



'I' and 'We' Identities – an Eliasian Perspective on Lesbian and Gay Identities'

by Allison Moore
Edge Hill University

Sociological Research Online, 15 (4) 10
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/15/4/10.html>>
10.5153/sro.2241

Received: 24 May 2010 Accepted: 16 Oct 2010 Published: 30 Nov 2010

Abstract

Lesbian and gay sociology has witnessed a reflexive turn in recent years, which emphasises choice, self-creation and self-determination in the formation of sexual identities. Individuals are involved in, what Giddens (1991) called, a 'project of self' or a 'reflexive biography', which allows them to engage in a dynamic and constantly evolving process of defining and re-defining their self-identity. Identity becomes fluid, fragmented and plastic. In a recent issue of this journal, Brian Heaphy argued that such accounts of lesbian and gay reflexivity are partial and fail to take account of the ways in which structural factors continue to limit one's choice narrative and he proposed a move towards a reflexive sociology, rather than a sociology of reflexivity. This article seeks to develop Heaphy's argument further and suggests that the limitation of theories of reflexivity lies in their inability to adequately account for the continued significance of collectivity, interdependency and human relations in shaping an individual's identity. Drawing on Norbert Elias' figurational sociology, it will be argued that against a reflexive model of identity that privileges individualism, choice and creativity over collectivity and material constraints, there is a pressing need to revisit and re-establish our interdependent relationships with one another.

Keywords: *Gay, Lesbian, Elias, Reflexivity, Figurational Sociology, Habitus*

Introduction

1.1 In a recent issue of this journal, Brian Heaphy (2008) problematised the reflexive turn in lesbian and gay sociology. Since the early 1990s there has been a growing interest in and significance attached to the notion of reflexivity in the sociology of identity, including in lesbian and gay sociology. Derived from and underpinned by the work of Anthony Giddens (1991; 1992; 1994), Ulrich Beck (1992; 1994) and Scott Lash (1994) the "extended reflexivity thesis" (Adams, 2006: p.512) that dominates contemporary sociological theories of identity formation emphasises the uncertainty and unpredictability of life in late / high / post modernity. Gone are the traditional social structures and collectivities that shaped and constrained an individual's life experiences and expectancies and in their place are individual choice, self-creation and self-determination.

1.2 Heaphy claimed that not only does the focus on choice, creation and self-reflexivity fail to account for the ways in which power dynamics and positionality in society continue to limit one's biography, such theories also underestimate the social, cultural and economic resources required for self-determination. By failing to take account of the differential and unequal experiences of individuals writing their own narrative, it might be argued that theories of self-reflexivity hold untenable generalisations and, in so doing, "validate, valorise and make visible *exclusive* experience as lesbian and gay experience" (Heaphy 2008). Whilst in support of Heaphy's concerns over accounts of lesbian and gay reflexivity, this article seeks to develop his arguments further. Heaphy claims that, as researchers, "we rarely explicitly explore the limits of our analyses in terms of whose realities are represented, whose are made visible, and what interests of power are promoted" (Heaphy, 2008). I would argue that this is due, in part, to the failure of theories of reflexivity to adequately account for the continued significance of collectivity and interdependency in shaping individual identity and it is impossible to understand and make sense of individual identities outside of and independent to collective identities.

1.3 Heaphy's article rests on the argument that accounts of lesbian and gay reflexivity are partial, reflecting, what has been called elsewhere, 'partial life projects' (Du Bois Raymond, 1998), which "unreflectively affirm exclusive and normative assumptions" (Heaphy, 2008) about lesbian and gay lives and politics. He suggested that although rooted in liberatory and affirmative agendas, the unintended

consequences of such an approach are that the diversity of lesbian and gay experiences is marginalised and, frequently, it is the experiences of the researcher rather than the research subjects that are represented. Consequently, such accounts “often reflect white, urban, middle-class habitus” (Heaphy, 2008). To counter the tendency towards affirmative and normative accounts of lesbian and gay life, Heaphy proposes a move away from theories of reflexivity to methodological reflexivity or reflexive sociology. Here, there is a recognition that all analyses of social life are fragmented and partial in the sense that research can never present subjects’ lives in their entirety and there is an acknowledgement that it is impossible to objectively analyse the social world because researchers are simultaneously analysts of and interdependent actors in the social processes they seek to understand. They bring with them their own experiences, assumptions and their own, largely unconscious, habitus.

