



Standpoint, Objectivity, and Social Construction: Reflections from the Study of Gay and Lesbian Communities

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Abstract

This article considers a number of related concepts – standpoint, objectivity, emancipation – in the light of my own research which looked at gay and lesbian communities in the north-west of England. It advocates and promotes the use of gay and lesbian standpoint and defends research with emancipatory aims, notably in the light of academic and theoretical developments which eschew real-life experience and categories of identity rooted in lived actuality. Suggesting that queer theory is largely irrelevant to the lives of gay men and lesbians, it advocates a return to an engaged and practical sociology which acknowledges the benefit of research which has potential for application by the communities it observes.

Keywords: Standpoint; Gay; Lesbian; Queer; Essentialism; Social Construction; Realism; Emancipation

Introduction

1.1 This article will look at some of the issues which I had to consider whilst researching into gay and lesbian communities in the North-West of England. In particular, it will look at two issues which I came to recognise were an integrated part of my own approach to doing this piece of research. My adoption of a clear standpoint and advocacy of a standpoint position, and my scepticism about 'queer theory' are both linked to my belief in a 'real-life' sociology, and I intend to outline my position on both of these methodological issues, in the context of doing my own research.

1.2 The question of the relationship between sexuality and research methodology is something which has been under-researched, and which was a key consideration within my research, which was completed . In particular, the questions of whether my own position as an openly gay man would be relevant to the way the research was done, and if any further, more generally applicable theoretical principles could be discovered and utilised, became apparent from an early stage. These questions led to consideration of whether 'standpoint' theory was of any use in the context of a 'gay and lesbian standpoint' for carrying out research. This also links to the more frequently considered theme of the place of 'bias' and objectivity in this sort of

social research. In turn, if standpoint is a helpful theoretical concept, does its application require a more essentialist concept of gay or lesbian sexuality than some elements of recent scholarship, in particular, 'queer theory', with its social constructionist bias, allows? Whilst these two issues – standpoint and objectivity, and queer theory – are not necessarily linked, in the context of this research, the emergence of the existence of standpoint helped to build a critique of queer theory.

1.3 The research which raised these questions and has recently been published as 'Provincial Queens' (Homfray 2007) was a qualitative, ethnographic study of gay and lesbian community activists in the North-West of England, largely concentrating on the cities of Manchester and Liverpool. Having worked in the voluntary sector for some 11 years, I had often thought about returning to education, and my own interest in this topic was influenced by my own continuing involvement with gay and lesbian community activities. During the time that the research was being conducted, I was chair of two organisations in the Liverpool area, and when living in Yorkshire, had founded and developed a gay helpline.

1.4 During the period of research, I continued my active personal involvement with the gay community groups I participate in within Liverpool, and lived through the changes which made up much of the backdrop of the ensuing theoretical discussion. In choosing this area of interest to research, the immediate questions of the ethics, objectivity and philosophy of the project required attention, given that the work was clearly not in any way the product of detached or disinterested academic impartiality. Many of the 54 semi-structured interviews carried out were with people known to me, and most were involved with organisations whose work was familiar. This is not entirely unusual given that doctoral research carried out within any identifiable group is likely to be a theme of existing interest to the researcher. For me, it was particularly acute since I was closely involved, and both identified and associated with the community which I was investigating. The research methods chosen and the approach which I took was very much one borne out of lived experience and association. It is fair to say that I believed in standpoint before I was aware of its theoretical existence, and similarly, queer theory was not something which had any immediate resonance in relation to the grassroots activity I had been involved with.

Ethos and epistemology; the question of standpoint

2.1 In consequence, the research also pinpointed a number of ethical and methodological questions, and the perspective taken on these questions is also important in terms of understanding how I constructed and appreciated the ethos of 'insider research'. As the researcher I was working within a community well known to me, and where there was a personal commitment to the issues raised by the community being researched. This meant that both identification as a gay man and active participation in and identification with the gay and lesbian community were central to the doing of this research. The questions can broadly be grouped into two categories, those of standpoint, and those of objectivity, although both matters bring forward some common points for discussion.

2.2 On a theoretical level, with regard to standpoint, the question of whether there is a 'gay and lesbian epistemological standpoint' is the central question. Much of the earlier work which acknowledged 'standpoint' did so in the context of either social class, from within a Marxist paradigm or more influentially, inspired by feminist research methodology (Hartsock 1987). In one of the few articles which specifically examined the idea of a lesbian and gay standpoint, McIntosh (1997 p206), suggests that it "enables us to question concepts which may be taken for granted in the straight world" – the experience of doing this research led to a conclusion that a standpoint exists to the extent that someone doing the same research who was neither lesbian or gay would have produced a significantly different piece of work, and, indeed, may have experienced considerable resistance to participation should the respondents have been informed that they did not identify as either gay or lesbian. This could be seen as a controversial viewpoint, and it is not one which is universally accepted, even by writers researching into similar areas who are themselves lesbian or gay. For example, Didi Herman, in her published book based on her doctorate states categorically:

"I am more persuaded by standpoint critics who argue that identity standpoints, while perhaps

being a necessary stance within some forms of political campaigning, do not reveal true or better interpretations of social phenomena within academic research. Furthermore, such standpoints impose a homogeneity upon the category being claimed which cannot reflect or represent the diversity within it (Herman 1994p12)"

