The contextual process of identity: a cultural study of sexual identity change as experienced by American-educated college students studying sexuality in the Netherlands.

Peg Brigham Alden
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/5409

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
THE CONTEXTUAL PROCESS OF IDENTITY: A CULTURAL STUDY OF SEXUAL IDENTITY CHANGE AS EXPERIENCED BY AMERICAN-EDUCATED COLLEGE STUDENTS STUDYING SEXUALITY IN THE NETHERLANDS

A Dissertation Presented

by

PEG BRIGHAM ALDEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2001

Human Development Program
THE CONTEXTUAL PROCESS OF IDENTITY:
A CULTURAL STUDY OF SEXUAL IDENTITY CHANGE AS
EXPERIENCED BY AMERICAN-EDUCATED COLLEGE
STUDENTS STUDYING SEXUALITY IN THE NETHERLANDS

A Dissertation Presented
by
PEG BRIGHAM ALDEN

Approved as to style and content by:

Maurianne Adams, Chair
Pat Griffin, Member
Susan Fiske, Member

Bailey W. Jackson, Dean
School of Education
DEDICATION

To my partner Lee Henigan Alden and our daughter Anya.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Maurianne Adams who has been a mentor to me for the last ten years.

I would also like to thank the students who shared their lives so openly in order to make this research project possible.
ABSTRACT

THE CONTEXTUAL PROCESS OF IDENTITY:
A CULTURAL STUDY OF SEXUAL IDENTITY CHANGE AS EXPERIENCED BY AMERICAN-EDUCATED COLLEGE STUDENTS STUDYING SEXUALITY IN THE NETHERLANDS.

MAY 2001

PEG BRIGHAM ALDEN, B.I.S., SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING M.ED., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST ED.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Maurianne Adams

This qualitative study followed thirteen students from various American colleges and universities who participated in a College Semester Abroad Program focusing on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Studies in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The purpose of the study was to see whether students’ experiences of their own sexual identity shifted over the course of their four-month, cross-cultural experience and if so, to identify facilitating conditions and obstacles to identity changes. By using interviews, observations and students’ written work, eleven shifts in sexual identity were noted, including shifts in feelings, cognition and practice. By reviewing pre-program and beginning-of-program interviews and application material, students’ identity profiles also showed a variety of sexual identity functions, some of which were congruent with Dutch culture and others which were dissonant. A direct relationship was found between the number of sexual identity shifts a student experienced during their stay in the Netherlands and the number of Dutch-dissonant identity functions which they brought with them from the United States. This study proposes that future research combine social constructionist theories of sexual identity with Piagetian theories of cognitive development in a new process model of sexual identity development.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE PROBLEM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale and Significance of Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L/G/B Identity Formation, Concepts and Implications</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Identity in Historical Context</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn-of-the Century Sexology</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freud and the Emergence of Psychosexual Development</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinsey and the Challenge to the Dichotomous View of Sexuality</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Early Gay Movement and the Shaping of Identity</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emergence of Gay Identity Theory</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Models of Sexual Identity Development</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Model Assumption #1: Sexual Identity Development Is Linear. From Starting Point to Final Identity, There Is But One Basic Path</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Model Assumption #2: Sexual Identity Is Understood within the Context of Oppression and a Shared Stigmatized Identity</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Model Assumption #3: Sexual Identity Is Understood in the Context of the Individual's Relationship to the Stable Sexual Categories, Homosexual and Heterosexual</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Radicalesbian Feminism&quot; and the Concept of Sexuality</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Constructionism and Essentialism: Theories of Sexuality

The Theoretical "Wars" Begin
Sexual Identity and the Social Constructionist Movement

Constructionist Assumption #1: Collective Discourses Are
Merely Artifacts of Exchange
Constructionist Assumption #2: Social Power Plays a
Significant Role in Our Social Meaning-Making
Constructionist Assumption #3: Empirical Science Holds
No Particular Claim to "Objective Truth"

"New" (1990's) Models of Sexual Identity

Cox and Gallois, 1996: Social Identity Approach to Sexual Identity
McCann and Fissinger, 1996: Sexual Minority Identity Formation
Rust, 1992: Identity Formation Process
Jenness, 1992: Lesbian Detypification Process
D’Augelli, 1994: Human Development Model of Sexual Identity Development

The Challenge to Social Constructionism
Social and Political Implications of Models of Sexual Identity
The Individual: Active Participant or Passive Player in the Construction of Sexual Identity
Current Status of Constructionism/Essentialism Debate

LGB Identity in the Netherlands
Conclusion

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction
Match of Theory and Methodology
Methodological Challenges
Research Setting
The College Semester Abroad (CSA) Student As Research Participant
My Role As Researcher
Data Collection Methods

Data Collection #1: Observations and Anecdotal Data in Field Journal
Data Collection #2: Pre- and Post-Program Interviews
Data Collection #3: Written Work

Data Analysis
IV. SEXUAL IDENTITY SHIFTS

Introduction ................................................................................................................. 87
Shifts in Experience ................................................................................................. 90
  Shift in Feelings about the Liberatory Nature of Sexual Identity ................. 90
  Shift to an Experience of Loss in Relationship to Sexual Identity .......... 91
  Shift in Feelings about Group Membership ..................................................... 93
Shifts in Cognition .................................................................................................. 95
  Shift in Belief about the “Cause” of Sexuality .............................................. 95
  Shift in Understanding about the Consistency of Sexual Identity .......... 97
  Shift in the “Salience” of One’s Sexual Identity ............................................. 98
  Shift in Understanding about Having the “Truth” about Sexuality ...... 101
Shifts in Practice ...................................................................................................... 102
  Shift in the Use of Identity Labels ................................................................. 103
  Shift in Public Presentation of One’s Sexuality ............................................ 105
  Shift in Political Involvement ....................................................................... 106
  Shift in Sexual Attraction and Behavior .......................................................... 107
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 109

V. IDENTITY MOMENTUM

Introduction ............................................................................................................... 111
Sexual Identity Functions ....................................................................................... 114
Sexual Identity Functions Congruent with Dutch Culture ..................................... 117
  Dutch-Congruent Function #1: Flexibility ....................................................... 117
    Flexibility in Context ...................................................................................... 117
  Dutch-Congruent Function #2: Ease ................................................................. 118
    Ease in Context .............................................................................................. 119
  Dutch-Congruent Function #3: Sex ................................................................. 119
    Sex in Context .............................................................................................. 120
Sexual Identity Functions Dissonant with Dutch Culture ...................................... 121
Dutch-Dissonant Function #1: Personal Defense .................................................. 121
Personal Defense in Context .............................................................................. 122
Dutch-Dissonant Function #2: Political Strategy .................................................. 125
Political Strategy in Context ............................................................................. 125
Dutch-Dissonant Function #3: Performance .......................................................... 128
Performance in Context ...................................................................................... 129
Dutch-Dissonant Function #4: Community Building .............................................. 131
Community Building in Context ...................................................................... 132
Dutch Dissonant Function # 5: Organizing Tool .................................................... 133
Organizing Tool in Context ................................................................................ 135

Identity Profiles .................................................................................................. 137
Relationship Between Identity Functions and Identity Shifts .............................. 138
Piagetian Theory and the Process of Sexual Identity Change ................................. 140

VI. CONCLUSION

Implications of Findings for the Use of Existing Sexual Identity
Development Models .......................................................................................... 144
The Process Model of Sexual Identity Development ............................................. 146

Equilibrium .......................................................................................................... 149
Dissonance ........................................................................................................... 150
Disequilibrium ...................................................................................................... 150
Assimilation/Accommodation .............................................................................. 150
Return to Equilibrium ......................................................................................... 151

Accommodation Case Example: Eduardo ............................................................ 151
Assimilation Case Example: Joy ........................................................................... 153
Implications of Findings for Working with Those Engaged in the Sexual
Identity Development Process ............................................................................ 156
Implications of Findings for Studies of Sexual Identity ....................................... 159
Final Statement .................................................................................................... 160

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................. 162
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Problematic Assumptions Perpetuated or Left Unchallenged by the “New” (1990’s) Identity Models</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Shifts by Pseudonym of Subject</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shifts Experienced by Subject (in Descending Order)</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Identity Functions by Pseudonym of Subject (in Alphabetical Order)</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pseudonym of Subject with Corresponding Dissonant Functions and Identity Shifts</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Matrix of Identity Shifts and Functions</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Process Model of Sexual Identity Development</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Perhaps it is best to start this dissertation with the story of how I came to my research topic.