1.4 This article will attempt to develop Heaphy’s arguments by drawing on Norbert Elias’ process sociology. It will argue that individual and collective identity / habitus are inextricably linked and it is, therefore, impossible to analyse individual subjectivities and life trajectories outside of the material circumstances within which individuals find themselves. It will begin by outlining the central tenets of Elias’ process sociology, which attempts to overcome dichotomous models of structure / agency and objectivism / subjectivism. In so doing, it avoids both the reifying tendencies of overly deterministic accounts of social life and the excessively individual accounts that fail to address the continued significance of material circumstances in shaping an individual’s life experiences and expectations. It will then go on to consider the manifestation of theories of reflexivity in lesbian and gay sociology. Heaphy (2008) suggests that there is some similarity and compatibility between Giddens’ notion of the project of the self and the tradition within lesbian and gay studies of documenting the lives, experiences and narratives of lesbian and gay men as both emphasise creativity and reflexivity. However, I would posit that, despite the emphasis on biography, story-telling and self-identity in contemporary lesbian and gay sociology, if read through an Eliasian lens, they can be seen, not as theories based on a reflexivity that is isolated or individualised but rather on a notion of reflexivity that tells us something about collective sexual identities and human interdependencies. From this perspective, with its emphasis on relationality and human interdependencies, choices made by one individual are not isolated, self-reflexive projects but, instead are interwoven with, shaped by and, in turn, shape the choices made by others. Where theories of self-reflexivity focus on dynamism, fluidity and change, Elias’ process sociology stresses the continuities in social life and its formation and reformation over time.

Norbert Elias’ Process Sociology

2.1 Norbert Elias’ process sociology can be seen as an attempt to move beyond dualities such as structure / agency, individual / society and objectivism / subjectivism. As a result, he was critical of what he saw as the tendency towards reification in sociology, which presents social structures as objects external to and over and above the individual. He argued that this was a “naively egocentric” (Elias, 1970: p.14) view of social life, which, not only served to “dehumanize social structures” (ibid, p.16) but also gave the false impression that individuals are separated from society by “some invisible barrier” (ibid, p.15). For Elias, the things we call social structures are not external objects exerting pressure on individuals to act in particular ways. They are the product of social relations and human interdependencies.

2.2 Elias was also equally critical of what he saw as excessive individualism and the tendency to present society as the intentional outcome of individual action and individual agency. The social world is the product, not of individual action or consciousness, but rather the result of social networks and collectivities formed over several generations (Smith, 2001). Elias developed the idea of unplanned social processes or unplanned order to explain how individuals exercise agency within the constraints of their material circumstances arguing that there is little relationship between our planned and intentional actions and the consequences of them. We do exercise agency but not in circumstances of our own making and, due to the relational nature of social life and human interdependencies, a choice exercised by one individual “becomes interwoven with those of others; it unleashes further chains of actions, the direction and provisional outcome of which depend not on him [sic] but on the distribution of power and the structure of tensions within this whole mobile human network” (Elias, 1991: p.49-50). Elias’ notion of unplanned order not only highlights the fluidity and indeterminacy of everyday practice, it also suggests that individuals are both free to act in social interactions and, at the same time, are constrained by their social position. It is with the concept of habitus that Elias most clearly articulates the interdependent relationship between the individual, the collective and social structures.

2.3 Although Pierre Bourdieu is perhaps the most widely known social theorist to use the concept of habitus and it is his characterisation of habitus that dominates contemporary sociological theories of identity, Elias also used it^[1]. In contemporary sociology^[2], habitus tends to be understood as a habit, an acquired disposition (Crossley, 2005: p.104) or a typical condition of the body (Jenkins, 2002). Habitus exists at an unconscious level and can be understood as values, behaviours and dispositions that have become so naturalised and taken for granted that they are literally embodied. There are two distinct ways in which Elias’ conception of habitus might be understood as embodied. Firstly, habitus is something experienced intrapsychically, as a psychic structure or personality type and, secondly, habitus has a material reality in so far as it is produced and reproduced through our practices and interactions with others.