2.3 Whilst I conclude that 'standpoint' is valid and applicable in the instance of this research, it is important to consider Herman's position. A single piece of research may, indeed, not be any great contribution to 'truth', or may not even 'better' the previous work done in the broad area. However, it may be able to provide a distinctly different perspective that that already considered. So, should a heterosexual researcher have undertaken the research, the content of the responses may well have been at variance from those I discovered. The data produced, would have been significantly different in content. Would, for example, a heterosexual researcher be able to discuss an issue which could be viewed as 'sensitive'. Renzetti and Lee (1993), such as the nature of coming out and the making of someone's gay or lesbian identity, unless they had a profound knowledge on a personal level of this experience, leading to a basis on which the researcher and the respondent can connect and form some sort of mutual trust and understanding? This is particularly the case when the topic of research is specifically concerning the issue upon which the standpoint is based. It may, then, be accurate to say that such a standpoint could be of less immediate or identifiable importance should the topic of research be, say, welfare benefits provision, or the impact of public transport provision in rural areas, where the issue of sexuality may not be the primary focus of attention, and thus may not be raised within the research interview.

2.4 This may, of course, be seen as something of a 'middle way' position between Herman's view and the more thoroughgoing epistemological and philosophical position that views standpoint as a reflection of a lived and experienced truth which can then be applied across the broader parameters of research fields as a way of legitimising a particular epistemological truth. Whilst this view has itself been decried or at least sidelined (Herman 1997) in its application to feminist research in the sense of it being viewed as universal and unchanging, I would argue that to remove it altogether would marginalize the considerable benefits of the perspective it brings, particularly when the theme of the research being done relates so directly to the 'standpoint' being identified. In particular, my research was very clearly focused on gay and lesbian communities and the process of doing the research convinced me that a standpoint position was appropriate.

2.5 One obvious example of this was the unspoken rapport and recognition which I found took place when making initial contact with the respondents, and explained about the research. This was done by means of a telephone call, often as the result of snowball sampling. To attempt to demystify and uncover the possible practical impact of a lesbian and gay standpoint may suggest a concentration on questions of 'recognition', or 'comfort', or 'association'. The shared recognition that the respondent has of the researcher's life experience may, then, assist the interview process by immediately providing a point of shared reference which can make the interview comfortable, familiar and automatically more likely to be conversational. This is particularly the case when the research is concerned with the topic, and would suggest that it is easier for a lesbian or gay researcher to elicit information and material from other gay men or lesbians, should the research topic be concerned with issues relating to lesbian and gay sexuality. The question would, if supported, follow the considerable literature which supports the view that commonality of gender assists the 'flow' of the interview. As Finch (1984) notes:

"... an interview conducted in an informal way by another woman can easily take on the character of an intimate conversation. The respondent feels quite comfortable with this, precisely because the researcher is acting as a friendly guest, not an official inquisitor, and the model is, in effect, an easy, intimate relationship between two women" (Finch 1984 p74).

2.6 This follows the assertion of feminist research methodology that the factor of gender is likely to produce a distinctly different epistemology than that of the man-interviewing-woman scenario, and assumes the primacy of gender as a standpoint (Stanley and Wise 1993). With regard to cultural identity, Song and Parker (1995) have, in looking at the relationship between researcher and respondent, noted that

"... existing scholarships on research methodology did not adequately address our own research experiences" (Song and Parker 1995 p243).

2.7 This was also found to be the case with my own research. Some of the factors raised by Song and Parker are relevant, such as the complexity of the relationship between researcher and respondent with regard to cultural identity. The dichotomy of the 'insider/outsider' debate in their context, where mixed-race researchers interviewed Chinese young people, was found to be more complex, given the mixed views of young Chinese people towards the perceived commonalities or differences between themselves and the researchers. This was more complex than a simple black/white, or male-female dichotomy, and the lack of active methodological consideration of their more complex and nuanced interpersonal relationships in this research context meant that a number of issues arose with regard to both the commonalities and the differences, the:

"... partial and simultaneous commonality and difference between the researcher and the respondent" (Song and Parker 1995 p249).

2.8 Placing these insights in the context of my own research raised a number of salient issues, to which no clear answer can be given due to the simple lack of previous methodological research in the specific area. The vast bulk of my respondents identified strongly as either 'gay' or 'lesbian', and equally the majority of work being carried out around lesbian and gay issues in the geographical area being researched, is mixed-gender. However, there are clearly issues of gender difference which may occur, as well as the assumed and perceived commonalities of a 'homosexual' identity based on sexual orientation. As a male researcher, it would be arrogant to assume that gender difference would have made no difference to the female respondents in terms of their experience of the research interview. A radical feminist stance, such as that of Jeffreys (2002), would not accept any shared characteristic between gay men and lesbian women and would view the divide of gender greatly outweighing any collectivity based on sexual orientation. However, this was not something which I experienced during the research: no women refused to take part, and whilst gender was raised as an issue, it was within the context of being 'gay or lesbian'. An example, from a Manchester-based respondent, illustrates this well

".. I feel part of the lesbian community. But in Manchester, it's a very mixed community, gender-wise, whereas in London it's very separate. More lesbians are involved in women's stuff here, and there are more things aimed at lesbians but where men are welcome. In London, my whole life was spent with lesbians. I'd never call myself a separatist, not at all, but that's the way it was there. I prefer mixed" (M12)

2.9 The fact that I am white, and that some of those I talked to were from other ethnic backgrounds, may well have had some sort of impact upon the shared perceptions of commonality (Conerly, 2000). In addition, more complex perceptions of standpoint from their perspective may be experienced: for example, a black lesbian respondent (M17) stated that whilst her lesbian identity is important to her, it currently makes less practical impact on her life than her ethnicity. This is not necessarily an indication of political consciousness relating to her sexuality being unimportant, but an indication that her particular position was more directly affected by her ethnicity than her sexuality. This realisation covered a number of factors: in particular, that she is a mother of three, and that there are situations and circumstances where she chooses not to be 'out' as she considers their needs to be such that this is not always advisable. In consequence, her identity as a mother and a black woman have more immediate impact than her identity as a lesbian (Homfray 2007 p54-57)

