.
2. Humans have a fixed sexual orientation, determined at birth, and for the entire population, it is distributed along a continuum, ranging from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality. Social factors are irrelevant both for determining a person’s sexual orientation as well as for people’s understanding of this concept.

While radical essentialism to encompass exclusively any of the two theories above is considered naive, the moderate essentialist sees them as possible avenues of contribution towards a more complex essentialist theory.

Anthropologically speaking, even the Sambias have a certain portion of their population (approximately 5%)[3] who continue to have same-sex relations, or too much heterosexual relations, even after completing their rites of passage into adulthood.

¹See my Philosophy of Science essay on Michael Ruse and Larry Laudan’s discourse on creation science not being verifiable. This was an extension of Karl Popper’s minimum criteria for demarcation of science from non-science. < <http://polywog.navpoint.com/philosophy/science> >.

2 ESSENTIALIST THEORY

Essentialists also give credence to the biological and psychological factors surrounding homosexuality. Specifically:

“that sexuality is strongly influenced by natural, non-social factors, such as genes, and that people’s personal characteristics - in addition to their bodies - are shaped by evolutionary forces...”[1]

The view that the genes are in control of the person is not appealing to anyone but pure essentialists. In any politically correct circle, this evidence is stigmatised as “fascist” and shunned as a “hyper-essentialist” point of view.[2] Despite the research that has gone into this field of enquiry there is, as of yet, any veridical evidence, much less controversial evidence, to support it.

Researchers presenting biological “evidence” such as Simon LeVay, Dean Hamer, and Jim McKnight² often seem to conflate the attack on social constructionism with providing solid evidence for the essentialist argument. As a result:[11]

“by never coming to grips with the complexity of...social constructionism...and by reducing this mode of analysis to a homogeneous and simplistic doctrine that is antagonistic to biology...we are left with a book that has no further ambition than expanding and inflaming the political and intellectual divisions that already exist between the sciences and the humanities.”

Psychologically, the view has been that local environmental factors (not to be confused with sociological factors) contribute to the sexual orientation of a person. For example, experiences as a small child that reinforce particular patterns of behaviour may lead towards an adaptation of that behaviour as adults.

In sum, the essentialist notion of homosexuality, in the era of science, is that we are slaves to our genes - every preference, and sexual desire that we have is in large part “hard-wired.” Or like an animal, we are subject to stimulus and response behavioural patterns, over which we have no control!

²See: Simon LeVay, *The Sexual Brain*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993. Dean Hamer, *The Science of Desire: The Search for the Gay Gene and the Biology of Behaviour*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994. Jim McKnight *Straight Science? Homosexuality, Evolution and Adaptation*, London: Routledge, 1997.

3 The Unified Theory

Social constructionism seems to have gone too far by totally denying the existence of *any* trans-historical and cross-cultural enquiry into the homosexual identity. The notion that homosexual identity arose from the heterosexual (and homophobic) labelling, and border patrolling[5] (the separating of the “self” from the “other”) is too narrow-minded.

However, the essentialist notion of an individual being subservient to his genes is equally preposterous. Society is not composed of animals subject to nature’s randomness. The level of testosterone in a man does not give him an excuse to sexually violate women.

Unfortunately many gay activists believe in the power of nature as a means to meet their political ends. Pepper Schwartz, in an opinion denouncing the essentialist argument, outlines the methodology of these gay activists:[7] if they can prove sexuality to be a genetic trait, then there would be legal protection for homosexuals as a class. I read this methodology as: legal protection for homosexuals as handicapped. Searching for a genetic excuse as to why one is more attracted to blue eyes versus black eyes is in a similar vain to searching for an excuse to homosexuality.

Wayne Dynes in a similar note points out the political double standard of current “queer” theory: strategic essentialism.[2] In political arenas, some gay and lesbian politicians and theorists secretly maintain the social constructionist arguments, while publicly citing the essentialist arguments.

What I propose, and by no means completely settle in this essay, is a combination of essentialist theory and social constructionist theory. There are certain natural universals which must be appeased (essentialist); *how* these universals are appeased is what is socially constructed. In other words, the cliché “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater” can be ascribed to both theories.³

We may all be born with the gene that dictates how thin or heavy we are. This by *no* means dictates *how* we eat. Based on the type of society that we grow up in, we may learn to eat heartily: to load up on starches like pasta and red meat. In other cultures we may be brought up to share our food equally first amongst our peers. Very dependant on our eating habits, we may, or may not fall subject to this gene.