2.4 Another important feature of the habitus is the distinction Elias makes between the individual, subjective habitus as embodied in individuals and the social, collective habitus based on shared experiences and social position. Whilst each individual’s habitus will be unique to them to understand subjective habitus as not only individually experienced but also individually authored is to abstract individual life trajectories from their material surrounding. Social habitus refers to the shared habits, dispositions and practices of groups. For Elias, social habitus can be understood as “the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society” (Elias, 1991:p.182). In this sense, Elias uses the notion of social habitus to present a view of social life

that allows for agency and choice but within circumstances not of individuals' making. Individual habitus, the habits, dispositions and practices "specific to a particular person" (Fletcher, 1997: p.11) can only ever be understood as an aspect of the wider social habitus. So, although individual habitus has uniqueness to it, it is always grounded in the collective or shared habitus. Of course, it is important to remember that Elias adopted a processual view of social life and, therefore, habitus, individually experienced and collectively authored, should be seen as a life long process, which begins at birth. Elias argued that it was not possible to understand individual or social habitus without reference to their formation and reformation over time. In the words of Elias, our "whole outlook on life continues to be psychologically tied to yesterday's social reality, although today's and tomorrow's reality already differs greatly from yesterday's" (Elias, 1986: p.35 cited in van Krieken, 1998: p.61).

2.5 So, whilst constructions of sexuality are socially, culturally and historically specific, the meanings attached to constructions in one era do not supplant and replace those of earlier eras. Instead, vestiges of previous constructions persist, underpinning and informing the emerging conceptualisations. Contemporary constructions of sexuality and sexual identities, therefore, should be seen as products of long-term social processes. In other words, there are continuities in the history of sexuality and contemporary identities, both individual and collective, are rooted in the past as well as the present. So, for Elias, individual and shared habitus tell us as much about social life and social processes of the past as they do about contemporary social life. Indeed, due to the habitual and largely unconscious nature of the habitus, it is relatively slow, perhaps even resistant to change and may therefore be more reflective of the habitus of the past than it is of the habitus of the present. This warns us against accepting a reflexive model of identity formation that privileges choice and self-creation and the expense of continuity and process, as sexual identities cannot be written and re-written in isolation and cannot be separated from their historical roots.

Figurations and the formation of 'I' and 'We' Identities

3.1 For Elias, all human relations are relations of interdependency or, what he called, figurations. We only become individuals and develop our self and group identity in and through our social relations, which in turn sit within wider social networks of interdependencies (van Krieken, 1998; Smith, 2001). Elias (1970) drew on everyday language and, particularly, the use of personal pronouns as a figurational model. The pronouns 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'we' and 'they' can be used to represent positions in society and articulate the interconnectedness of social life, since each position can only be understood in the context of and with reference to the other positions.

3.2 Elias saw personal pronoun positions as something separate and distinct from social positions or roles. Social roles always refer to the same person, whilst personal pronouns can and do change. Therefore, the personal pronoun model allows us to recognise our interdependencies, our relationships with those in our intercommunicating groups, even though we may occupy different social positions or roles. However, these social figurations are not fixed or static. They are dynamic, in "a state of constant flux and transformation, with interweaving processes of change occurring over different but interlocking time-frames" (Quilley & Loyal, 2004: p.5). Members of groups may "say 'we' of themselves and 'they' of other people; but they may say 'we' and 'they' of different people as time goes by" (Elias, 1970: p.128).

3.3 Elias' personal pronoun model, which locates individual identity within a wider web of interconnecting and interdependent identities, provides a useful lens through which to examine contemporary lesbian and gay life and represents a counter to the dominance of the theories of self-reflexivity. For Elias (1970), we can only refer to ourselves as 'I' in relation to those people we call 'We' and 'They'. So, whilst the expression of a lesbian or gay identity does involve choice, creation and biography it should be seen as a form of story-telling that is predicated on, or at the very least, shaped by, figurational relationships and the changing dynamics of 'I', 'We' and 'They' pronouns.

3.4 Throughout history the membership of 'We' and 'They' groups in relation to the lesbian / gay 'I' has changed, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of these figurations. For example, under the conditions of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1983) figurations develop between those whose sexuality conforms to the accepted parameters of heteronormativity and those individuals whose sexuality is outside and, therefore, challenges heteronormativity. These figurations perpetuate relations of inclusion and exclusion and are central in the creation and continuation of sexual communities as a focus of both individual and collective identity. Here, not only is Elias' personal pronoun model instructive but so too is his conceptualisation of established and outsider relations. A relatively late development in his process sociology, the concept of established and outsider relations emerged out of his research undertaken in collaboration with John Scotson in the early 1960s. Although Elias and Scotson defined community in terms of human interdependencies within a shared geographical locale (van Krieken, 1998), their work on the characteristics and maintenance of established and outsider relations has a much wider application. Elias was essentially concerned with the means by which "members of groups which are, in terms of *power*, stronger than other interdependent groups, think of themselves in human terms as *better* than the others ... [and] ... What is more, in all these cases the "superior" people may make the less powerful people themselves feel they lack virtue - that they are inferior in human terms" (Elias and Scotson, 1994: p.xv-xvi, italics in original). In other words, established and outsider relations are characterised by the normalisation of relations of dominance and subordination. A key feature of the established and outsider relations relates to Elias's earlier work on civilising processes, whereby "the established almost invariably experience and present themselves as more 'civilized' and outsiders are constructed as more 'barbaric'" (van Krieken, 1998:p.151). Not only are outsiders constructed as uncivilised, unrestrained and unrespectable, acceptance by the established requires them to adopt forms of behaviour, social norms and values defined as civilised and respectable by the established.