2.10 One could, indeed, mount a convincing argument for not interviewing anyone at all were it to be necessary to justify or legitimise the research process on the basis of commonality alone. I would argue, however, that in the case of research which is specifically on the topic of 'sexuality', or 'lesbian and gay communities', then the commonality of the researcher sharing the identity of 'being lesbian or gay' is enough. More specific examples of research e.g.: Dunne's study on work patterns of lesbian households (Dunne 1997), Green's research on lesbian feminist communities in the late 1980's (Green 1997) and Yip's

work on gay male Christian couples (Yip 1997) all took place within the context of the researcher sharing the identity of those being researched. My research also begins from that premise, although the category of 'gay or lesbian person involved in working for political change' is a broader one.

2.11 It was, however, a relevant matter in the context of my research. When approaching possible respondents to ask them to participate, I made it clear to them that I was a gay man and that the research emanated from interests developed through ongoing personal involvement in gay organisations. Whilst I did not dwell upon this matter during the interviews, the following comments were made, unsolicited, during the interview process.

"If you weren't gay, people wouldn't talk to you in the same way. You can use 'shorthand', use language which I know you'll understand because you're gay. I wouldn't talk like that to heterosexual people – men or women – even the most sympathetic, I can't see why a straight person would want to do this research, and I'd be very suspicious of them" (L2)

"I wouldn't have done this interview if the researcher was straight. No way. Why would someone who's straight want to do this anyway? Like these fucking academics who have written books about abuse, but have no experience of it. It's about power and voyeurism" (L6)

"I might have had a problem (doing the interview) if you weren't gay – I may have delved into why you were doing it a bit more" (L7)

"If you had said you were straight, I wouldn't have done the interview. I couldn't remember if you had said you were or not, and I sussed out pretty quickly that you weren't. No, there's no way I'd have done it if you were straight. I wouldn't have trusted you, I wouldn't have said a lot of the things I said, I would have 'presented' a much more detached picture" (M20)

2.12 These four examples emphasise that for these respondents, the sexuality of the researcher did matter and made a difference not only to their choice as to whether to participate or not, but to how they behaved during the interview. If the research had been carried out by a heterosexual researcher, at least these three, and perhaps more, of the respondents, would not have been prepared to participate. This could be viewed as largely relating to access of respondents, rather than displaying support for the presence of gay and lesbian standpoint. I would argue that the two matters are indivisible: it is the existence of standpoint which inspires such responses. The presence of a gay or lesbian consciousness is present in the vehemence of the responses and indicates that the data which would have emerged from research done by a heterosexual researcher would have lacked shared knowledge and privileged understandings. The outcome would have been far less rich and honest responses.

2.13 All four respondents were female, and this helped to confirm my belief that in this instance, a positive gay identity as a researcher, based on sexual orientation, is likely to be more important as a factor in the research process, than other sources of identity. And this does closely relate to a standpoint, a way of seeing, understanding, and interpreting life's experiences which emanate from a shared sexual orientation.

2.14 To illustrate further, one of the contributors gave the following examples, based on her work in a lesbian health project:

"On the steering group of the project, the women were dykes. The Unit Manager is straight, and there was a question of whether it would be good for the kudos of the project, but not good for us, if she attended. She came a few times, and it was fine, but every now and then we'd have to explain something which everyone else knew. I was talking about what to put on the leaflet, gay women, or lesbians, and for her benefit we'd have to have a history lesson. I suppose it's the frustration of knowing that I've thought about sexuality a lot, and I wanted to have a decent conversation, not just go back over the same old ground." (M20)

2.15 There is then, shared experience, such as that of coming out, or personal experience of homophobic

discrimination, which cannot be transferred to the most sympathetic heterosexual. In the context of this research, then, a lesbian and gay standpoint seems not only apparent in practice, but vital in theory. There has been little substantive work on the methodological implications of this, and any attempt to do so could quite easily be dragged into the more abstract theoretical debates about the nature of gay or lesbian identity, and to what extent it exists as an essential reality. Nevertheless, it would remain an interesting area for further study. One of the few articles written directly about the question suggests that Hartsock's original concept of standpoint is

"... not necessarily the way you experience the world every day, but the way you perceive it if you consciously adopt a particular perspective" (McIntosh 1997).

2.16 From this point of view, a lesbian and gay standpoint is an epistemological understanding which can be gained via the adopting of a particular consciousness; the prevalence of gay and lesbian academics working directly in this field is some indication that this is a consciousness, a standpoint, which is still being formulated and transmitted. Whilst sexual orientation remains a positive identity for gay men and lesbians – and my research shows very clearly that is the case – I would suggest that research done by someone from outside this identity category would be, at best, substantially different, but more probably, unsatisfactory.

2.17 Whilst empathy may be a quality which anyone can gain and display, is it really possible to consciously adopt a standpoint which one needs actual lived experience to truly appreciate, in terms of the actual doing of the research? Male researchers may adopt feminist stances, but in the instance of, for example, research relating to domestic violence against women, would this adopted 'standpoint' mean that their presence in the research process as a man would be overturned by their belief in a particular epistemological principle? McIntosh wishes to remove the status of epistemological knowledge from standpoint, instead viewing it as a method of generating interesting and insightful data which would not be discovered otherwise. I would share some of that aim, but remain unconvinced that it is simply a methodological tool which can be utilised in the way of other, more mechanical techniques. To be insightful in the way McIntosh indicates requires a level of profound understanding which cannot be gained from political or epistemological principle alone. It is not purely shared experience, but a mutual understanding of what that shared experience means at a more profound level, which indicates the presence of a gay or lesbian consciousness.

