

# Chapter One

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## Introduction

*I cannot escape the nagging suspicion that gay liberation has disregarded Audre Lorde's oft-quoted dictum that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,' and has, instead, contented itself with simply building a small, yet tastefully furnished addition out back.*

-- Riki Anne Wilchins, *Read My Lips*

*It is not sex that gives the pleasure, but the lover.*

-- Marge Piercy

Are you a man or a woman? Are you sexually attracted to women, men or both? The answers to these two questions, each of which is expected to be simple, determines your sexual orientation: homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. In many popular discourses, as well as some scientific ones, sexual orientation is taken for granted as a (fixed) characteristic of individuals. This notion is a relatively recent one in Western history.

### **The Complexities of Desire**

According to historian Jonathan Katz (1996), the word heterosexual was first used in something like its contemporary sense in 1893. Austrian psychiatrist and sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing helped change the definition of sexually normal and healthy from one based on conscious efforts towards reproduction to one based on other-sex desire, thus allowing for the possibility of pleasure without reproduction. Heterosexuality did not become a popular identity in the United States until the 1920s when the notion of (male plus female) sex for procreation only began to decline. Until its construction in the late 1800s through medical and juridical discourses, the homosexual was an inconceivable identity. '...sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than a juridical subject of them. The 19th century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in

addition to being a type of life, a life form' (Foucault, 1990: 43). Challenging Katz and Foucault, Oosterhuis' (2000) history of Krafft-Ebing's sexual politics suggests that the production of sexual orientation identities – heterosexual and homosexual – was not simply a top-down process of medicalisation, but an effect of complex micropolitical relations of power and resistance (an account compatible with Foucault's methodology if not always his writing). This historical work is part of a social constructionist project which rejects the assumption of sexual orientation as a fixed characteristic of individuals. Instead, sexual orientation has been theorised as a role (McIntosh, 1998 [1968]), a script (Gagnon and Simon, 1973), a performance (Butler, 1990), a fiction (Weeks, 1995) or a narrative (Plummer, 1995) rather than an essence.

Perhaps the earliest social constructionist perspective on sexual orientation was developed by Simon and Gagnon (1998 [1967]). They argued that studies of homosexuality suffered from two key defects. The first is a simplistic and monolithic construction of the category "homosexual". The second is the obsession with aetiology. Aetiological theories largely focused on biological characteristics like genes and hormones or on dysfunctional families. Although they didn't have much to say specifically about biological models, Simon and Gagnon offered a critique of dominant theories that the development of gendered and sexualised identities are a unified phenomenon dependent upon the proximity of the family to the nuclear ideal. Even more radically, they suggested that any theory which proposes to explain a cause of homosexuality must also explain how people become heterosexual. In addition to criticising the specific limitations of aetiological theories, they also question the emphasis. Sociologically, they argued it is more interesting to understand people's experiences of identity rather than what may have ultimately caused them to inhabit that identity.

Simon and Gagnon further argued a preponderance of emphasis is placed upon the sexual aspects of the "homosexual's" life. Through being labelled deviant, homosexuality is constructed as sexual in a way in which heterosexuality is not. Even more, the "homosexual" is constructed as a type of person where the "heterosexual" is not. Although a lot has changed since 1967, including the decriminalisation and demedicalisation of homosexuality in most countries and the rise of gay and lesbian identities, the observations of Simon and Gagnon still largely apply. The increased visibility of homosexual identity has led to the limited development of the "heterosexual" as a type of person: a label largely used as a defence, an attack or to otherwise differentiate one from an either stigmatised or proud homosexuality.

This obsession with deviant sexuality and consequent labelling of the "homosexual" as a type of person creates an illusion of similarity between people so labelled. Simon and Gagnon were keen to emphasise that homosexuality is not a unitary experience. "Not only are there as many ways of being homosexual as there are of being heterosexual, but the individual homosexual, in the course of his [sic] everyday life, encounters as many choices and as many crises as the heterosexual" (p62).

Simon and Gagnon conclude by arguing that any sociological endeavour to understand the lives of homosexual people must include aspects other than sexuality including family, economics and religion. "The aims, then, of a sociological approach to homosexuality are to begin to define the factors -- both individual and situational -- that predispose the homosexual to follow one homosexual path as against others; to spell out the contingencies that will shape the career that has been embarked upon; and to trace out the patterns of living in both their pedestrian and seemingly exotic aspects. Only then will we begin to understand the homosexual. This pursuit must inevitably bring us -- though from a particular angle -- to those complex matrices wherein most human behaviour is fashioned" (p65).