3.5 It is possible to apply Elias' concept of established and outsider relations to sexuality, whereby heterosexuality represents the established, civilised and respectable and diverse sexualities represent the outside, uncivilised and unrespectable. Since the nineteenth century and the pioneers of sexology there

have been demands for the acceptance of homosexuality on the grounds of respectability and normality. More recently, sexual politics has been predicated on the notion of lesbians and gay men as 'virtually normal' (Sullivan, 1996) and there have been calls for the removal of "state barriers to participation" (Phelan, 2000: p.432) in civil society by the extension of heteronormatively defined and State sanctioned rights to lesbians and gay men. Those outsiders whose sexual behaviour and relationships most closely resemble that of the established are more likely to be acknowledged and recognised, even if they are not actually accepted as members of the established group. Likewise, those outsiders whose sexual behaviour and relationships continue to be constructed as uncivilised and unrestrained because they are non-monogamous or 'unsafe' are pathologised and are less likely to be acknowledged or recognised.

3.6 We are reminded here of Queer critiques of the "politics of normalisation", which result in new figurational relations between the established and outsider groups and see the formation of the dichotomy between good gay citizen and bad queer outlaw. It has been suggested by some queer theorists that the cost of the move towards greater formal equality for lesbians and gay men has been a shrinking of the sexual world and an attempt to "domesticate promiscuous queers" (Phelan, 2001 cited in Richardson, 2004: p.398. See also, Warner, 1999a, 1999b). Visibility and acceptance in the public sphere means increased regulation and surveillance and requires the acceptance of liberal principles of toleration. Therefore, public manifestations of homosexuality, or indeed, any diverse and non-conforming sexuality, are tolerated as long as they do not pose too much of a threat to the heteronormativity of the public / private divide. Richard Goldstein (2002: p.3) has characterised this conditionality of public visibility as "If you're gay, it's okay; if you're queer, disappear". In other words, in Eliasian terms, acceptance by the established group is conditional and the established / outsider figurations continue to be characterised by dominance and subordination.