2.18 The question of standpoint is one which relates strongly to the themes of my research, in particular, that of gay identity, and gay community. The black woman referred to earlier acknowledged the part which her gay identity played in constructing her overall identity, but did not see it as the dominant feature. She related this partially to the way which she viewed the nature of gay community, as opposed to the Ghanaian community which was her primary community of identification. Her experience of gay community was something which did not include her in any profound way, and was not characterised by the sense of 'belonging' which she associated with the local Ghanaian community. In this sense, she gained a greater sense of political consciousness from her identification with her part of the black community. However, other non-white respondents identified more strongly with both their gay identity and the gay community, feeling far more rejection from the black community because of their sexuality, than the other way around. Similarly, both disabled respondents within the research sample had found that the experience of being discriminated against had been greater because of their sexuality than their disability.

2.19 The picture is, then, something of a complex one, and the implications for a gay and lesbian standpoint may be that exceptions will always exist, in that there are people who are gay or lesbian who may not gain their primary political consciousness from their gay or lesbian shared identity or experience. However, the balance of experiences within my research strongly suggested that this was a minority view, and that the outcome of both holding a primary identity as gay or lesbian, and being part of a perceived gay community was the development of specific understandings or knowledges which could not have been gained other than through being gay or lesbian.

2.20 For example, 'coming out' experiences, and the 'becoming' aspect of gaining a gay or lesbian identity, are very particular types of identity formation which cannot be easily replicated in any other context. They

are unique to gay and lesbian people and although they can take many different forms, and are in many ways very individualistic experiences, they do provide a specific point of reference which can be an immediate point of contact between gay people of otherwise contrasting characteristics. The popularity of the coming-out story in theatre and literature demonstrates this common point of reference: it also emphasises the normative position of heterosexuality and the 'otherness' of being gay or lesbian. This is likely to continue to be the case despite the positive changes in law and policy – those changes will not in themselves transform being gay or lesbian into something normative, in the majority, or 'expected'. The sense of 'becoming' gay or lesbian, as one discovers, identifies and adopts a gay or lesbian identity will continue to be a distinctive factor, and one which is likely to remain a unifying phenomenon. The points of recognition which will remain shared are those which heterosexuals can only be at best, sympathetic outsiders, and which continue to remain an 'entry point' into a gay or lesbian identity. My research demonstrated the continuing importance of this aspect of gay and lesbian identity, and its strength and pervasiveness gave further support to the presence of standpoint, and my wish to associate with it.

2.21 Given that almost all living gay or lesbian people in the UK who have come out did so in an atmosphere of legal discrimination and social marginalisation, the sense of a gaining of identity and building of community through oppression is one which is strongly supported in existing literature (Weeks 1990, Green 1997). There remains a significant element of homophobia within contemporary society, which will not disappear simply because the law has changed. Indeed, some of the voices who feel most aggrieved by the changes, for example, conservative elements within the church, have become significantly more protective of their position, to the extent of actively seeking to exclude non-celibate gay and lesbian people from their congregations (Bates 2004).

2.22 Examples of this homophobia varied from local authorities and other public bodies to commercial organisations: one respondent who had begun a medical degree and abandoned it because of the homophobia he had experienced.

" The rigidity of the structures of the medical hierarchy, the all-pervading, indoctrinating culture that you can't get out of...the constant assault on my sense of self-worth from what I still believe is a massively homophobic...bigoted structure. The sense of isolation was strong, I was aware of other gay medical students, of gay doctors, but I was aware of the tokenistic nature of being there...having lunch with junior doctors on attachment and hearing them say 'I fucking hate faggots, they deserve to die...'" (L3)

2.23 Such expressions were not isolated and they emphasised the depth of the continuation of homophobia – and why gay and lesbian people do seek out others who have personal experience, rather than just sensitivity to or understanding of, their situation. The junior doctors concerned in this case may well be expected to observe equality practices which they do not believe, and this may indicate that gay and lesbian people may face some situations where they need to be absolutely sure of the stance and mutual understanding of the person they are working with. In my case, this was the person carrying out a piece of research about a fundamental aspect of their lives, which was clearly identified throughout the qualitative data.

2.24 Homophobic experiences within public or governmental institutional settings may in future, be less prevalent, or at least, less overtly so, but homophobic individuals and hostile organisations will continue to exist.

2.25 Hence, the experience of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is likely to remain, and this will, in turn, retain the need for gay and lesbian people to maintain organisational networks and collaborations. The idea of a gay community will remain 'necessary', and will continue to help to maintain a specific gay and lesbian outlook whilst homophobia remains a reality. This is not to say that there will be one, uniform 'voice of authenticity' which reflects gay and lesbian orthodoxy, any more than there ever has been before. Accepting a gay and lesbian standpoint, like any other standpoint, required me as researcher to recognise the flexibility of the group concerned and to identify the factors which enable a position of

privileged knowledge to exist. It would be naive to suggest that there are not internal hierarchies and divisions within the broad 'gay and lesbian community', but it would be equally naive to view these as structured in an overly rigid manner. And as someone personally involved with these structures, I and other gay and lesbian researchers will be in a better place to be aware of ongoing changes.