In the summer of 1994 I accepted the position as the founding Academic Director of the School for International Training's lesbian, gay and bisexual studies program in Amsterdam. I, like many of the students who have since attended the program, had certain expectations of what I would find in the Netherlands. Renowned as a country accepting of diversity, one which has taken the international lead in gay and lesbian rights and academics, I expected the Netherlands to greet me with a vibrant, political and cultural, gay and lesbian community. Such was not the case and I found the mystery quite puzzling.

Equipped with my own, American-constructed lesbian identity and years of graduate study in Human Development and Social Justice Education, I was confounded by what I found that first semester in Amsterdam. Despite the fact that we had chosen Amsterdam as the site of this program because of its renowned tolerance for sexual expression and despite the fact that the political climate in the Netherlands reflected what my students and I might consider an ideal environment for gay and lesbian rights, there was something about Amsterdam that I, my partner and my first group of students found oddly unsettling. We were all experiencing unexpected changes in our feelings about and understandings of our sexual identities, changes that didn't make sense in the context of the models of sexual identity that I was familiar with. In light of these experiences, it became my challenge (personally, professionally and academically) to better understand
just where my expectations had developed and why it was that they were proving to be so out of sync with the reality of Dutch life and culture.

I am not a newcomer to the study of difference. I have traveled extensively in Africa, South and Central America, Europe and the United States of America and spent many years working in the arena of multicultural education. I have an undergraduate degree in International Studies and had focused the five years prior to moving to Amsterdam on graduate work in the area of diversity education. Throughout much of this academic and professional work I have maintained an interest in the development of social and cultural identity. The notion that culture affects how we perceive the world, including ourselves, was therefore not a new one to me when I stepped off the plane and onto Dutch soil (reclaimed as it is from the waters of the North Sea). Still, I found my initial experience in Amsterdam unsettling.

It was only after the whirlwind of that first semester stopped and the dust settled that I decided to focus my dissertation on what had, by then, become a curious mystery. I hoped to be able to answer the question of exactly how the sexual identities of my students were changing over the course of their time in Amsterdam and what exactly was facilitating these changes? This dissertation has provided answers to those original questions and I gladly present them to you now.

Statement of Problem

Over the last few years in the United States, issues surrounding sexual identity have moved rapidly from the fringes of cultural awareness to a more mainstream and central stage. Regardless of whether one applauds or laments the cultural changes, one cannot deny the fact that gay men and lesbian women are becoming increasingly visible. As this representation of homosexuality increases we are confronted with a multitude of
questions ranging from whether and how to include gays and lesbians in our cultural institutions to the appropriateness of sexual identity as a topic at various levels of our educational system. Although this increasingly public and sometimes contentious discourse about sexual identity can be seen as a reflection of our collective understandings about the meaning of sexuality in America today, it is simultaneously creating the future of American sexuality. Understanding the assumptions behind and the implications inherent within this sexual identity discourse is important for those who are interested in shaping the current and future sexual environment.

There have been attempts at new theories of sexual identity development in the academic literature over the last ten years. But, traditional stage models of sexual identity development, often referred to as “coming out” models, continue to carry the most cultural currency at this point in time. These models, which both reflect and perpetuate popular theories about homosexuality as a biologically or genetically determined “essence” (Wilkenson and Kitzinger 1995), are a powerful force in our culture. Whether it be in the contemporary gay and lesbian political movement, in therapeutic practices that cater to gays and lesbians, or in the curriculums that attempt to educate young people and their adult allies about the “nature” of sexuality, these stage models dominate. These essentialist models are ones into which many gays and lesbians themselves struggle to fit their varied and divergent experiences and feelings (Rust 1993).

As I will explore in more depth in the chapters to come, a closer look at current research on sexual identity suggests that there is no one "homosexuality", but rather multiple "homosexualities" (Epstein 1987) and that a linear and unitary developmental stage model cannot begin to account for the "dazzling idiosyncrasy" of sexual identity formation (Suppe in Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995, p. 96). Through the theoretical lens
of social constructionism, one begins to see these popular stage models as problematic
and to recognize their underlying assumption of a universal, essential sexual orientation
as an artifact of the times in which we live and the contemporary systems of sexual
organizing which are made available to us.

Despite the fact that they are "potentially explosive in their implications for our
future understanding and behavior in regard to sex” (Tiefer 1995, p.17), social
constructionist theories have remained relatively inaccessible to the general public. As
yet, no model has been available to account for the diversity of sexual identity which we
see in the "real world" (Brown 1995; Sophie 1986). Outdated developmental models
need to be, but have yet to be, replaced. Although “sexological theory [has] progressed as
social constructionists carefully exposed and challenged essentialist assumptions ...
sexologists have not yet fully reexamined the process of sexual identity formation. The
result is disjunction between contemporary concepts of sexual identity and available
models for describing sexual identity formation” (Rust 1993, p. 51). This study is meant
to add to the body of knowledge that will hopefully begin to bridge this gap.

Purpose of the Study

Pressure to define oneself sexually, especially in adolescence and young
adulthood, is keenly felt in America today. It is widely assumed, and has been since Eric
Erikson wrote of identity confusion in the 50’s, that the development of a stable “identity”
is a central task of the young person as s/he moves into adulthood. What this means in
terms of sexual identity is that young people, if they experience any feelings that deviate
from the heterosexual norm, are expected to move from uncertainty to certainly, from
confusion to closure on a stable sexual identity.
Although not explicitly stated, the stage models of gay and lesbian identity development draw almost exclusively from research on young adults (Patterson 1995; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). These models support the Eriksonian notion that young adults do and should work towards a consolidation of their sexual identities. Other assumptions inherent in these models are the assumptions that sexual identity progresses along one basic developmental "path", that sexual identity can only be understood within a homophobic social context, and that the categories of homosexual and heterosexual are stable and ahistorical. The problematic nature of these assumptions will be explored further in later chapters.

While research has shown that the majority of young adults do experience their sexual identities as neither voluntary nor socially constructed (Cass 1984; Epstien 1987), this should not be taken to support the universality of these models. I would argue, supported by social constructionist theories of sexuality, that these models only "fit" because the available constructions of sexuality in America today limit the possibilities of sexual identity from which one can "choose". In a society where "normal", "healthy", "mature" sexuality is defined as stable and unchanging, most people will "experience" their own sexuality as stable and unchanging.

The purpose of my study was to problematize the commonly held wisdom of stable sexual identity as a sign of "health" and "maturity" and to explore the degree to which sexual identity is impacted by a shift in a person’s social location. In the case of this study the shift was from an American college campus to a four-month, intensive lesbian, gay and bisexual studies program in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Although further descriptions of Dutch cultural and politics will appear throughout this dissertation,
it should at least be noted here that the Netherlands presented the participants in this study with a general sexual paradigm and a specific gay identity that they had never before experienced.

If one were to adhere to the social constructionist tenet that sexual identity/orientation is “shaped and reshaped by a cascade of choices made in the context of changing circumstances in one’s life and enormous social and cultural pressure” (Byne et al. 1993, p. 237), then one might assume that changes in social and cultural circumstances would yield changes in sexual identity. By closely following 13 research participants throughout their four-month experience in the Netherlands, which was undoubtedly a change in social and cultural circumstances, this study set out to explore the (potentially) fluid nature of sexual identity. This exploration was framed by the following research questions:

• How do the individual sexual identities of a small group of American-educated college students shift and change over the course of an intensive, four-month, cross-cultural experience of gay, lesbian and bisexual studies in the Netherlands?

• What are the facilitating conditions for, and the obstacles to, identity shifts and changes for these students?