3.7 Changing figurational dynamics can also be identified between lesbians and gay men, as well as between lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. During certain times throughout history, lesbians, gay men and bisexuals can clearly be seen as occupying the same personal pronoun position of 'I' and 'we', despite their different social positions or roles on the grounds of sexuality, gender, class, ethnicity and so on. For example, the Gay Liberation Front, the radical movement of the early 1970s was not predicated on single-issue, sexuality politics but, rather, was committed to an anti-capitalist agenda. It made connections between oppression on the grounds of sexuality and other structural inequalities, such as sexism and racism (Watney, 1980). In this sense, the 'We' of the GLF transcended social roles and the 'They' positions were occupied by those who stood outside the movement. However, there was considerable fragmentation within the GLF especially along the lines of gender and class, which highlights different figurational relationships. From the inception of the GLF, the position of women had been ambiguous. On the one hand, conceptualising homosexual oppression within a framework of patriarchy, sexism and restrictive sex / gender roles, would seem to suggest that feminism was conceptually and strategically embedded within GLF ideology (Weeks, 1990). Indeed, there are a number of areas where there are considerable similarities, notably in the strategy of politicising the personal and in the commitment to challenging self-oppression and 'false-consciousness' (Watney, 1980). On the other hand, the culture and membership of the GLF was overwhelmingly male. One woman who contributed to Alkarim Jivani's anthology of lesbian and gay life in the twentieth century and who had been involved in the Manchester branch of the GLF states, "The lads from GLF were very contradictory... They were very loud in meetings, they always wanted to chair the meetings. They were very butch, if you will, and we felt that they didn't have an understanding of our sexuality. They were reluctant to share jobs and to share power and so we were fighting a battle within a battle" (Luchia Fitzgerald in Jivani, 1997: p.169). The failure on the part of the men in the GLF to understand lesbians' sexuality and, to a lesser extent, women's failure to understand theirs, reflects the fact that, whilst they were all committed to equality and to ending homophobic oppression, that meant different things to gay men and lesbians (Weeks, 1990). Lesbians in the GLF were as concerned with gender equality, including equal pay and issues around the family and childcare, as they were with equality on the grounds of sexuality. From 1971 onwards, women started withdrawing from the GLF, finding support in the Women's Liberation Movement. Janet Dixon was one of the women who felt there was no alternative but to leave the GLF. "We, the lesbians, began to abandon the GLF dream... in terms of heterosexism, whatever your sexuality, if you are a woman you are always second best. Gay men, under pressure, could return to the closet and regain all the privileges of being male. Where could lesbians go?" (Dixon, 1988: p.75). In the quotes it is possible to see how both of these women positioned gay men as the 'they' to the 'We' of lesbian sexuality. For Fitzgerald, it was the failure of gay men to have an "understanding of our [lesbian] sexuality" that determined the 'We' and 'They' figuration, whilst for Dixon, it was their position as men that represented the 'They' to the position of 'Women'. It might be argued from an Eliasian perspective that despite the shared 'I' and 'we' positions on the grounds of ideology and politics, the different social positions adopted by members of the GLF on the grounds of gender and class contributed to its demise. Not only do these examples demonstrate the way in which figurations are in a constant state of flux, they also illustrate that "what constitutes a social group is not internal to the attributes and self-understanding of its members. Rather what makes a group is the relation in which it stands to others" (Young, 1997: p.389). Understood in this way, one's identity cannot be understood as an individualised, reflexive project of the self but, rather, as one element in a complex and multi-perspectival story of interconnectedness and interdependency.

Challenging the Reflexive Turn in Lesbian and Gay Sociology

4.1 Analysing lesbian and gay identities through an Eliasian lens represents a challenge to the trend towards reflexivity in sociology. In contemporary theories of and research on lesbian and gay reflexivity, it is perhaps Anthony Giddens' notion of the reflexive self that is most clearly identifiable especially his thesis on choice biographies, life politics and the democratisation of relationships. Giddens (1991, 1992) argued that under the conditions of high modernity, our identities are losing their rigidity and are becoming increasingly fluid. Identities can be chosen and changed in what he called a 'reflexive project of the self'. A central feature of the reflexive project of the self concerns the notion of choice narratives, the idea that "On the level of the self, a fundamental component of day-to-day life activity is simply that of *choice*" (Giddens,

1991: p.80, italics in original), whereby individuals create and re-create their lifestyles and identities from a "plurality of choices" (ibid, p.82) as free thinking and free acting agents, freed from the "[structural] shackles of the past" (ibid, p.211). This reflexive project of the self becomes translated in to a language of politics as life politics, which replaces the earlier emancipatory politics. Where emancipatory politics was concerned with "liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect their life chances" (ibid, 210), life politics is a politics of lifestyle, inextricably linked to questions of self-identity. He also argued that sexual relationships were undergoing a transformation, becoming increasingly democratised and equalised. Giddens maintained that a democratisation of the personal sphere is difficult in heterosexual relationships, due to the fact that sexuality has traditionally been inextricably linked to reproduction. In lesbian and gay relationships, however, "sexuality can be witnessed in its complete separation from reproduction" (ibid, p.143) and there is greater degree of equalisation, which "is an intrinsic element in the transformation of intimacy" (ibid, p. 149). Whilst Giddens' notion of the reflexive self can be found in a wide range of sociological texts on lesbian and gay life, in the British literature it is Jeffrey Weeks (1995, 1998, 2007) and Ken Plummer (1995, 2001, 2003) who have most explicitly drawn on his analysis in their work, especially in their conceptualisation of sexual and intimate citizenship^[3].