Another germinal piece of social constructionist writing on sexual orientation was "The Homosexual Role" by Mary McIntosh (1998 [1968]). McIntosh begins with a sociological critique of the frequent characterisation of homosexuality as a condition of individuals. She suggests that the recognition that homosexual behaviour is not confined to those labelled "homosexuals" should lead to the development of an anti-essential conceptualisation of sexual orientation. Instead, many people evade this problem 'by retaining their assumption and puzzling over the question of how to tell whether someone is "really" homosexual or not' (p68). Medical models of sexual orientation have constructed an in between condition called bisexuality and the corresponding type of person labelled "the bisexual". 'There is no extended discussion of bisexuality; the topic is usually given a brief mention in order to clear the ground for the consideration of "true homosexuality"' (p68).

Like Simon and Gagnon, McIntosh was concerned with the obsessive research on the aetiology of homosexuality. She also felt that this line of inquiry was bound to be uninformative. On the other hand, the conceptualisation of homosexuality as a condition, she argues, is an interesting object of sociological study. 'This conception and the behaviour it supports operate as a form of social control in a society in which homosexuality is

condemned. Furthermore, the uncritical acceptance of this conception by social scientists can be traced to their concern with homosexuality as a social problem. They have tended to accept the public definition of what the problem is, and they have been implicated in the process of social control' (p69).

McIntosh argues that the social labelling of certain persons as deviants acts in roughly two ways as a mechanism of social control. First, it serves to draw a clear line between permissible and impermissible behaviour. Any tendencies towards deviant behaviour will quickly be labelled and 'immediately raise questions of a total move into a deviant role with all the sanctions that this is likely to elicit' (p69). Second, labelling segregates deviants from normals, preventing contamination. Thus, normal heterosexual people are protected from deviant homosexual practises and values. The construction of this sort of division can lead to fixed and polarised identities. Indeed, McIntosh notes the conceptualisation of sexual orientation as a condition is popular among homosexual people as well as heterosexual ones. The rigid categorisation offers justification for deviant behaviour and inhibits anxieties about ambiguous possibilities. Furthermore, it allows for the legitimisation of homosexuality without challenging norms of heterosexuality.

McIntosh argues that the labelling process should be the focus of inquiry and that homosexuality should be seen as a social role rather than a condition. Role is more useful than condition, she argues, because roles (of heterosexual and homosexual) can be dichotomised in a way that behaviour cannot. She draws upon cross-cultural data to demonstrate that in many societies 'there may be much homosexual behaviour, but there are no "homosexuals"' (p71).

Finally, McIntosh offers further support for her argument that homosexuality cannot be considered a condition. The conception of homosexuality as exclusive of heterosexuality (and vice versa) is a culturally and historically specific development. Despite the dominance of this idea in our society from as long ago as early 18th century England, the reality of people's sexual lives is not so neatly categorised. She looked to Kinsey's data as a source for understanding the impact of the homosexual role (and the same time the heterosexual role) on sex categorical desire. In Kinsey's terms this included both 'psychological reactions and overt experience' (cited in McIntosh 1998 [1968]). McIntosh argued that a strong social role would result in a polarisation of sexual desire (e.g. heterosexual or homosexual), whereby experiences of attraction for members of both sexes would be relatively rare. This begs the

question of what constitutes "relatively rare". Kinsey's decision to construct five categories of bisexual desire is entirely arbitrary. Alternatively, a comparison of levels of polarisation across categories offers a useful way of looking for the effects of the social role.

Weeks (1998a) argues that a central aspect of McIntosh's germinal work was a distinction between behaviour and category. Weeks notes that this distinction does not invalidate questions of aetiology but rather 'suspends them as irrelevant to the question of the social organisation of sexuality'. Foucault as well claimed no certainty on the subject: 'On this question I have absolutely nothing to say' (cited in Weeks, 1998a: 137).

The really interesting issue is not whether there is a biological or psychological propensity that distinguishes those who are sexually attracted to people of the same gender, from those who are not -- that can safely be left to those who want to cut up brains, explore DNA, or count angels on the point of a needle. More fundamental are the meanings these propensities acquire, however or whyever they occur, the social organisations that attempt to demarcate the boundaries of meanings, and their effect on collective attitudes and individual sense of self (Weeks, 1998a: 137).