Rationale and Significance of Study

As mentioned earlier, there is a significant gap between social constructionist concepts of sexual identity and available models for describing and understanding sexual identity formation. In the absence of those models, stage models of sexual identity development continue to shape both institutional policy and personal practice. The result is a rapidly expanding discourse on sexuality that speaks accurately to the experiences of some gays and lesbians, but marginalizes others whose realities do not fit neatly into the molds created by the stage models.
Of particular concern to me is the ethnocentrism which is inevitable if our current models are left unexamined. Although the complex relationship between culture and sexuality will be explored in-depth in later chapters, it is important to note that as long as sexual identity development models are based on essentialist assumptions of sexuality these models are presumed to be universal, rather than responsive to changing historical and cultural conditions. If gay or lesbianism is considered to be an "essence", a "core" part of oneself that exists outside of the realm of culture, then these stage models can be unproblematically applied beyond the bounds of Western Culture. My experience in Europe has informed my understanding of the differences between American and European sexual identity development and has caused me to cringe when reading or hearing many Americans who assume a universal sexuality. The "disconnect" between the stage models and the experiences of many people around the world is immense. It is my hope that this dissertation can help to provide a model which is more reflective of and sensitive to cultural variation in the construction of sexual identity.

Assumptions

The word "identity" comes from the Latin root "idem", which means "to stay the same". But, this study runs contrary to that definition in its assumption that identity, in this case sexual identity, can be, and often is, fluid and flexible.

Each time a society changes, there is a reciprocal change in individuals growing up within it. The effect is somewhat like a spiral in nature. Conflict and crisis breed development and change, which in turn allow for a different sort of conflict. (Elliot, 1985, p. 70).

For the purposes of this study, change is the "given" or the underlying assumption. It is this lens of change which framed the research questions and methodology which gave
form to this study. And it is this lens of change which brought into focus the analysis and, ultimately, the findings which are presented.

Limitations

This study is certainly a modest one. An in-depth study of thirteen students over a course of four months can certainly provide useful insights, but it must be taken into consideration that the context in which this study was set, an intensive college semester abroad program in the Netherlands, is quite unique. My research participants were operating in a cultural milieu that was unquestionably more tolerant than what they were accustomed to. Since most gay and lesbian Americans traveling abroad would likely encounter cultural environments that they would interpret as less tolerant, care must be taken in generalizing from this group to others, such as the broader category of sojourning students.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The concept of sexual identity is a complex one, one which has changed form and salience over time and across cultures. As with all studies, I have faced the challenge of determining just what of the vast array of information pertaining to sexual identity warranted inclusion in this literature review. I have chosen to start this chapter off with a quick look at the concepts of “homosexuality” and “identity” in order to familiarize the reader with some of the boundaries which I have drawn around this study. The second section of this chapter focuses on the literature pertaining to the historical context of contemporary notions of sexual identity. By tracing the development of the concepts of sexual categorization and identity over the last century, the reader is better situated to understand the theoretical underpinnings of my work, social constructionism, which emphasizes the historical and cultural construction of sexuality. In the third part of this chapter, I devote space to exploring further this social constructionist theory of sexuality, the debates which it fuels, the assumptions which it challenges, and the implications which it holds for political action, personal identity, and academic research such as this dissertation. And finally, I report on the particular elements of gay and lesbian identity in Amsterdam which help to situate this study within a unique Dutch context.

In my literature search and review I have drawn from many disciplines beyond my home base of developmental psychology. I have explored the concept of sexual identity across the boundaries of time and culture. I have created a historical framework for understanding sex in general, and sexual identity in particular. I have played with various theories and I’ve settled, for the purposes of this dissertation, on a frame of reference that
speaks to my own experience and that of my students. I expect that within the pages of this chapter you will find a clear and defensible direction for my research into the development of sexual identity.

L/G/B Identity Formation, Concepts and Implications

It would seem to follow that in order to make sense out of the concept of lesbian, gay and bisexual identity development one would first need an operational definition of the social categories about which one is studying. What do we mean by lesbian, gay and bisexual? Who are the subjects about whom we would like to glean information? Over the last 100 years there has been no lack of attempts to answer these questions. From the "sexual invert" at the turn of the century (Ellis 1900) to the "queer activist" of today, the notion of what constitutes a "homosexual person" has been a topic of interest in both popular culture and the academy. Although some see a truce in the battle (Kitzinger 1995) and others interpret the struggle as still in its early stages (Katz 1990), few would debate that a theoretical war has been raging recently. This was fueled by conflicting conceptualizations of sexual orientation (Patterson 1995) and instruments for delineating and defining sexual interests and behaviors (Strickland 1995).

The dispute over sexual categories is the juncture of a multitude of conflicts, among them the conflict between biologists and many sexuality theorists. Where the former present homosexuality as an unproblematic physical category, the latter aims to problematize sexual labels. The physical scientists are certainly not alone in their assumptions that lesbianism and male homosexuality can be conceived of as core, fundamental ways of being that are determined prenatally or in early childhood. Such essentialist models are, in fact, the norm, reflecting and perpetuating popular theories.
about homosexuality as a biologically or genetically determined "essence" of the individual (Wilkenson and Kitzinger 1995).

Which definition a scholar chooses reflects a willingness to align with certain explanatory models, which in turn defines the parameters of ensuing theory and research (Brown 1995). Given the highly charged nature of sexual identity in the United States today, facing the complex definitional questions of sexual identity becomes not only an academic dilemma, but a political event as well (Phelan 1989).

Definitions of what constitutes a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person inevitably intersect with the tightly held notions of science itself, individuality, and especially gender. The constructions of gender and sex are actually prerequisites for the construction of homosexuality, for without the notion of men and women, male and female, a society cannot begin to differentiate same-sex behavior or identity. Although it is sexual identity that is the subject of this dissertation, and not gender identity, the two are sometimes inseparably linked in a mutually reinforcing interplay.

I would have to concur with Leonore Tiefer (1995) in saying that the most basic, and also the most difficult, aspect of studying sexuality is defining the subject matter. Even a cursory sweep of the literature on sexuality illuminates the range of criteria which have been and continue to be used in defining the "homosexual" or "lesbian". These include, but are not limited to, sexual behavior (Kinsey et al. 1953), erotic fantasies (Storm 1980), same-sex desire (Mohr 1992), and affectional attachment (Rich 1980). However, when one focuses specifically on the concept of sexual identity one notices a bit more of a consensus, if not in how one formulates one's sexual identity or what the implications for such an identity are, at least in how to recognize a sexual identity when one sees one. For the purposes of this dissertation I draw from the work of many of my

Acknowledging the various political, sexual, social, and personal implications of self-labeling, I define a lesbian (gay man, bisexual, etc.) as one who chooses to adopt a lesbian (gay male, bisexual, etc.) self-identity.

Although erotic same-sex activity seems to exist in many, if not all, times and cultures (Ferguson 1989; Katz 1990; Kitzinger 1995; Mohr 1992; Weeks 1987), incongruities between sexual experience and sexual identity are commonplace (Elliot 1985; Rust 1993; Weeks 1987). One’s engagement in homosexual behavior (i.e., the male youth of ancient Greece who has “instructional”, same-sex activity with his elders, or the young man of modern day Spain who is the active/penetrating partner in same-sex anal intercourse), in no way assures one’s taking on a gay identity. In fact, many societies which institutionalize homosexual practice do not have our contemporary American notion of a homosexual identity (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988, Greenberg 1988, Herdt 1993). And by the same token, not all homosexually active individuals within our own culture identify themselves as homosexual (or lesbian, or bisexual). This is made evident by an American research report showing that although 37 percent of respondents had homosexual experiences to orgasm, less than 4 percent expressed a homosexual identity (Kinsey in Weeks 1987). Even though intricately bound up with each other, behavior and identity are separate entities and care must be taken to use the word identity only in a cognitive sense (Cass 1984).
If, historically and cross-culturally, same-sex sexual activity has a range of different (or possibly no) implications for identity (Kitzinger 1995), then it becomes extremely important to pay attention to the particular context in which one explores sexual identity. Not only does sexual identity depend on the meanings that an individual person attaches to sexual categories (Weeks 1987), but it also depends upon that person's culture attaching relevance to the sexual categories (Ferguson 1989).