4.2 Weeks identifies three moments that have facilitated the emergence of the sexual citizen. Firstly, he suggests that there has been a democratisation of relationships, characterised by detraditionalization, egalitarianism and autonomy. In *The Sexual Citizen* (1998: p.44) Weeks explicitly correlates his notion of egalitarianism with Giddens' 'transformation of intimacy' and autonomy, or the "varied patterns of domestic involvement, sexual intimacy and mutual responsibilities that are increasingly displacing traditional patterns of marriage and the family" (ibid.p.44), with what Giddens has referred to as 'experiments in living'. The second moment in the development of the sexual citizen identified by Weeks is the emergence of new subjectivities. In other words, in keeping with Giddens' 'reflexive project of the self' our identities, far from being fixed, are open to the fluidity and change. Finally, Weeks suggests that new stories or new narratives about the self and sexual identity have opened up new possibilities for knowing about the intimate sphere. The 'narratives' he refers include 'coming out' stories, stories of discrimination and prejudice and stories about living with HIV. Crucially, for the sexual citizen, these are stories "which spring up from everyday life, but in turn place new demands on the wider community for the development of more responsive policies, in economics, welfare, the law, culture" (Weeks, 1998: p.47). The Giddensian influence continues in Weeks' most recent work as the following quote illustrates, "In the contemporary world, people are being forced to remake themselves constantly, to see their lives as a project that must be constantly attended to" (Weeks, 2007: p.125).

4.3 In a similar way Ken Plummer's notion of intimate citizenship echoes Giddens' claims of democratisation of relationships, choice narratives and life politics. Intimate citizenship is concerned with "the *control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships: access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc; and socially grounded choices (or not) about gender identities*" (Plummer, 1995: p.151). He sees intimate citizenship as "a sensitising concept, which sets about analysing a plurality of public discourses and stories about how to live the personal life in a late modern world where we are confronted by an escalating series of choices and difficulties around intimacies" (Plummer, 2001:p.238). Central to Plummer's notion of intimate citizenship is the telling of sexual stories, the making public of what was previously private and intimate^[4]. Plummer (1995) argues that there has been a proliferation of sexual stories since the mid to late twentieth century, including the 'coming out' story, stories of the 'family', emotions, representations, gender, identity and the erotic (Plummer, 1995). Not only has there been a proliferation in the number and nature of stories being told but, crucially, the political landscape has changed from one where the focus is on a traditional politics of rights and justice to a politics of empowerment, emancipation and democratisation (Giddens, 1991), what Plummer calls a "radical, pluralistic, democratic contingent, participatory politics of human life choices and differences" (Plummer, 1995: p.147). In other words, there has been a move from emancipatory politics to life politics.

4.4 Whilst it is possible to read Weeks' and Plummer's characterisation of contemporary sexual identities as an example of Giddens' notion of reflexivity, or at the very least draw analogies between their work, and both authors make explicit reference to him, I would argue that, read through an Eliasian lens, their claims of self narrative and choice biographies in late modernity tell us as much, if not more, about collective identities, shared experiences and interdependencies as they do about a reflexive project of the self. Indeed, both authors identify collectivity and community as central in the formation of self-identity even though, arguably there is a privileging of individual agency. For example, Plummer, coming from the symbolic interactionist tradition, saw telling sexual stories as symbolic interactions, in so far as they are narrated, given meaning and consumed through social interaction. However unique our life trajectories appear to be, sexual stories can only be given meaning with reference to the wider social, political and cultural contexts within which they are told. The symbolic importance of stories is not necessarily to be found in the individual narratives that are told, nor in the minutiae of the stories themselves, but rather in "the interactions which emerge around story telling" (Plummer, 1995: p.20) and, particularly, the interactions or "joint" actions between the producers, coaxers and consumers of stories. Similarly, Weeks' analysis of the creation and recreation of lesbian and gay identities cannot be understood in isolation because, as Heaphy (2008) suggests, "they are mediated through lesbian and gay community values". Weeks (1996: p.83) has suggested that the idea of a sexual community is a fiction, albeit a fiction that is necessary to engender a sense of "an imagined community, an invented tradition which enables and empowers". Community acts, therefore, not only as a repository of shared values but also as a focus of individual and collective identity. It provides a focus for the expression of identity, acting as a base for collective social and political action and providing the context for the development of a shared ethos (Weeks, 1996). For both Weeks and Plummer, it is only through awareness of and some degree of engagement with a collectivity that self-identity is formed and re-formed. It is here, in the intersection and interconnectedness of individual and collective identities that Norbert Elias' sociology can prove illuminating. In contrast to theories of reflexivity based on individualisation and choice narratives that dominate the sociology of identity, Elias highlights the continued significance of collectivity and interdependence. Reading the work of Weeks and Plummer through an Eliasian lens does not just represent a semantic shift, using different

linguistic tools to describe and analyse the same phenomenon. Elias' process sociology does offer something different to our understanding of contemporary lesbian and gay lives. It provides us with the means to theorise the dynamic and fluid relationships between disparate sexual identities, which, at times, are characterised by similarity, belonging and interconnectedness and, at others, by difference, otherness and separation. Specifically, an Eliasian perspective allows us to analyse changes in the 'I-We' relationship without giving preference to only the 'I' or the 'We' identity.