Weeks dismisses aetiology as uninteresting except perhaps to mad scientists and abstract philosophers. But, in his agnosticism, he acknowledges the possibility of essential heterosexual and homosexual desires. While I agree that the social organisation and construction of meaning surrounding desire are sociological questions of great importance, I also think that aetiology of desire can and should be addressed sociologically.

Edward Stein notes (1992) in his conclusion to *Forms of Desire* that many of the social constructionist criticisms made of essentialism are based on inessential characteristics of essentialism. He points out three characteristics attributed to essentialist models of sexual orientation and subsequently criticised. First, essentialism is charged with theorising homosexuality in particular rather than sexual orientation generally. Second, essentialism is based upon simplistic sexual orientation categories (i.e. heterosexual/homosexual binary). Third, essentialism relies upon a single explanation for the origin of sexual orientation (i.e. genetic, psychoanalytic, etc). Stein suggests that a more sophisticated essentialism is able to respond to each of these criticisms. This essentialism should explain all sexual orientations using a more complex categorisation which does not depend upon a single explanation.

I suggest that the first and third points are much easier for essentialism to address than the second. An essentialist theory of sexual orientation requires the existence of objective cross-cultural and ahistorical categories. Stein rightly notes the simplicity of Kinsey's bipolar model of sexual orientation. In his germinal studies on sexual behaviour, Kinsey (1948, 1953) rated subjects' sexual behaviour from 0 (entirely mixed-sex) to 6 (entirely same-sex). While revolutionary for its time, a linear model of gendered sexual desire is problematic in that it lumps together a broad range of people as 'bisexual'. It also places this range *in between* heterosexuality and homosexuality. Stein cites a more complex model developed through empirical work by Storms (1980) which suggests, unlike Kinsey, that same-sex and other-sex desire are independent of each other. Also unlike Kinsey, Storms' model has the advantage of being able to differentiate between a high degree of desire for both men and women and a low degree of desire for either men or women.

Another model of sexual orientation was developed by Fritz Klein (1993) which expands upon dimensions of the Kinsey model while retaining a linear understanding of gendered sexual desire. The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) recognises the possibility of sexual orientation changing over time; it includes ratings for past, present and future. The KSOG also includes multiple factors of sexual orientation identity including: sexual attractions, behaviours and fantasies as well as emotional and social preferences, heterosexual/homosexual lifestyle and self identification. This model is valuable because of its ability to recognise that sexual orientation identity is complex.

Combining the KSOG multi-variable understanding of 'orientation' with Storms' recognition of the independence of same-sex and other-sex desires would provide a much more robust model of sexual orientation. But no matter how complex a model of sexual orientation becomes it still presumes that the concept of sexual orientation is an accurate way of describing individuals' sexual desires. Indeed, it presumes that gender *is the definitive basis* for sexual desire. Furthermore, it presumes that gender is easily understood in binary categories of *men* and *women*. The essentialism upon which this depends contrasts with the sociological and historical work that clearly demonstrates the constructed nature of 'sexual orientation'.

Neither male nor female are clearly defined categories (see Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2000). None of the characteristics which are used to define gender (i.e. chromosomes, genital structures, reproductive roles) splits neatly into two categories. The human species is only roughly dimorphic. Gender categories are constructed around biological tendencies rather than the consequences of an essential binary. Sexual orientation cannot be essential if gender categories are not. Sociobiological accounts, in particular, often suggest that particular sexed characteristics (e.g. waist to hip ratios) explain categorical desire (see e.g., Miller, 2000). Given that such characteristics are not neatly sexed, we might expect that essential desire for a particular waist to hip ratio would not result in desire for women, for example, but for people with narrow waists and curvaceous hips.

An emphasis on the eroticisation of binary gender categories maintains the existence of 'sexual orientation'. But, how much explanatory power does this concept have? While all the people a given person is sexually attracted to may fall within only one gender category, this is not to say that sexual desire is categorical. A person who is *only* attracted to people who are women is not attracted to *all* people who are women. The concept of sexual orientation cannot explain why this person finds some women attractive and not others. Indeed, sexual orientation cannot even explain all gendered forms of desire as the eroticisation of gendered characteristics does not always fall simply into binary categories. The quantity of pornographic images and telephone sex lines directed at heterosexual identified men eroticising the relatively recent concept of "chicks with dicks" provides one example. These images often combine a mixture of "feminine" characteristics including large breasts, make-up, big hair and feminine clothing with the "masculine" characteristic of a penis. Another example is the eroticisation of butch and femme forms of gender presentation in lesbian cultures (see Nestle, 1987). Categorically gendered constructions of sexual desire also cannot address the reality of individuals with a history of single gendered desire who find themselves only once attracted to a member of the 'inappropriate' sex. Furthermore, even sexual orientation identity itself can be eroticised. Straight women are sometimes eroticised by lesbian women (termed "lady lovers" by Susie Bright (1990)). Likewise, straight men are the subject of sexual fantasies (and realities) for many gay men. The heterosexual corollaries have been labelled "dyke daddies" or "lesbian-identified men" (Bright, 1992) and fag hags. Bisexual women have been erotically constructed as sexually adventurous and offering the opportunity of a threesome with two women for a heterosexual man. Sexual orientation is placed as central to sexual desire while other aspects of sexual preference (e.g. S/M and fetishism) are