Objectivity and bias

3.1 A further related matter that I had to deal with was that of 'objectivity', or to use a more pejorative term, 'bias' (Hammersley 2000, 1995, Hammersley and Gomm 1997). To accept the existence of standpoint on any level suggests that the ideal of 'objectivity' is flawed. Rooted in a particular view of social research which believes that this is, firstly, a possibility, and, furthermore, desirable as an aim, it suggests that a piece of research can be unaffected by the researcher's role in the process, and that a researcher can be 'value-neutral'. I would concur with Green (1997 p4), that:

"... in keeping with most of my colleagues these days, I don't believe in (intellectual objectivity). Had someone else done the study, or had I done it at a different moment in my life, I have no doubt that different arguments would have been made."

3.2 It also encourages a view of research which suggests that an outcome will be purely focused on the contribution it makes to academic knowledge and the furtherance of 'truth', without particular consideration to the use that research may then be put to, or the effect it has on those being researched, both the particular subjects of an individual project, and the wider group of people who may benefit from the work – in the case of this research, lesbians and gay men. More recent poststructuralist or postmodernist perspectives have suggested that such emancipatory aims should be challenged, dismissing 'a metanarrative of justice as an organising concept ...' and instead stressing 'concern to emphasise difference and the particular.' (Humphries 1997).

3.3 Indeed, Humphries argues that such a position places the liberal believer in 'truth and objectivity' alongside the pro-standpoint, emancipatory researcher, in valuing the existence of social identities of a realist and concrete nature.

3.4 Any notion that I am, or could be 'objective' with regard to the question of gay and lesbian equality, or could approach the research as a dispassionate outsider is simply not a possibility. To that extent, I 'take the side' of the wider gay and lesbian community and wanted my research to assist them in their emancipatory aims. As someone who has been intimately involved in this area of campaigning since the mid-1980's, and whose personal identity is that of a gay man, to 'step outside' would simply be impossible. That being said, the fact that I am in my 40's, male, white, politically liberal-social democratic, and live in a monogamous relationship with my civil partner, may well also have its impact. I was aware of the possibility of tensions between my own political or personal leanings, and the perspectives of gay and lesbian respondents who may have had quite different outlooks and beliefs in some of the areas being investigated in the research.

3.5 However, I would share the views of Truman (2000), who casts some doubt upon the empowering or emancipatory function of much social research on the wider stage, and looks towards the experience of participation as something beneficial in itself, as opposed to the impact of the future publishing of research findings, which 'are likely to be little more than passing interest to the average gay individual out for a night on the town' (Truman 2000 p33). I would hope that those who took part in the research were able to feel that their contribution was worthwhile on at least the level of being able to express their own views, and thinking through their own position. For if there is any semblance of political gay and lesbian community, and those working for change are important in its development, then opportunities such as this can only be of value.

Social construction: its limitations?

4.1 Questions of both standpoint and emancipation lead, in turn, me to further consider the domination of a social constructionist viewpoint within the social sciences when studying lesbian and gay communities. I did

this with some trepidation, given that the very mention of 'essentialism' in sociological circles can make one feel that one has cast oneself out of sociology, such is the stunned reaction!

4.2 The essentialist/social constructionist debate has received a vast amount of attention beginning with McIntosh' seminal work of 1968, 'The Homosexual Role'. In turn, this led to the development of queer theory, which is a logical outcome if not direct product of this debate. Indeed, it could be argued that the essentialist/social constructionist debate was, and remains, something which clearly originated within sociology, and whose boundaries are sociological, whereas queer theory has its inspiration in critical literary theory. However, the thoroughly sociological ideas of social construction, in failing to grapple with the perceived reality of the lived experience of gay men and lesbians, may well have meant that sociological insight has been overlooked in favour of an approach which not only accepts, but celebrates a constructionism so complete that 'reality' itself is viewed as little more than performance.

4.3 The essentialist/social constructionist debate is related to, but not identical to, the more popularly discussed 'nature-nurture' question, and the research which asks whether 'homosexuality' is caused by genetic or other biological factors, or the product of environment. The focus and topic of this debate is the idea that there is a 'sexual orientation', which is innate and biologically determined. Whilst the focus of sociology is predisposed to minimise the influence of the biological, the growing interest in the body, and the views of theorists such as Bamforth (1997), whose socio-legal analysis suggests that a 'moderate constructionist' viewpoint is possible, or Norton (1997) who argues for a 'cultural unity' of homosexuality across boundaries of time or space, suggests that the social constructionist viewpoint, at least in its more 'radical' guise, to use Bamforth's terminology, may have its limitations.

4.4 Much of the initial debate centred around the attempts of sociology to move away from labelling theories, and to construct a theoretical perspective that was both congruent with gay liberationist celebration of 'polymorphous perversity' and deconstruction of gender boundaries, and offered a challenge to the biological constraints of essentialist ideas. Early social constructionist analysis drew heavily from historical thinking, (Weeks 1990, Greenberg 1988) and differentiated 'modern homosexuality' from other examples of same-sex activity. So, Greenberg suggests that 'homosexual relations' existed in pre-modern society, but that 'homosexuality' only came into existence as we would now understand it, in the 'modern' era, accompanying the growth of medical science, capitalist market economy, and bureaucratic forms of governance. As he explains (Greenberg 1988 p484):

"Homosexuality is not a conceptual category everywhere ... when used to characterize individuals, it implies that erotic attraction originates in a relatively stable, more or less exclusive attribute of the individual. Usually it connotes an exclusive orientation: the homosexual is not also heterosexual, the heterosexual not also homosexual."