The definitions of sexuality which are currently used in Western, Eurocentric cultures are not universal concepts. The two examples most often used to illuminate this point are anthropological studies of both the Melanesian sexual practices and the Native American berdache. In the former, homosexual relations among men are both universal and obligatory (Herdt 1984) and in the latter a third gender role has been created for men and women who can not or do not fit easily into the prescribed gender-roles (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988). What becomes of the category "homosexual" if homosexual behavior is the norm for all men? How does one define same-sex or opposite-sex attraction without a dichotomous, two-sex system? Challenges to the Western formulation of the "homosexual" are not the only confounding factors in the study of homosexual identity. The notion of identity itself presents a variety of challenges.

It wasn't until the 1950's that the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson introduced the term "identity" into the general social science literature (Epstein 1987). Yet, as we head into the 21st century we see that the role of identity has increased in importance as a personal, political and psychological construct. Discourses and movements centering on issues of identity have erupted around the world with considerable force and questions of cultural, religious, national, linguistic, and sexual identity frequently command center stage (Moghadam 1994 p. 3). The current phenomenon of identity formation is not unique to a
specific geographic area or social group. Even if one laments the construction of social identities as an instrument of regulatory regimes (Butler 1993) or a limiting burden (Weeks 1987), one cannot deny the central position which identity holds for people as they navigate through this modern world.

In trying to understand identity one can easily get mired down in the multiple definitions, some of which have nothing more in common than the term used to denote them. A particularly useful analysis of identity constructions can be found in Philip Gleason's semantic history, Identifying Identity (1983 in Epstein 1987, p. 28-29). In it he observes that

most definitions of identity tend to fall toward one or the other pole of an opposition between two conceptions of identity, one a psychological reductionism, the other a sociological reductionism. The first conception of identity - which might be called "intrapsychic" - treats identity as a relatively fixed and stable characteristic of a person, which, from a developmental standpoint, more or less unwinds from within. In a word, this sense of identity is essentialist: it is the type of "identity" that we mean when we speak of identity as describing who someone really is. Quite distinct is the sense of "identity" which I will call "acquired" (although the term "constructionist" would not be inappropriate). In this sense, identity is the internalization or conscious adoption of socially imposed or socially constructed labels or roles. According to the "acquired" definition, identity is not so deeply entrenched in the psyche of the individual, and can vary considerably over the course of one's life. This is the type of "identity" that we have in mind when we say that someone "identifies" as a such-and-such.

The "intrapsychic" concept of sexual identity seems to be the collectively held wisdom in America today both within and outside of the gay "community". Given the current construction of sexual "orientation" as an innate and stable category for organizing sexuality and given the frequent and public attacks on homosexuality, it is not surprising that many gay and lesbian identified people, as well as their heterosexual counterparts, express strong feelings about the "fixed and stable nature" of their sexual identity (Richardson 1984). Indeed, a fixed essence perspective of sexuality seems to be
built into the cultural milieu as a part of the “psychologies” of our time (Cass 1984). But, “what we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood” (Gergen 1985, p. 266). Despite strong, individual experiences of immutable sexual identity, the essentialist interpretation of sexuality can be looked at as an artifact of the times in which we live and the contemporary systems of sexual organizing which are made available to us. For this reason, it is the sociological model, which allows for a range of constructions, including a perceived fixed identity construction, which speaks to my own understanding of sexual identity and is the foundation for this dissertation.

Steven Epstein, in an article comparing gay identity with ethnic identity says, “It is in the dialectics between choice and constraint and between the individual and the group that identities emerge” (1987, p.29). It is this juncture that I am exploring in my own work. The interpretation of identity as a relational process inspired me to move beyond the field of psychology, which has tended to privatize, individualize, and depoliticize the phenomena it studies (Kitzinger 1995), and to draw from history, philosophy, sociology, political science and women's studies for my own understanding of sexual identity. It is the dynamic interplay between the individual and his or her temporal and cultural "situation" which has riveted my attention throughout this dissertation process. Over the last hundred years the construction of "homosexual" has changed from a descriptive clinical category, to a pejorative psychoanalytic category, to a category with social and political meaning (Rust 1993). Currently, heterosexuals and homosexuals have settled into two seemingly fixed, concrete categories of everyday postmodern life (Katz 1995). How did it come to be that a social construct which has only existed in Western Europe and the United States since the late 1800's (Brown 1995; Ferguson 1989; Fox 1995;
Katz 1990; Kitzinger 1995; Patterson 1995; Rust 1993; Weeks 1987/1995), now exists as a fully blown social and human identity (d'Emilio 1983 in Weeks 1987)? It will require a historical visit to answer this question.

Before I go on to my historical overview, perhaps it is time for a bit of a disclaimer. As I set out upon this project I assumed that I would focus my study on the processes involved in the formation of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities. However, as the cultural and historical construction of categories of sexual organization became clear to me, I increasingly felt the need to problematize the categories which I was using.

Although most of the literature on sexual identity focuses on lesbian, gay and bisexual identity, these categories are certainly not the only ones relevant to today's sexual arena in general and this study in particular. Although like many dominant social identities, heterosexuality is often unexplored, it must be noted that heterosexuality too is an individual and group identity, a sexual-political institution, a particular historical arrangement (Katz 1995). Add to the list of possible sexual identities queer identity, transgender identity, or any number of other emergent identities and one sees quickly how limiting it is to confine sexual identity to a lesbian/gay/bisexual framework. My choice to sometimes refer to "gay", "lesbian" or "bisexual" identity and other times to use the more general term, "sexual" identity, is a reflection of the line that I walk between the more widely accepted model of sexual identity and my understanding of a much broader and inclusive framework.

Sexual Identity in Historical Context

Turn-of-the-Century Sexology

Past Americans and other peoples have named, perceived, and socially organized the bodies, lusts, and intercourse of the sexes in ways radically different from the ways we

16
do (Katz 1990) and the study of these differences has created a field of history which is extremely rich and rapidly expanding. The following historical review is limited, focusing only briefly on that history which has been most instrumental in creating the contemporary, Western notion of gay/lesbian identity.

Gert Hekma, a sociologist from the University of Amsterdam, gave a lecture to my students in the Spring of 1995 entitled "Making Sexuality in These Days". In his lecture he presented the characteristics of our modern Western sexual culture, including the following assumptions:

• there exist two distinct genders, and one (male) is inherently more sexual than the other (female)
• there is an essential sexual nature which determines sex drives and orientation
• the philosophy of love is inevitably and intricately entwined with sex
• and sex is to be relegated to the private, individual sphere.

These assumptions underlie current practices and beliefs, making it difficult for us to recognize them as culturally and historically held notions which have profound effects on our contemporary sexual identities. Consider for a moment what meaning a "heterosexual" or "homosexual" self-identity might have if, for example, you lived with the popularly held notion prior to the 1800's in Europe that there was only one variable sex, and women and boys were actually just underdeveloped men (Geertje Mak's lecture on Gender and Sexual Ambiguity in the 19th century, March 6, 1995). Or suppose you found yourself in the early 1700's, where True Love was characterized by "purity" and freedom from sensuality all together (Katz 1990; Phelan 1989). What meaning would contemporary notions of sexual identity have held during these times? Very little or none, I would imagine.
Research has been done in an attempt to determine just when and how homosexual behavior, at least for some, began to take on the significance of an identity. Theo van de Meer's recently published dissertation traces the roots of a Dutch gay subculture and identity to the 1730's, a time when public persecutions of "sodomites", as scapegoats for the decline of the Golden Age in the Netherlands, forced the newly emerging "modern individual" to define himself in terms of his desires, sex and gender (van de Meer 1995). And U.S. historian, John d'Emilio, credits the expansion of capital and the spread of wage labor in the 1800's with the transformation in structure and function of the nuclear family which depends upon heterosexual norms. According to d'Emilio it was the ability to make a life beyond the boundaries of one's immediate family which would set the stage for the future appearance of a collective gay identity in America (d"Emilio 1993).