constructed as deviations.

Other aspects of human social organisation have also been eroticised, such as class. Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl" may have been gendered, but she was certainly classed as was the voice of the singer. Another example comes from a personal advertisement site for men with same-gender desires (Gaydar, 2001). Here, a 24 -year-old white British gay man described himself as 'Looking for hot suit and tie sex with one or more boyz!!' Again, the suit and tie is gendered, as is this individual's sexual preference. But this is not the whole story. For 'hot suit and tie sex' to be intelligible, others must recognise the eroticisation of clothing and the class status and power which they represent. In fact, this particular web site offers the advertisers in the opportunity to identify with a particular style of clothing. Some of these options are obviously eroticised (e.g. military, leather, sports kit). Others (e.g. casual, alternative, formal, trendy) serve to indicate to others what "type" of person the advertiser is in order to indicate the likelihood of social/sexual attraction. Thus, it appears that clothing is eroticised because of its symbolic representation of social statuses including power, gender and class.

Not only does 'sexual orientation' have limited explanatory power in understanding the complexities of human sexual desires, practices and relationships, but efforts to interpret ourselves and each other in terms of sexual orientation categories also result in a great deal of suffering. In particular, people who experience strong same-gender desires have historically been stigmatised. The twins heterosexuality and homosexuality, born in the the 19th century, were not loved equally. Not only has human desire been split into categories, but these categories are arranged hierarchically. Bisexuality, when acknowledged as a possibility (or set of possibilities), is likely to either be romanticised or placed lower on the hierarchy than homosexuality.

Bisexuals are frequently viewed by gay and lesbian-identified individuals as possessing a degree of privilege not available to gay men and lesbians, and are viewed by many heterosexuals as amoral, hedonistic spreaders of disease and disrupters of families. This "double discrimination" by heterosexuals and the gay and lesbian communities is seldom recognized or acknowledged as a force of external oppression, yet this oppression is real and has many damaging effects on bisexuals (Ochs, 1996:217).

Politically, the question then is how to address the suffering caused by these hierarchical categories. The most popular strategy has come to be called identity politics.



## The Limits of Identity Politics

The concept of a homosexual minority group developed during the 1950s (Cory, 1951 cited in Epstein, 1998), but did not flourish until the late 1970s with the growth of gay subcultures (Epstein, 1998). Here we see the seeds of a future identity politics in 1950s US homophile organisations. 'The primary function of the homosexual group is psychological in that it provides a social context within which the homosexual can find acceptance *as a homosexual* and collect support for his deviant tendencies' (Leznoff & Westley, 1998:5 [1956]; my emphasis). This version quickly smothered an alternative approach: 'gone were the dreams of liberating society by releasing "the homosexual in everyone." Instead, homosexuals concentrated their energies on social advancement *as homosexuals*' (Epstein, 1998: 140; original emphasis). The goal of liberation was traded for an ideal of equality between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Often, lesbian, gay and bisexual identity politics are based on a biological essentialism, arguing that equal rights should be granted to sexual minorities because their desires are 'natural' (see Stein, 1999 for discussion). Some advocates of identity politics have been able to incorporate a constructionist position by emphasising shared experience and common interests, thus modifying the foundation minimally. Seidman notes that variations of gay politics from essentialist to constructionist all depend on a notion of sameness in terms of interests.

'Gay theory has been linked to what I call a "politics of interest." This refers to politics organised around claims for rights and social, cultural, and political representation by a homosexual subject. In the early homophile quest for tolerance, in the gay liberationist project of liberating the homosexual self, or in the ethnic nationalist assertion of equal rights and representation, the gay movement has been wedded to a politics of interest' (Seidman, 1997: 153-154).