4.5 What becomes evident in the work of both Plummer and Weeks is that, despite the fact that they draw explicitly on Giddens' notions of reflexivity, transformation of intimacy and life politics, their characterisation of lesbian and gay life should be seen as neither excessively individualised nor as presenting reflexivity as having "simplistic liberatory potential" (Adams, 2008: p.521). Both see individual identity grounded in and (re)created by collective identity because it is through interaction, shared experience and collectivity that individual identities are given meaning, mediated through sharing sexual stories or membership of community. In this sense, although they do not use Elias' terminology, we can read their work through an Eliasian lens because in both authors' work it is possible to see the relationship between the formation of the 'I' identity and the 'We' identity. We can see the relationship between the subjectively experienced, individual habitus and the collectively co-authored social habitus. We can see the ways figurations, in constant flux and dynamism, continue to shape one's individual and collective identity or, in Eliasian terms, our 'I' and 'We' image. Both authors allow for agency, particularly in the form of telling sexual stories, asserting positive and proud sexual identities and coming together as a community to resist and challenge compulsory heterosexuality. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement that there are limits to this agency, that there are occasions when it is not possible to tell one's story or to have control over how the story is heard by an audience, that community is not a site of resistance and collectivity for all because it creates new figurations of outsiders as well as insiders. The agency that is present in their work is one that is one that reflects "an embedded, embodied and contradictory reflexivity" (Adams, 2006: p.521) that is intimately and inextricably bounded to that of others.

4.6 In conclusion, let's return to Heaphy's article and his appeal for a reflexive sociology, which was predicated on the argument that scholars need to engage in critical reflection in an attempt to present an account of lesbian and gay lives that avoids universalising and homogenising tendencies. He claimed that without employing reflexive methodology or reflexive sociology, it is impossible to accurately portray the diverse and disparate experiences of lesbians and gay men. Throughout this article, it has been argued that Elias' process sociology and, especially, his figural approach can go some way to addressing difference. Individual identity / habitus has to be understood, not only in the context of the collective habitus / identity but also as a temporal phenomenon formed over generations and linked as much to the past as it is to the present. It is also important to recognise that identity and habitus are multi-layered and multi-perspectival and are shaped by the relations or figurations we have with those around us. The expression of a lesbian or gay identity does involve choice, creativity and narration but the 'I' identity does not and cannot exist without reference to a wider set of identity positions. As Elias (1970: p.124) himself, argued "there can be no 'I' without 'he', 'she', 'we', 'you' or 'they' [...] Taken together, the personal pronouns are in fact an elementary expression of the fact that every person is fundamentally related to other people, and that every human individual is fundamentally a social being".

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to Vicki Coppock, Phil Prescott and Paul Reynolds who read earlier drafts of this paper and offered insightful comments. I would like to express my thanks to the anonymous referees for their constructive feedback.

Notes

¹Although similar, Elias' and Bourdieu's conceptualisations of habitus do differ, with Elias drawing much more heavily on Freudian theory and, therefore, presenting a more psychologically informed view of the habitus. Elias and Bourdieu also applied the concept of habitus to different social phenomena in their analyses (Reed-Danaby, 2005; Kasper, 2009). However, this does not point to fundamental differences in their characterisation, but rather "differences in their emphases and interests" (Kasper, 2009: p.317).

²Habitus or 'habit' has a long tradition in sociology and can be found in the work of the founding fathers, including Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (Camic, 1986). It was only during the mid-twentieth century that habit was effectively "excised from the conceptual structure of the field [of sociology]" (Camic, 1986: p.1039), primarily by the structural functionalist sociologists of this period.

³This is not to suggest that Giddens is the main or only influence in their work, nor that their work did not address issues of self-identity, creativity and story-telling prior to his conceptualisation of reflexive biographies but rather that both Weeks and Plummer make an explicit references to Giddens reflexivity thesis.

⁴See Reynolds (2010) for a critical discussion of intimate citizenship and, specifically his argument that, if intimate citizenship is to be meaningful and realised, it is necessary to disentangle the intimate and the private.