Despite speculations as to earlier influences on the development of homosexual identity, the turn of the century is consistently highlighted as a decisive moment in the history of Western sexual identity (Brown 1995; De Cecco and Shively 1987; Ferguson 1989; Fox 1995; Katz 1990; Kitzinger 1995; Patterson 1995; van de Meer 1995; Richardson 1987; Sprague 1984; Weeks 1987/1995). To understand this crucial period of time we must familiarize ourselves with the sexologists of the late 1800's and early 1900's, for it is here where many theoretical roots of sexual identity lie. It is through the sexologists' attempts to make sense of the diverse manifestations of sexual expression that what one did (sexual behavior) began to determine what sort of person one was (sexual identity) (Weeks 1987).

Medical doctors did not always hold an esteemed place in Western society, but towards the end of the 19th century their rise in power and prestige allowed these
professionals to prescribe a range of "healthy" societal norms, among them a new, medical model of love, replete with sexuality (Katz 1990). These turn of the century sexologists worked hard at their task of defining a "normal eroticism"; in a ten year period of time over 1,000 publications on homosexuality emerged. The assumption underlying all of this work was a belief in a complex natural/biological process which needed to be understood in all its forms (Weeks 1987). Unfortunately, the models that were to emerge from this period, ones that have shaped the conception of sexuality for the last century, were unable to maintain a sense of complexity and diversity and instead created new, strict boundaries which privileged heterosexuality as the "master sex from which all others deviated" (Katz 1990).

Not surprisingly, the main players in the turn of the century sexology arena took their cues from the medical men who preceded them. In 1886 the current Darwinian notions of evolution led Richard von Kraft-Ebing, a German-Austrian psychiatrist and forensic authority, to write his far-reaching book, Psychopathia Sexualis. In it he put forth his beliefs that the human species evolved from a primitive hermaphroditic state to today's gender-differentiated physical form (Fox 1995) and that "every expression of the sex drive that does not correspond to the purposes of nature, i.e., reproduction", is "perverse". By first categorizing and then pathologizing homosexual behavior, Kraft-Ebing greatly shaped the notion of "abnormal" sexuality and solidified the "biological" category of the "sexual invert" or "third sex" (Brown 1995; Dynes 1990).

Although there were many turn-of-the century sexologists exploring the question of sexual identity, Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) and Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), medical doctors from Britain and Germany respectively, were perhaps the most influential. They built upon and in many ways reinforced Kraft-Ebing's notions of
distinct sexual categories which, interestingly, included a subgrouping of "psychosexual hermaphrodites" similar to today's notion of bisexuals (Dynes 1990; Fox 1995). Although medical men themselves, Ellis and Hirschfeld's publications, political organizing and public speaking were instrumental in helping the concept of sexual categories emerge from the narrow world of medicine to become a commonly accepted notion (Katz 1990).

By contemporary gay emancipation standards, one might consider these sexologists' treatment of homosexuality as enlightened. No longer defining homosexual behavior as sin and crime, they moved towards a model in which homosexuality was part of the newly emerging human sexuality and the homosexual person, diseased though he or she was, now had membership in an inborn and unmodifiable category (D'Emilio 1993; Katz 1990; Phelan 1989; Weeks 1987). Whereas sexual liaisons between women prior to the turn-of-the-century were perceived as perverse relationships between women who were essentially heterosexual, there now existed a "lesbian identity" (Brown 1995; Ferguson 1989). As Michel Foucault so clearly put it, with the advent of the sexologists, the 19th century homosexual "became a personage, a past, a case history...in addition to being a type of life, and morphology... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (in Kitzinger 1995, p.139). It was at this time that "homosexual", as a descriptive word, began to be known to the general public (Dynes 1990).

Like the identity formation that it spawned, there exists a real paradox in the sexological endeavor. The sexological account of sexual identity can be seen as an imposition designed to obscure any real sexual diversity with the myth of a sexual destiny (Weeks 1987). It can be seen as prescriptive as well as descriptive, telling us what we
ought to be like, and how we should define ourselves (D’Emilio 1993; Weeks 1987) and it has created the language of sexual normality and deviance that stigmatizes contemporary gay and lesbian identity. Yet, paradoxical though it appears, those early sexologists with their pleas for greater compassion for the "homosexual" who could not be held responsible for his or her "condition", provided the spring board for self-definition, a foundation for the individual and collective resistance that would follow (D’Emilio 1993; Ferguson 1989; Kitzinger 1987; Phelan 1989; Weeks 1987). In short, the sexologists, in what some believe to be a backlash against feminism at the turn-of-the-century (Ferguson 1989; George Chauncey and Lillian Faderman in Phelan 1989), "established the boundaries beyond which it has been very difficult to think. Homosexual identities became established within the parameters set by sexological definition" (Weeks 1987, p. 41).

Freud and the Emergence of Psychosexual Development

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the Viennese physician and founder of psychoanalysis, is yet another central figure in the sexology arena of the early 1900’s. By breaking with the widely held notion of homosexuality as constitutionally determined, Freud began what would become the long-standing nature-nurture debate. Unlike his contemporaries, Freud felt that in-born, unchangeable homosexual characteristics could only be ascribed to a small percentage of "inverts". He instead stressed the continuum that extends from the exclusive homosexual to the individual who has only fleeting experiences or merely feelings in the course of adolescence (Dynes 1990; Weeks 1987; Brown 1995).

Freud added to the "what is homosexual identity?" debate by problematizing the category of "homosexual". According to his theories, all individuals have some same-sex
sexual feelings and these feelings can be traced back to a universal primary bisexuality, a primitive state from which both heterosexuality and homosexuality are derived (Dynes 1990; Fox 1995).

Freud's insights were radical at the time. He opposed efforts to "separate homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a special class" (Dynes 1990, p. 433) and he stressed the confounding factor of bisexuality into the sexual identity categorizations. And perhaps most important to the development of a social constructionist model of identity development, he introduced a paradigm of sexual identity development as fluid and changeable over time and responsive to the individual and societal context. Yet Freud, by defining heterosexuality as "maturity" and homosexuality as "fixated" or "immature", carried on the tradition of homosexuality as a psychopathology (Brown 1995; Katz 1990; Weeks 1987). For this reason, Freud can be considered one of the major medical manufacturers of the heterosexual mystique as the ruling sexual orthodoxy (Katz 1990).

The Depression and the Second World War put a damper on the "progress" made by the sexologists in the first quarter of the 20th century, as can be seen by a glimpse into the lives of some of the players in the field. Hirshfeld was the victim of attacks by the Nazis which necessitated his foregoing public appearances for the sake of safety and ultimately resulted in the destruction of his Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. The Nazi philosophy emphasizing racial and sexual "purity" and rigid sex roles led to the arrest and murder of countless gay men and lesbians (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988), putting an end to what had been a budding homosexual movement in Germany. The threat of National Socialism in Austria forced Freud, a Jew, to flee to London where he
died shortly after the outbreak of the war. The turmoil of world events precluded further assessment of the value of work that had been done by the early sexologists (Dyne 1990).

While the war may have halted the work of the scientific community, it created an opportunity for those who had already begun to self-identify as gay or lesbian to meet people like themselves and for previously heterosexually identified men and women to explore homosexual options (D'Emilio 1993, Faderman 1991). World War II created a need for women in both the military and in the work force. All-women factories and military units created both the social setting and financial independence necessary for the development of a subculture of lesbians such as could not have occurred at previous times in history (Faderman 1991). After the war many ex-service people elected not to return to their hometowns and their numbers swelled the changing gay milieus in many major U.S. and European cities (Berube 1990).

Kinsey and the Challenge to the Dichotomous View of Sexuality

With the postwar Publication of Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953), Alfred Kinsey and his Institute for Sex Research "raised one of the most violent and widespread storms since Darwin, not only in the scientific community but among the public at large" (Pomeroy 1972 in Dynes 1990, p. 662). Though Kinsey explored topics ranging from the sexual responses of brain injured people to sex practices in pre-Columbian civilizations, it was his "revelations" that homosexual attractions and behaviors were widespread and "normal" that drew so much attention and criticism to his work. The following statement, made by Kinsey in 1948, is important to our purposes of better understanding the developing notion of sexual identity:
[Humans] do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex (Kinsey 1948 in Fox 1995, p. 54).

With his seven point Heterosexuality-Homosexuality Scale (Kinsey et al. 1948) Kinsey created such a continuum, one that still frames the notion of sexual orientation for many people today.