This assertion of sameness and common interests does not sit well with many people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, or who think of themselves as having same-sex desires. Emphasis on shared sexual orientation identity occludes discussion of the other key social divisions including race, gender and class. It also de-emphasises sexual diversity among

people who identify as having same-sex desires. Various new forms of identity politics have developed to provide alternatives for those who feel excluded by gay politics with its emphasis on the issues of white, middle-class, able-bodied, homosexual men.

This dependence on sameness is the major limitation of identity politics. While lesbian and gay identity politics developed in order to challenge the suffering produced by sexual orientation hierarchy, it has been criticised for producing new hierarchies.

The desire to bring things into unity generates a logic of hierarchical opposition. Any move to define an identity, a closed totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure. [...] Any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction, and logic of Identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn (Young, 1989: 303).

Even those who attempt to develop more nuanced theoretical positions in order to defend identity politics acknowledge the difficulties caused by difference. Steven Epstein's (1998 [1997]) defence of the ethnic minority model of gay and lesbian identity is a particularly useful example. His goal is to avoid either the "strict essentialist" (modern) and "strict constructionist" (early postmodern) understandings of identity in order to carve a path in between. Whilst he acknowledges that constructionists 'have continued to provide the most useful insightful analyses of the changing character of the gay community and gay identity' (1998:151), he is critical of constructionism because it is not 'politically useful' in that it cannot gauge concrete political strategies which are often neither essentialist nor constructionist. He offers the example, of the lesbian feminists who "have consolidated an (essentialist) conception of group difference to a significant extent - but the emphasis on identity as a conscious political choice seems to place them squarely within the constructionist camp" (142). It seems that Epstein is attempting to avoid being either essentialist or constructionist himself in the hope that it will save him from being criticised as essentialist. However, Cohen (1991) notes of Epstein's argument that while he expounds upon the political value of an ethnic identity politics, he briefly admits awareness of its limitations in his conclusion.

. . . it seems clear enough that the gay movement will never be able to forge effective alliances with other social movements unless it can address the inequalities that plague its internal organization. In this light it is worth

noting a peculiar paradox of identity politics: *while affirming a distinctive group identity that legitimately differs from the larger society, this form of political expression simultaneously imposes a "totalizing" sameness within the group: It says, this is who we "really are."* A greater appreciation for internal diversity - on racial, gender, class and even sexual dimensions - is a prerequisite if the gay movement is to move beyond "ethnic" insularity and join with other progressive causes. (75, citing Epstein 1987:47-48; emphasis Cohen's)

Cohen argues that by relegating this point as to an afterthought, Epstein's argument exemplifies the response of gay and lesbian identity politics to issues of difference, inevitably privileging sameness over difference.

A further effect of emphasising sameness on identity category is to construct its opposite as equally monolithic. In other words, gay and lesbian (or even lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender (LGBT)) minority strategies help to produce the notion of a singular heterosexual majority. In this respect, LGBT identity politics ultimately prevent that which they are seemingly working toward. Through this 'reverse discourse' (Foucault, 1990) of homosexual or gender illness come Pride, sexual identity politics reinforces the LGBT/straight and man/woman binaries rather than attempting to deconstruct them. Goffman notes that those who take this path are doomed to replicate the society which they attempt to criticise:

When the ultimate political objective is to remove stigma from differentness, the individual may find that his very efforts can politicize his own life, rendering it even more different from the normal life initially denied him . . . Further, in drawing attention to the situation of his own kind he is in some respects consolidating a public image of his differentness as a real thing and of his fellow-stigmatized as constituting a real group. On the other hand, if he seeks some kind of separateness, not assimilation, he may find that he is necessarily presenting his militant efforts in the language and style of his enemies (1963:123).

Goffman's critique of identity politics is a valuable one, though the aims of a 'normal life' and 'assimilation' also reinforce the idea of a normal majority. If the initial aim of LGBT politics was to eliminate stigma on the basis of difference, then they must not reinforce a particular shared difference, but rather deconstruct the idea that there is such a thing as 'normal.' An alternative politics could reinforce the idea that everyone is different, and that this human diversity is valuable. The key point in Goffman's critique is that this opposition to 'sameness'

based on a politics of 'sameness' is bound to reinforce the idea of normal. Goldstein and Rayner note, 'Identity-claims depend on others for their viability but this fact is rarely acknowledged by the claimants, for to do so would be to acknowledge dependency, *and this is precisely what the claimants want to deny*' (1994:371; original emphasis).