4.5 The 'homosexual' as an individual is only understood, then, in his or her cultural context; the 'lesbian', 'gay man', or 'queer person' a later exposition still of that category. This view is one which even those who have doubts about the more thoroughgoing view of the constructionist would have some sympathy with. There are clear differences between the social organisation of, for example, ancient Rome and contemporary Britain, and even those writers, such as Norton (1997), who argue that a unified and autonomous queer identity and cultural pattern can be both identified and applied across national and temporal boundaries, would acknowledge that they may manifest themselves differently, with contrasting social environments.

4.6 I became convinced by the definition of a 'moderate constructionist' coined by Bamforth (1997). This incorporates an acceptance of the presence of social diversity which affects and directs individual and social understanding of gay sexuality as an identity category, but also accepts that sexuality itself; sexual desire, sexual attraction is innate and 'orientated' towards either the opposite sex, the same sex, or both sexes. What this viewpoint enables is a gay sexual identity that is based on an 'essence', something within which makes that person sexually drawn to those of the same sex, but which is realised and understood within the possibilities of the social and sexual categories known at the time. Thus, while the category of 'gay' as an

identity in the way we now understand it may well be a product of specific social or historical circumstance, or understanding, and may mean that a contemporary 'gay person' may be a distinct social being, 'gay sexual orientation' has always existed, and it is this which constitutes an 'essence'. Bamforth's 'moderate constructionism' could just as easily be seen as a 'mild essentialism', accepting that there is an 'essence' which, though interpreted in social context, is integral to the person, and may in turn provide a space for integration of bodily reality and lived experience within a theoretical discussion which has, at times, appeared to be somewhat detached.

4.7 This became all too obvious in talking to my respondents. The terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' were used with relative ease, and the assumptions about such an identity were far from thorough-going constructionism. The coming-out stories talked about 'becoming' gay or lesbian, but not in the sense of making a choice. Rather, the 'discovery' of that which was already there and the experience of adopting an identity to accompany that which they recognised about themselves. The essentialist-constructionist debate was not a central aspect of my work but the data clearly indicated a much more essentialist approach than mainstream constructionist sociological thinking

4.8 Vance's acknowledgement (in Altman et al 1989) that more thoroughgoing constructionists reject fixed sexual desires, or desire itself being inherent or even connected at all to any biological or physical impulse or 'feeling', is particularly prone to this, and in seeing all desire as itself socially constructed, may start an intellectual enquiry which is most easily pursued by concentration on that which is itself most distinct from actual, lived, bodily experiences, and which cannot be contradicted by the pages of a text.

4.9 I would associate with those researchers, who, having found that, stubbornly, gay men and lesbians in the 'real world' may not be convinced by the extremities of social constructionism, adopt theoretical positions which effectively place themselves in opposition to the inclinations of sociological research. So, whereas the 'deconstruction of gender' and the 'breakdown of binary sexualities in opposition to each other' may have received some acclamation within radical theories of gay liberation, its contemporary influence can be questioned. The sort of approach which accepts a biological base for sexual desire, views 'gay' and 'straight' as reasonable and experientially reflective categories of sexuality, and sees a place for these terms both in the creation of 'community', and the movements for change which work for political equality is still one which my research indicates carries more resonance with the wider gay and lesbian population. Sociological researchers such as Whisman (1996) both accept that most gay men and lesbians do not primarily view their sexuality as 'chosen' or 'socially constructed' in the more thoroughgoing sense, and that clearly defined binary categories are those used by rights campaigners, yet still see a politics which eschews this 'popular' view as ultimately desirable. Methodologically, and from a perspective of empowerment, can such scepticism with regard to the grounded viewpoints of those being researched be sustained, without making the research process itself, and in turn the entire sociological project, something which will be viewed as, at best, a product of detached academic insularity, at worst, intellectual masturbation which has the potential to be positively harmful to the aims which both researcher and researched claim to share?

4.10 I reached the conclusion that this was not something I could share – and that my own experiences and outlook was much closer to the 'mild essentialism' of my respondents and the bulk of gay and lesbian activists.

Queer theory; is it a profoundly un-sociological project?

5.1 The nadir of this extreme constructionist approach is found in the meanderings of 'queer theory'. Whilst Plummer (1998) sees this as a possible source of future theoretical engagement and sociological development, there is a greater danger that its influence may skew thinking and academic energy away from real-life sociology. Even Turner, generally sympathetic to the 'queer' project, suggests that

"At its worst, queer theory undoubtedly will contribute nothing ... After a decade, the concept of queer theory has floated around universities long enough that mediocre professors and graduate students have undoubtedly used it to produce wooden, pedestrian readings of

literary texts, or historical interpretations that opponents of queer theory will point to in trumpeting its irrelevance" (Turner 2000 p198).

5.2 When starting to do background reading before commencing the interviews, the sheer amount of work which had been influenced by queer theory was notable – particularly when compared to the very sparse amount of empirical and qualitative study of gay and lesbian populations, particularly in the UK. This made it seem all the more important that my research should not be focused on obscure literary tropes but demonstrate something of a 'back to basics' concentration on respondent narrative and sociological analysis.

5.3 It is perhaps indicative that queer theory owes much to Foucault (Spargo 1999) who himself eschewed gay identity politics, and that many of its propagators are either not self-identified as gay at all, or whose academic inspiration is far from social-scientific. The leading lights of queer theory, e.g. Sedgwick or Butler could, given their pedigree, not be viewed in such dismissive terms as Turner uses above, yet is it not reasonable to ask genuine questions as to the practical relevance of their writing?