As well as being a period in which Kinsey's work became popularized, the 50's witnessed the beginnings of anthropology's contributions to the sexuality question (Fox 1995; Wekker 1994). Both had in common an emphasis on the human potential for bisexuality and the inadequacy of the dichotomous view of sexuality. Together they challenged the assumptions of mutually exclusive sexual categories, gender as the primary criteria for sex partner selection, and the immutability of sexual orientation (Fox 1995; Katz 1990). Both challenged the certainties of the 'sexual tradition' by asserting the tentative nature of sexual identification (Weeks 1987). However, problematizing the mutually exclusive categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality does not necessarily remove them from their oppositional positions, but rather can be and has been used to reinforce the polarity (Katz 1990; Kitzinger 1995). It is almost impossible for those of us steeped in Eurocentric cultural philosophies that dichotomize subject/object, mind/body, nature/culture to wrap our minds around the notion that "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" as binary oppositions may be nothing more than a figment of our Western logic (Brown 1995; Fox 1995; Young 1990).
The Early Gay Movement and the Shaping of Identity

During the time in which Kinsey was publishing his volumes on male and female sexuality, a gay subculture was growing both in parts of the United States and in Europe. In the case of the Netherlands, the establishment of the Shakespeare Club in 1946 was a renewal of gay organizing that had been interrupted by the war. The American Mattachine society was newly established in the late 40's. These "homophile" organizations adopted an assimilationist stance. While trying to hide their distinctive social and sexual features they actively sought out the acceptance of the mainstream, including the medical professionals (Ferguson 1980; Amsterdam Historical Museum 1989; Phelan 1989). It was not until the 60's, when the Black Power, student and Women's Liberation movements created the social context of a self-affirming counter-culture, that an increasing number of gays and lesbians began to challenge the medical view of homosexuality as "ugly and dangerous" (Ferguson 1989; Phelan 1989). The argument began to be made that homosexuality was not a problem of the individual, but of society.

In the late 60's and early 70's we can see a rough congruence between the early gay liberation politics and the emerging theories of gay identity as a social construction (Epstein 1987). For a short period of time the idea of a society without homosexual and heterosexual categories was discussed frequently within the lesbian and gay movement (Katz 1995), but this soon gave way to a model of ethnic self-understanding in which American gays and lesbians began to organize and represent themselves as a minority group. Homosexuals began to concentrate their energies on social advancement as homosexuals and to form their politics on the reification of the category "homosexual", a loose form of essentialism (Epstein 1987). This rift between the newly emerging
constructionist theory of gay and lesbian identity and the self-understanding of the gay and lesbian community remains evident in America today. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The Emergence of Gay Identity Theory

It was in the 1950's that Erik Erikson and other social theorists first drew attention to questions of identity and the interactive developmental process between self and others (Erikson 1959). Yet it wasn't until the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality as a clinical diagnostic category that "gay identity" and "lesbian identity" began to appear in writing about gays and lesbians. Attempts to discover the etiology of homosexuality gave way to the development of theory and research on the formation of "positive" lesbian and gay identities (Fox 1995; Elliot 1985; Patterson 1995; Rust 1993). It is here that we begin to see the emergence of a constructionist theory of gay and lesbian identity development. Although I will give a considerable amount of attention to it later in this chapter, I would like to introduce to my reader the social constructionist approach to identity at this time.

Constructionism is not a specific school, but rather a broader tendency of thinking that has appeared in a number of disciplines (Epstein 1987) including sociology, history, political science, literary criticism, and communication (Kitzinger 1995). It is indebted to intellectual trends such ethnomethodology, existentialism (Tiefer 1995) and symbolic anthropology (Epstein 1987). The roots of social constructionism, not necessarily as a movement, but as a shared consciousness, can be traced to the historical swing in the philosophy of knowledge away from the exogenic (knowledge as mirror of external reality) toward the endogenic (knowledge dependent on process) (Gergen 1985). An important juncture between social constructionism and psychology is the area of identity.
Where essentialists are "realists" in their insistence that identity categories reflect an underlying reality of biological or genetic difference, constructionists are "nominalists" in their contrary assertion that such categories are arbitrary, human-imposed divisions of the continuum of experience (Epstein 1987). According to the social constructionist, categories, like "gay", "lesbian", and "straight" create social types, rather than revealing them.

The 1970's spawned a range of work which strengthened the social constructionist notions of gay and lesbian identity. In his paper, "Social Psychology as History" (1973), Kenneth Gergen undermined psychology's claims of discovering "facts" about the world by documenting the extent to which those "facts" rely on their social, historical and political context (Kitzinger 1995). Labeling theorists like British sociologist Mary McIntosh provided the means to challenge the essentialist views of the "homosexual" as a natural transhistorical category by highlighting the power of socially assigned "roles" (Epstein 1987; Ferguson 1989; Kitzinger 1995; Mohr 1992). And the far reaching symbolic interactionist work of Kenneth Plummer replaced the sexual drive theory with the sexual script metaphor (Epstein 1987). By investigating sexuality on the level of subjective meaning, Plummer showed how homosexual identity is variable, subject to constant revision and editing depending upon society's attitude (Elliot 1985; Epstein 1987; Kitzinger 1995; Rust 1993; Tiefer 1995). To some, it appeared as if a constructionist theory of sexuality identity was firmly in place (Epstein 1987). Soon, however, the proliferation of stage models of sexual identity, the advent of the feminist construction of lesbianism and a renewed interest in biological research into homosexuality would show that this assumption was premature.
Stage Models of Sexual Identity Development

The period between the mid-70's and mid-90's saw a flurry of proposed "stage" models to describe the gay/lesbian identity development process, models which were shaped by the theoretical and political context of the period in which they emerged. In keeping with Eriksonian concepts of psychodynamic theory (Erikson 1959/1968), these models assumed unity, consistency and continuity of the individual. Gay identity emerged as a personal, individual identity, a process of maturation against the weight of social forces (Weeks 1987). These models attempted to denote stages whereby the individual came to positively identify as gay or lesbian despite the societal oppression which surrounded them.

Like the Black (Cross 1971, Jackson 1976) and minority (Atkinson, Morton and Sue 1979) identity development models that inspired them, the early stage models of gay and lesbian identity were based upon the concept of a distinctive and self-affirming counter-culture (Furguson 1989) and an “ethnic” self-understanding (Brown 1995, Epstein 1987, Katz 1990). These models were particularly well suited to the United States with its history of civil rights movements and ethnic-based struggles. Indeed, Vivienne Cass’s frequently-cited stage model of homosexual identity development (1979) was inspired by William Cross’ (Cross 1971) seminal model of racial identity formation (McCarn/Fassinger 1996). Thus, we can see how the racial identity framework, developed in the context of the civil rights movement to describe the stages of liberation traversed by Black activists as they moved to affirmation of Black identity (McCarn/Fassinger 1996), influenced much subsequent sexual identity development scholarship (see Joan Sophie's Critical Examination of Stage Theories of Lesbian Identities for an overview).
One of the distinguishing features of the stage models is a sequence of "developmental milestones". Although the exact "milestones" may vary from model to model, they generally include the following: awareness of homosexual feelings or the relevance of homosexuality for oneself, identity acceptance in which a gay or lesbian identity is adopted, and disclosure of sexual orientation to other people (Brown 1995; Fox 1995; Sophie 1986).

As well as sharing the notion of "milestones", these stage models of gay and lesbian identity formation often share a range of other assumptions, assumptions that have become not only foundational to our collective understanding of sexual identity, but to our entire system of psychology (Cass 1996). Although the assumptions inherent in these models are many, there are three in particular that have proven particularly relevant and problematic for this study. They are as follows: the assumption that sexual identity takes place in a linear fashion, the assumption that sexual identity formation is always set within the context of an oppressive environment, and the assumption that there exist stable social sexual categories. Because these three assumptions and their implications for our understanding of sexual identity development will be revisited a number of times throughout this dissertation, I would like to spend some time elaborating upon them here.

Stage Model Assumption #1: Sexual Identity Development Is Linear. From Starting Point to Final Identity, There Is But One Basic Path.