Furthermore, in producing a singular notion of heterosexuality, identity politics disguise differences (including oppressions and challenges to oppression) that exist within this broad category. Carol Smart (1996) criticises the tendency in feminist theory to tar all heterosexual possibilities with the same brush. While she acknowledges the value of feminist analysis of orthodox heterosexuality as based on the eroticisation of (power) difference, she also criticises those (e.g. Andrea Dworkin and Sheila Jeffreys) who seem to suggest that women have only two options: opt out of heterosexuality (feminist) or accept the orthodoxy (collaborator). Feminist analysis has been crucial in pointing out the ways in which the naturalisation of heterosexuality, including mechanistic and barely controllable male sexuality and passive female sexuality, has functioned to excuse rape, sexual abuse, prostitution and the perceived inconsequence of women's sexual pleasure. In other areas, feminists have suggested that it is possible for constructions of womanhood to be resisted or reconstructed. At times, however, heterosexuality has been constructed as essentially oppressive to women. Smart argues that this oppositional dualism which developed in 1970s (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981) debates around heterosexuality and which resurfaced in the early 1990s (e.g. Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993) is in danger of inhibiting progress in theorising heterosexuality.

Crucial, then, is the importance of recognising the potential diversity of heterosexualities. Despite the recognition of the diversity among non-heterosexual identified people, acknowledgement of alternative possibilities for heterosexualities has not been forthcoming. Smart argues that one explanation for this is a desire to be able to recognise 'heterosexuals' as a 'class' responsible for heterosexism and homophobia. Acknowledging diversity problematises the concept of a unitary power wielding class of heterosexuals. This is yet another way in which efforts to construct unity in identity politics cause tensions. Smart recognises the importance of critical studies of dominant identity categories, suggesting that heterosexuality needs to be examined in the same way in which masculinities and whiteness have recently been explored. While Smart argues that we must recognise potential diversity of heterosexualities, she also acknowledges that orthodox heterosexual identity/ideology has only

recently been challenged by the rise of gay/queer and lesbian/feminist criticisms. Being largely perceived as unquestionable, "heterosexual identity is therefore akin to a white colonial identity. It entails an effortless superiority, a moral rectitude, a defeat of the emotional and the neurotic by the power of unconscious struggle and, of course, the certain knowledge of masculine superiority" (Smart, 1996: 173). The question Smart poses is whether it is possible to question the unquestionable without giving up the possibility of politically alternative and pleasurable heterosexualities.

## **Resisting Orientation**

The prioritisation of sameness over difference within identity politics concerned me. In earlier research, I looked at Pride Scotland in order to evaluate criticisms of LGBT identity politics (Heckert, 2004). With this project, I wanted to get more personal. It seemed to me that efforts to conform to sexual orientation identities causes a great deal of suffering, regardless of whether one might be understood as a member of a 'sexual minority' or not. This had certainly been my own experience, as well as that of many people I cared about. Doing sexual health education work with young people has also helped me to recognise how much efforts teenagers put into doing heterosexuality. And, as various researchers have pointed out, while sexual orientation identities may be constraining, many people also find them deeply empowering (Plummer, 1995 and 2003; Seidman, 1997; Weeks, 1995; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). Who was I to tell people that they should give them up? At the same time, I argued that the notion of sexual orientation is an inherently oppressive one as it fixes, categorises and places into hierarchies the complexities of human desires. In order to avoid a false consciousness argument, with its inherent authoritarianism (that I know better than people who find value in these identities) I had to try to find out how people experienced sexual orientation. In keeping with my own interests and values, I wanted to understand how people resist orientation. At the same time, if I were to provide a viable alternative to identity politics, I also had to try to understand how people feel that they benefit from these identities. From these 'personal' perspectives, I aimed to contribute to the process of developing political practice, purely theoretical and applied, to overcoming 'sexual orientation' as a defining framework in so many people's lives. While some commentators suggest that the hetero/homo division is already breaking down (Giddens, 1992; Roseneil, 2002), I am not necessarily so optimistic. Regardless, it should be apparent that there is a lot more to be done on this front.

In the next chapter, I return to debates around difference in order to provide a historical grounding to my project. This also provided me an opportunity to explore different perspectives within the politics of sexuality to assist in my understanding of participants' experiences. In Chapter Three, I suggest an alternative framework for understanding sexual orientation identity and, at the same time, providing a potential basis for a more effective politics of sexuality. In Chapter Four, I describe who I spoke to, why I chose them, and how I experienced the research process. In Chapters Five through Eight, I provide analyses of participants' stories, addressing questions of personal identity and political action. And finally, I conclude with my thoughts on the possibilities of resisting orientation.