5.4 For example, Sedgwick's 'Epistemology of the Closet' (1990), is lauded not only as a piece of literary criticism, which it is – given that its contents consist of interpretations of Nietzsche, Proust, Wilde, Melville and James – but as an iconic book in the history of both queer theory, and lesbian and gay studies, which can be used politically, and socially; the book was published as part of a 'social science' list in the U.K. Whilst this chapter does not afford a full-length critique of any one text, the content and style of the book can neither be looked upon as sociological in any meaningful sense; and is written in a dense and deliberately 'academic' style which would make its conclusions remarkably difficult to look at in terms of practical application. Would the arguments, for example, have immediate resonance to gay men and lesbians who have experienced the reality of the closet, or are helping those who are beginning to emerge from it? Would Proust have automatic resonance with a working-class gay young man in the closet in Manchester? It may be the case that Sedgwick may say that is not her aim, and it would be somewhat philistine to decry any academic endeavour simply because it lacks practical applicability, but when the field appeared, at one time, to be almost overwhelmed with this sort of literary work marketed and promoted as sociological theory, at the expense of more empirically-centred work, it does question the emancipatory relevance of this sort of theorising. It also raises issues of to what extent any sort of gay or lesbian standpoint is likely to reflect this type of detached, primarily literary theorising. I would suggest, not at all.

5.5 Similarly, Butler's 'Excitable Speech' (1997) creates a case against the legally-enforced criminalisation of 'hate speech' as a specific offence. This is an issue which has been a particular issue of contention in the court-dominated legal structures of the USA, and there have been different positions taken on the issue from both within the gay and academic spheres (Jacobs and Potter 1998 , Jenness and Grattet 2001). Initial considerations have been raised which place the debate in a British legal context (Iganski (2002), and emerging viewpoints suggest similar variety of opinion. Without wishing to suggest that either position is 'correct', Butler's arguments appear to bear little connection to the real experiences of gay men or lesbians who have been the victims of hate crime. Does a reduction of hate speech (often accompanied, in reality, by hateful action) to 'performativity' assist the gay man or lesbian being verbally or physically harassed in the real world? Is it possible to deal with one's real-life experience of violent and hateful speech by an atomising of any process which denies its reality as something painful and incisive, which does have the ability to wound and impact in a negative fashion on the lives of gay men and lesbians. It is at this level where even the 'doyens' of queer theory patently fail to connect with the practicalities of lived experience and the development of a shared consciousness. Hate crime, for example, is something which is high on the gay and lesbian political agenda, and at the time of writing, new legislation is being prepared which will identify homophobic hate crime as a specific criminal offence and make it illegal to incite hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation. The gap between queer performativity and shared gay and lesbian understanding is thus exemplified.

5.6 I would suggest that caution needs to be applied, then, to the entire 'constructionist' project in its more profound or thoroughgoing forms; by hoisting itself so firmly to constructionism, even sociological work

which accepts the value of identity politics and sites itself within the realist tradition has allowed the logical outcome in the effective 'de-socialisation' of lesbian and gay studies and the domination of literary, textual, queer theory. By allowing itself to be drawn into the 'essentialist-constructionist' debate, and by its fear of any possible condemnation of bodily, biological, or 'sexual essence' factors as threatening the sociological enterprise, the outcome has been the drift of research into lesbian and gay concerns away from sociological priorities, and, ultimately, from social or political change. A standpoint needs to be based on more than simply a construction which has almost no base in the real world, as does the achievement of genuine emancipation.

5.7 Kirsch (2001), in his effective critique of queer theory, explains how this sort of theorising is incapable of contributing to positive social change; starting from a position that identity is not necessarily stable, but takes on an 'essential' role in terms of its political function. Political identity has to be 'essentialist' from the perspective of achieving social change, because social change is achieved and experienced collectively, via movements. And can the extremities of constructionism, as displayed in queer theory, ever be applied to any sort of social change in the sense of actual social action? The basis of my research involves the actual experiences of gay men and lesbians, working for social change, within their communities, and if we cannot even recognise any idea of 'identity', then the thought of basing change on a community of interest is simply not viable. Social constructionism when taken to its most extreme level is hardly conducive to the theoretical development and application of ideas of 'community of memory' or 'communities of interest', and Bell (1993) suggests that constitutive community of any description requires some level of essentialism. Within this context, which I largely concur with, I would also support Kirsch's critique of queer theory – and, by extension, the extremes of social constructionism, in the following areas.

5.8 First, Kirsch notes that the deconstruction of social reality is far less of a challenge to social order than practical and applied research which aims not to deconstruct, but to build in order to achieve social change. Despite the 'radical' gloss which surrounds Foucault and his devotees; queer theory has no sense of the worth of the collective, given that the 'real world' and any notion of 'power' based on social division or structure – indeed, the social world beyond the discursive – is not 'real' at all. As Kirsch points out, the idea of 'culture' which queer theory champions is not one which equates to the 'cultural' milieu in any sort of sociological sense.

5.9 Second, Kirsch uses a neo-Marxist model of class and structure in his critique of queer theory. Whilst I would question the central role of class in understanding inequality with regard to gays and lesbians, his observations of the importance of recognition of the material and the reality of discriminatory and prejudiced legal and social structures, can be adapted and applied within other economic and political frameworks of belief.