In the summary of their thorough review of existing stage models of gay and lesbian identity development, Susan McCarn and Ruth Fassinger note that one thing that the stage models of identity development have in common is that they “all describe a linear path in three to six stages, along which lesbian/gay identity moves from the recesses of the self-concept to the very center and finally emerges as one acknowledged
part of the self’ (McCam and Fassinger, 1996, p. 513). Despite the fact that research has shown that many people, particularly women, move between identities even after a lesbian or gay identity is acknowledged (Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1986), most stage theories postulate a linear progression towards a fixed end point. "Universal stages" (Troiden, 1988) and "ideal sequences" (Plummer, 1975) are proposed as the presumably "best way" to achieve homosexual identity. Despite some lip service to difference, deviations more often than not are interpreted as immature, regressive or fixated (Weinberg, 1984).

Stage Model Assumption #2: Sexual Identity Is Understood within the Context of Oppression and a Shared Stigmatized Identity.

In her introduction to the special edition of the journal Developmental Psychology devoted to homosexual identity development, Charlotte Patterson states that the “important background against which contemporary research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities should be seen is that of widespread prejudice and discrimination” (Patterson, 1995, p.4). With the terms identity development and “coming out” (an implied emergence from silence into a hostile environment) used almost interchangeably in the literature, this “background of oppression” is an unquestioned given. These deeps roots in an oppression-based framework can be seen most clearly by exploring the history of what has been called the founding model of sexual identity, Vivienne Cass's homosexual identity development model (Cox and Gallois, 1996; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996).

Similar to the racial identity development theories which served as a template for it, Cass's homosexual identity development model concerns itself with the role of oppression in shaping identity formation in stigmatized groups (Cox and Gallois, 1996; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996). It is impossible to disentangle Cass’s model, or any of the
other stage models, from this oppression-based framework. Indeed, one of the core processes which the stage models share is movement from an internalized state of oppression to one in which homosexuality is seen increasingly as acceptable (Gonsiorek and Rudolph, 19xx; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996). As I will elaborate upon in later chapters, particular care should be taken in unquestioningly continuing to apply oppression-based, racial identity models to contemporary sexual identity development.


In an article about individuality and diversity in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, N. E. Betz and L. F. Fitzgerald point out that the content of identity an individual traverses appears to be similar across all stage models of homosexual identity development (Betz and Fitzgerald, 1993). Most all of the models share the assumption that identity can be understood by exploring the developing relationship between the individual, who is in temporary flux, and the social sexual category, which is permanently stable (Cox and Gallois, 1996; McCarn, Fassinger, 1996). Even those models that reference a “continuous” or “circular” process of sexual identity assume that the social sexual categories of heterosexual and homosexual (and sometimes bisexual) themselves remain unchanging and it is only the individual’s relationship to those stable categories that changes (Coleman, 1982; Minton and McDonald, 1984; McCarn, 1996). Once again, as will be explored in depth later, my research will call this assumption into question.

I am certainly not alone in having difficulty with the stage models of sexual identity development. Indeed, criticism of these models is a common theme in identity literature. With the exception perhaps of Cass’ interactionist model which assumes that stability and change depend on congruence or incongruence within the interpersonal
environment, the stage models are essentially essentialist and are therefore targets of criticism for many who take a constructivist approach to sexual identity. Often referred to as "coming out" models, the stage theories imply that a newly self-identified gay or lesbian person was always essentially homosexual in orientation, but has only now become ready to acknowledge his or her "true" sexual nature and identity (Buamrind 1995; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). The process of gay and lesbian identity development thus becomes the process of shedding a "false" heterosexuality for the "true essence" of homosexual identity (Rust 1993).

If the above mentioned problems are not enough to dissuade one from investing too heavily in stage models of gay and lesbian identity formation, a number of other complaints have been leveled against them in the literature I reviewed. These include the almost exclusive focus on the identity development of young adults while excluding questions of longitudinal stability of sexual orientation over the adult lifespan (Patterson 1995; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995), the extrapolation of gay male experience to lesbians despite the evidence of important gender differences (Brown 1995; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995), and the overly Eurocentric nature of the models (Brown 1995) which not only assess, but evaluate sexual identity against culturally specific standards of "development".

Although some self-identified lesbians and gay men do indeed progress along the unidimensional path which is outlined by the stage models, variations are too common to be considered deviations from the norm (Epstein 1987; Rust 1993). What of the man who has developed a positive gay identity and then later rejects that identity? Or the lesbian feminist who says that she made her sexual choices purely out of a political ideology? Research into the lives of homosexuals increasingly suggests that there is no one
"homosexuality", but rather multiple "homosexualities" (Epstein 1987). How can we continue to insist on linear and unitary developmental models in the face of the "dazzling idiosyncrasy" of sexual identity formation (Suppe in Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995, p. 96)? According to Paula Rust in her article, "Coming Out in the Age of Social Constructionism",

sexological theory [has] progressed as social constructionists carefully exposed and challenged essentialist assumptions. But sexologists have not yet fully reexamined the process of sexual identity formation. The result is a disjunction between contemporary concepts of sexual identity and available models for describing sexual identity formation (Rust 1993, p. 51).

The close of the 20th century found us lacking in models that are able to account for the diversity of sexual identity which we see in the "real world" (Brown 1995; Sophie 1986). Outdated developmental models need to be, but have yet to be, replaced. Sexual identity formation needs to be reconceptualized as an ongoing dynamic process of describing one's social location within a changing social and historical context (Rust 1993; Sophie 1986). A "healthy" and "mature" sexual identity can no longer be considered to be inevitably stable, but potentially fluid and changing (Brown 1995; Sophie 1986). If one is to adopt the social constructionists point of view, then we can no longer accept gay, lesbian, heterosexual or any other identity as static. As Kitzinger and Wilkinson put it in their study, "The Discursive Production of Lesbian Identities" (1995), completing a transition from one identity to another does not mean a sort of "terminal" lesbian, gay or any other sexual identity.

"Radicalesbian Feminism" and the Concept of Sexuality

During the late 70's and into the 80's, while stage models of lesbian and gay identity were proliferating, the voice of lesbians within the resurgent feminist movement
began to be heard. This voice was to challenge not only the heterosexism of the feminist movement, but the definitions of homosexuality within the gay movement. Up until then, lesbianism was conceptualized as a specific minority experience, little different in its implications from male patterns of homosexuality (Weeks 1987). While gay men were using essentialist arguments of homosexuality to achieve political gains, lesbian feminists began to develop a theory that reflected their different interests. This theory maintained that "lesbianism can potentially be chosen by all women in opposition to patriarchal oppression: any woman can be a lesbian" (Kitzinger 1995, p. 154). An important rallying point for lesbian feminists became Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" in which she took the modern notion of lesbianism and extended it to form a lesbian continuum. Lesbian identity was shifted away from the genital sexuality developed by the neo-Freudians after WW II and popularized in the 60's, towards women-identified experiences of all types, particularly political (Ferguson 1989; Phelan 1989; Weeks 1987).

To the extent that the lesbian feminists' interpretation of sexuality sought to replace individualized notions of homosexual "essence" with a broader, more socially and politically dependent model of lesbianism, it can be seen as supporting a social constructionist theory of sexuality. But for reasons which will be explored later in this chapter, feminists did not hold this social constructionist line. Rich and Radicalesbians maintained both that lesbian identity was a transhistorical phenomenon and that an "essential" difference and opposition between men and women existed (Ferguson 1989; Phelan 1989). In the process of withdrawing "the construction of lesbian identity from the grips of those who denied the self-understandings of lesbian women...they fell into the trap awaiting all moderns, all subjects of the regime of truth: the trap of
counterreification, of justifying their existence by reference to transcendental standards of what a lesbian 'is', what she means, and where she fits" (Phelan 1989 p.158).

Although I do not claim to be familiar with the large body of contemporary feminist thinking, I would like to believe that feminists can take some credit for problematizing the notion of rigid sexual categories, at least in theory if not in "lay" practice. Women's experiences of our sexual selves appear to be sufficiently different from that of men, with one of those differences being a more fluid sexual identification (Elliot 1985; Garnets and Kimmel 1993; McCoy 1994; Sears 1992; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). To the degree that feminists continue to spotlight this diversity (Laura Brown spends one quarter of her chapter on lesbian identity in the book, Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities Over the Life Span (1995) focusing on the question "Who are the Lesbians?") we continue to confound attempts at universal notions of gay and lesbian identity.