References

ADAMS, M (2006) 'Hybridizing Habitus and Reflexivity: Towards an Understanding of Contemporary

Identity?' In: *Sociology* 40(3) pp. 511-528

BECK, U. (1992) *Risk Society*. London: Sage

BECK, U., Giddens, A. & Lash, S. (1994) *Reflexive modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order* Cambridge, Polity Press

CAMIC, C (1986) 'The Matter of Habit' In: *The American Journal of Sociology*, 91(5) pp. 1039-1087

CROSSLEY, N (2003) 'From Reproduction to Transformation: Social Movement Fields and the Radical Habitus' In: *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(6) pp43-68

CROSSLEY, N (2005) *Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory* London, SAGE Publications

DIXON, J (1988) 'Separatism: A Look Back in Anger' In: Cant, B & Hemmings, S (eds) *Radical Records: Thirty Years of Lesbian and Gay History* London, Routledge

ELIAS, N (1970) *What is sociology?* New York, Columbia University Press

ELIAS, N (1991) *The Society of Individuals*

ELIAS, N & Scotson, J, L (1994) *The Established and the Outsiders* London, SAGE Publications

FLETCHER, J (1997) *Violence and Civilization: An Introduction to the work of Norbert Elias* Cambridge, Polity Press

GIDDENS, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity.

GIDDENS, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

GOLDSTEIN, R (2002) *The Attack Queers* London, Verso

HEAPHY, B (2008) 'The Sociology of Lesbian and Gay Reflexivity' In: *Sociological Research Online* 13(1) <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/1/9.html>>

JENKINS, R (2002) *Pierre Bourdieu (Revised Edition)* London, Routledge

JIVANI, A (1997) *It's not Unusual: A History of Lesbian and Gay Britain in the Twentieth Century* London, Michael O'Mara Books Limited

KASPER, D. V. S. (2009) 'Ecological Habitus: Toward a Better Understanding of Socioecological Relations' In: *Organization Environment* 22(3) pp.311-326

PHELAN, S (2000) 'Queer Liberalism?' In: *The American Political Science Review* 94(2) pp. 431-442

PLUMMER, K (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* London, Routledge

PLUMMER, K (2001) 'The Square of Intimate Citizenship: Some Preliminary Proposals' In: *Citizenship Studies* 5(3) pp.237-253

PLUMMER, K (2003) *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* Seattle, University of Washington Press

QUILLEY, S & Loyal, S (2004) 'Towards a central theory: the scope and relevance of the sociology of Norbert Elias' In: Loyal, S & Quilley, S (eds) *The Sociology of Norbert Elias* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

REED-DANAHAY, D (2005) *Locating Bourdieu* Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

REYNOLDS, P. (2010) 'Disentangling Privacy and Intimacy: Intimate Citizenship, Private Boundaries and Public Transgressions' In: *Human Affairs* 20(1) pp.33-42

RICH, A (1983) 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' In: Abel, E & Abel, E, K (eds) *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship* London, The University of Chicago Press Ltd

RICHARDSON, D. (2004) 'Locating Sexualities: From Here to Normality' In: *Sexualities* 7(4) pp.391-411

SMITH, D (2001) *Norbert Elias & Modern Social Theory* London, SAGE Publications

SULLIVAN, A (1996) *Virtually Normal: an argument about homosexuality* London, Picador

VAN KRIEKEN, R (1998) *Norbert Elias* London, Routledge

VAN KRIEKEN, R (2001) 'Norbert Elias and Process Sociology' In: Ritzer, G & Smart, B (eds) *Handbook of Social Theory* London, SAGE Publications

VAN KRIEKEN, R (2003) 'Norbert Elias' In: *Key Contemporary Social Theorists* Elliott, A & Ray, L (eds)

Oxford, Blackwell Publishing

WARNER, M (1999a) *The Trouble with Normal: Sex Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* New York, The Free Press

WARNER, M (1999b) 'Normal and Normaller: Beyond Gay Marriage' In: *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*

WATNEY, S (1980) 'The Ideology of the GLF' In: Gay Left Collective (eds) *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* London, Allison & Busby Limited

WEEKS, J (1990) *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* 2nd edition London, Quartet Books Limited

WEEKS, J (1996) 'The idea of a sexual community' In: *Soundings*, (2):pp 71- 83

WEEKS, J (1998) 'The Sexual Citizen' In: *Theory, Culture & Society* 15 (3-4) pp35-52

WEEKS, J (2007) *The World we Have Won* London, Routledge

YOUNG, I.M., (1997), 'Difference as a resource for democratic communication' In: Bohman, J. & Rehg,W. (eds) *Deliberative Democracy*, Cambridge: MIT Press.