5.10 Third, and most important, can queer theory actually be applied at all? 'Queer' activism may immediately come to mind, but in reality, the 'queer' paradigm has not involved a very large number of people. In my own research, I discovered that no explicitly 'queer' group has ever existed in Manchester, and attempts to set up a local branch of Outrage! in Liverpool was a short-term affair, the group existing in a vague sense after an 'outreach' visit in 1994 with two large-scale 'zaps' in the city aimed at the Roman Catholic cathedral and Granada TV, and further action against the ex-gay True Freedom Trust, and a meeting of Anglican Bishops in 1995. The departure of the group's founder to London in 1995 saw the demise of the group (Lucas 1998). Nationally, Outrage! still exists at the time of writing, but its activities consist as much of producing a regular website of press coverage of gay and lesbian matters, as direct action. More salient may be the responses of two respondents, both of whom identify readily as 'queer' and like the style and ethos of queer activism. However, this identity should not be automatically interpreted as an acceptance of the main tenets of 'queer theory' and its rejection of the gay and lesbian identity, as these responses indicate:

"I do like queer as a term, I do some stuff at the University, on a social work training course, and used 'queer', and one student stopped me, saying, 'I didn't think you were meant to use those words any more'. I said, 'Well, you're not, but I am.' It's my word, not yours. Part of me

likes to use the word because it makes people go 'Oh dear'. It's that clichéd argument about 'having the word back, thank you very much', and I rather like that idea, so I will use that term. I like the idea of people having to rethink what that's all about, that it's actually my word, and that they can't use it. But queer politics ... I'm not so sure about all that. I'm not wholly convinced. I like Queer in the sense that it's 'in your face', direct, tongue-in-cheek, humorous, and I like the idea of shock or drama. But the political, theoretical stuff ... I don't know." (L5)

"I call myself queer ... Queer politics, yes and no ... Queer is, for me, a defined statement of my sexuality, it's not necessarily the non-heterosexual, encompassing agenda which people like Peter Tatchell tried to put forward. Intellectually, I have a lot of sympathy with it, but I think you're on a hiding to nothing if you think it can happen within the constructs around us. In terms of the queer agenda, the wrongness of it is that it misunderstands the effect of oppression, it creates an environment where tuppence ha'penny looks down on tuppence, it doesn't seek to make everyone fivepence. It's not an engine in itself; it's a response to the engines around it" (M10)

5.11 Both of the above respondents had been actively involved in direct-action groups, including the Outrage! groups in Liverpool and Nottingham respectively, but neither showed any enthusiasm for queer theory as a way of inspiring or achieving political change, and both respondents use 'queer' as an alternative word for 'gay' with no indications that their own definition of queer suggests any abandonment of gay identity. Another respondent, similarly, stated:

"When I was younger it was an insult. I'm proud now, I'm proud to be queer. I don't want to fit into others' ideas of what I should be. I use queer as an alternative word to gay or lesbian. It saves me from having to say those words or 'LGB' all the time!" (M22)

5.12 At grass-roots level, then 'queer theory' may be:

"... an academic thing, you don't see or hear the term used quite as much" (M8)

5.13 It was notable that not a single respondent used the term constantly in preference to gay or lesbian, and most did not use it at all. If anything at all, it is a linguistic affection, but not attached to any particular theoretical outlook or particular worldview. Perhaps this worldview has no effective or possible application outside academic discussion; it certainly seems to have little resonance even among politically active and aware gay men and lesbians in the North-West of England. Far from being a tool of further enlightenment, it may be something of a dead-end, and a return to real-life sociology, shorn of exaggerated concentration on text and disembodied, largely non-sociological theory, may both be more reflective of contemporary gay and lesbian experience and be both more genuinely sociological and able to be used by that group of people in terms of the furtherance of their own cause and community.

5.14 It is certainly the case that if any meaningful concept of standpoint is accepted, then it requires a predominantly realist theoretical framework where such a standpoint can lead to emancipatory application. Whilst this does not have to mean the abandonment of a sociological concept as basic as social construction, the drift of this concept towards something almost entirely detached from lived experience in the form of queer theory has been an unwelcome and unhelpful development. Given the recent positive changes in British law with regard to gay men and lesbians, sociologists should have a valuable and important role in looking at how these changes affect everyday gay and lesbian experience. Many of these sociologists may well be working from a lesbian and gay standpoint. It is to be hoped that this aim will not be deflected.

5.15 In conclusion, partaking in this research led me to see the links between aspects of methodology which appeared, on the surface, to have only cursory connectedness. Both my own experience in community activism and my own gay identity influenced my choice of research topic. Focusing on this topic led me towards accepting a standpoint position as opposed to following queer theory, because it reflected what I perceived as the real-life lived experiences of my respondents and the very specific knowledge which

that life had given them. From my own perspective, both as gay man and sociological researcher, being involved in this research crystallised much that was already part of my own life experience. Acceptance of standpoint strengthened my own understanding of my own experiences in a way which queer theory could never do.

Note

The respondents have been classified using the same classification scheme as in the book which the research relates to (Homfray 2007). Respondents were allocated a code number indicating their base as either Liverpool (L) or Manchester (M); they are listed below with notes of their sex and involvement in work for lesbian and gay equality at the time of the interview.

L2	Female	Local council officer, active in women's, gay and deaf person's groups.
L5	Male	Long-time activist, particularly within Trade Unions. Founder of Liverpool Outrage!
L6	Female	Staff member at radical bookshop run by a women's cooperative.
L7	Female	Ordained priest in the Church of England, involved with local and national gay Christian organisations
M8	Male	Pastor, Metropolitan Community Church
M12	Female	Specialist social worker, gay and lesbian fostering and adoption agency
M17	Female	Black HIV and women's worker, lesbian parent
M20	Female	Lesbian outreach worker, outlying town
M22	Female	Youth worker

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