In this case, our eating habit is what is socially constructed. Similarly, the essentialist may make a claim that we all must eat to survive. The essen-

³Some may also call this “having your cake and eating it too.” However, I insist that the positive aspects of both theories cover unique grounds which may lead to a better unifying understanding of the homosexual identity.

tialist in this claim is correct in asserting that we all must eat. However, in the social world of humans, *how and what* we eat is socially constructed.

In relevance to the material at hand, we are all in some form or another (at least - some less and some more) sexual beings (essentialist). How we act on our sexuality is exceedingly influenced by societal forces (soc. construct.). If this is not the case, then what is to explain the male heterosexual entering a correctional facility, engaging in homosexual *acts* but still considering himself heterosexual. The self-deceived inmate proposes as an excuse that the only reason for the homosexual act is because a female is not available.[8]

Although the previous denotes a move towards social constructionism as a theory, we must not adopt social constructionism blindly. As much as we should evaluate the social attitudes towards homosexuals, we also need to pay attention to historical documentation before the nineteenth century that points to homosexuality as deviation from the norm.

In as much as the study of how homosexuality was socially stigmatised - historically, and culturally (as previously noted in the Sambia) - we must also focus on the existence and experiences of a homosexual identity. We must attempt to gather more information from homosexuals rather than concentrating on information about homosexuals.[5]

Sexual identity is more than just acts, or behaviours of a particular nature. It is, in effect, a way of life. While “normal” people may not define themselves in relation to homosexuals, gays do, indeed, define themselves in relation “normal” people. This is true of any minority ethnic, racial or religious class. A heterosexual does not need to identify himself as one; a white Anglo-Saxon protestant does not need to identify himself as such. On the other hand, a black female has two factors to identify herself as. If she were of Latino origin the fact that she is a female would come before the fact that she is black. If she was of American origin her race would be more of an issue than her sex.

The identity to a particular class, race or ethnicity, however, as much as it comes from within - class awareness, or consciousness - there are also external factors. It comes from what the person in the minority considers are his unique characteristics - achieved or ascribed statuses in order of importance. The fact that some people consider themselves heterosexual, even though they have performed homosexual acts, is as much a societal attribution as an internal identity.

Sexual Identity is a complex subject that deserves more than just a narrow-minded simplistic explanation: for either the essentialist view, or the social constructionist view. We have much to learn from enquiry into sexual iden-

3 *THE UNIFIED THEORY*

tity. This does not mean that the issue is settled on either side of the debate. Further, this is not an exhaustive attempt to defend or critique either theory. However, this essay is written with all hope that there is a redirection of scholarly forces in an attempt to find an exhaustive and explanitive theory which is neither shortsightedly essentialist nor dogmatically socially constructed.

References

- [1] Berggren, Niclas. *Is Social Constructionism and Appealing Construction?* 1 December 2000. < <http://ham.passagen.se/nicb/construct.htm> >.
- [2] Dynes, Wayne R. "Queer Studies: In Search of a Discipline." *Upstream*. 1 December 2000. < <http://www.mugu.com/cgi-bin/Upstream/Issues/education/queer.html> >.
- [3] *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: The Sambia*. State University of New York: U. at Buffalo. 1 December 2000. < <http://cas-courses.buffalo.edu/classes/apy/anab/apy106/cultures/sambia.html> >.
- [4] Machado, Diamantino P. "Social Forces in the Development of Sociological Theory." Classical Social Theory, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology Department. Drexel U, 30 March 2000.
- [5] Norton, Rictor. *Some Fallacies of Social Constructionism*. 1 December 2000. < <http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/extracts.htm> >.
- [6] Parker, Richard, and Peter Aggleton, ed. *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*. Philadelphia: University College London, 1999.
- [7] Schwartz, Pepper. "The Science of Sexuality Still Needs Social Science." *The Scientist*. 6 Feb. 1995: 12.
- [8] Tremblay, Pierre. *The Homosexuality in Social Violence*. 1 December 2000. < <http://www.virtualcity.com/youthsuicide/prisons.htm> >.
- [9] Vance, Carole S. "Anthropology Rediscovered Sexuality: A Theoretical Comment." Parker 39-54.
- [10] Weeks, Jeffrey. "Discourse, Desire and Sexual Deviance: Some Problems in a History of Homosexuality." Parker 119-142.
- [11] Wilson, Elizabeth. "Fossilised Homosexuals." Rev. of *Straight Science? Homosexuality, Evolution and Adaptation*, by Jim McKnight. *Australian Humanities Review* November 1997, Internet ed.: < <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/ahr/archive/Issue-November-1997/wilson.html> >.