Although feminists of the 70's and early 80's had begun to problematize rigid sex and gender categories, the late 80's would usher in a debate that would become much more far reaching. Extending into many corners of academia, the theoretical "war" between essentialism and constructionism would profoundly shape the conceptualization of sexuality and sexual identity both within and beyond the academic arena.

Constructionism and Essentialism: Theories of Sexuality

The Theoretical "Wars" Begin

Leonore Tiefer, in her book, Psychology, Gender and Theory, offers the following quote from Rubin, written in 1984:

There are historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated....Periods such as the 1880s in England and the 1950s in the United
States recodify the relations of human sexuality. The struggles that were fought leave a residue in the form of laws, social practices, and ideologies which then affect the way sexuality is experienced long after the immediate conflicts have faded. All signs indicate that the present era is another of those watersheds. (Rubin 1984 in Tiefer 1995, p. 17)

The debates which where raging in the 1980's, and to a certain extent continue to burn today, include, but are not limited to, questions of how to conceptualize sexuality in general and gay and lesbian identity in particular.

In keeping with a larger theoretical debate which spread far beyond the boundaries of any one discipline, sides began to be drawn around two different "camps" in psychology; these camps have most often been referred to as essentialism and social constructionism. The 1987 International Scientific Conference on Gay and Lesbian Studies (Vrij Universiteit of Amsterdam) was organized around the theme of "the essentialism/social constructionism debate" which was highlighted as "the hottest philosophical controversy to hit psychology in years" (Kitzinger 1995, p. 136).

Accusations were being thrown from one side to the other; essentialist frameworks were "misconceived, politically loathsome, supreme arrogance" (Katz 1995) and social constructionists were "fashionable, resentfully envious, and libertine" (Gergen 1994). Academic programs were split over what appeared to be a philosophical/theoretical rift, an example of this being what came to be known as the Utrecht and Amsterdam "schools" of gay and lesbian studies in the Netherlands. And acute conflicts arose between the interests of scholars and those of gay and lesbian communities (Hekma 1992). Although I touched briefly on notions of social constructionism earlier, I would like to now elaborate on the key aspects of social constructionism, the challenges it presents to previously existing schools of thought, and the ways in which the social constructionist assumptions have changed the field on which sexual identity issues are played out.
I admit to initially twisting myself into quite a theoretical knot when first trying to understand social constructionism. I had somehow managed to complete my graduate school coursework without diving into what has been described as a "contemporary movement of challenging implications which throws the very foundations of psychological knowledge into critical relief" (Gergen 1985, p. 226). Lenore Tiefer just as easily could have been talking about me personally when she said that "psychology seems not to have noticed that new theories have been proposed that are potentially explosive in their implications for our future understanding and behavior in regard to sex" (Tiefer 1995, p. 17). As I took the plunge into the social constructionist literature, which wins no awards for readability, I got particularly twisted up in the relationship between social constructionism and postmodernism. Celia Kitzinger's chapter, "Social Constructionism: Implications for Lesbian and Gay Psychology", in Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities Over the Lifespan (1995), was the most useful in helping me to untangle this theoretical knot.

Kitzinger makes what I consider to be a very important distinction between what she calls "weak" and "strong" social constructionism in the study of sexuality. According to Kitzinger, "weak social constructionists point out that, whatever the apparent similarities of the acts involved (e.g., genital stimulation), there are clearly vast dissimilarities in the implications of such acts for the person's identity, the way in which he explains his actions to himself, and the meanings they acquire in a social context" (Kitzinger 1995, p. 143). The "weak" social constructionist focuses attention on identity as an outcome of an interactive process of social labeling and self-identification.
(Epstein 1987), one in which culture more or less guides the individual and his or her natural inclinations along the existing tracks of sexual identity development. Let me offer an example.

The “weak” social constructionist would argue that people each have an essential inclination towards or away from engaging in same-sex relationships. Depending upon whether they find themselves in Kearney, Nebraska or Nairobi, Kenya their sexual identity will be determined by the ways in which that particular “host” culture makes available or restricts outlets for expression of homosexual or heterosexual tendencies. This model fits well with learning theories that acknowledge the impact of environment on personal, developmental outcomes.

The "strong" social constructionists, on the other hand, refuse to accept the limits of sexual conceptualization that have been created and take issue with the very notion of existing sexual categories as natural givens. Unlike the "weak" social constructionist who contends that "heterosexual" and "homosexual" people have different experiences, opportunities and self-concepts in different cultures, socioeconomic, and ethnic groups or at different ages, the "strong" social constructionist maintains that these categories "are constituted by socially meaningful ways of organizing experience, by the repertoires available to us in Western culture, by common forms of discursive practice (Kitzinger 1995, p. 144). In other words, like the qualitative researcher who chooses to move away from interview protocols which back their subjects into fixed choices, the “strong” social constructionist allows for a sexual meaning-making system which is organized along different lines than the ones which may be in current vogue.

Prior to my experience of living, working and studying in Europe it was easy for me to hold onto a “weak” constructionist view of sexual identity; but I have come to
recognize the ethnocentrism inherent in such a view. As long as I could believe in fixed categories of “gay” and “lesbian”, I could (and did) evaluate other cultures based upon their “acceptance” of these identities. Since the construct which I was using was a “Western” one and I was most often applying it to “non-Western” cultures (i.e. in Africa, Central and South America) I, and my culture, inevitably came out “on top”. Yes, I told myself, American gays and lesbians may suffer from discrimination, but at least we can exist. I assumed that there were hordes of “gays” and “lesbians” around the world waiting and longing to bring their “true selves” into existence.

In Europe, particularly in the Netherlands and Denmark, I was confronted with a different reality. There, in an environment which not only tolerated but protected homosexuality, the existence of gay identity (and rigid heterosexual identity as well) seemed to be in decline. It was a humbling experience to be called to task on my ethnocentrism by my European colleagues. Their expressed frustration in trying to do international work with American gays and lesbians who cannot get outside of their own cultural construction of sexuality was a challenge for me to explore social constructionism. Over the last few years, that exploration has led me to identify with the group of “strong” social constructionists whose work fits into the "postmodern" paradigm. Although not unproblematic, it is this group’s work which most accurately reflects my current understanding of "gay" and "lesbian" identity. Let me describe some of the aspects of this particular form of "strong" social constructionism.

The deconstructing of existing 'texts' (not only scientific and literary work, but newsletters, experimental designs, family photographs, case reports, tests, transcripts, etc.) is considered to be one of the primary aspects of the social constructionist movement (Gergen 1985; Tiefer 1995, p. 60). Since not only the written word, but language itself is
considered both the symbol and the practice of socially constructed "realities" (Ember 1994; Gergen 1994), social constructionism can easily get bogged down in rhetorical spirals of “reality” deconstruction. Yet, it is the process of "deconstruction" that allows us to examine the ways in which language shapes the meaning we make out of our own behavior and to analyze existing concepts, categories, and metaphors that currently exist as the dominant paradigm.

As well as the deconstruction of particular elements of our language, social constructionism makes certain assumptions about the world in which we live. Among these assumptions are the belief that collective discourses are merely artifacts of communal exchange, that power plays a significant role in our social meaning-making, and that empirical science holds no particular claim to "objective truth". These three social constructionist assumptions are further explored here.

Constructionist Assumption #1: Collective Discourses Are Merely Artifacts of Exchange.

According to social constructionism, discourses, like the medical construction of sexual categories as described earlier, are taken not as a "reflection or map of the world, but as an artifact of communal interchange" (Gergen 1985, p. 226). This is easy for many of us to acknowledge when looking back on discourses which no longer hold “truth” for us today. Take for example the previously mentioned, early 19th century notion in Europe that there existed only one sex with women and boys as anatomically and spiritually underdeveloped men. When considering this particular discourse it seems so very obvious that we are looking at an “artifact of communal exchange” and not a “reflection or map of the world”. Perhaps it is the old cross-cultural training analogy that the fish is not conscious of the water in which it swims. Or maybe it is our desire to believe that human existence and culture is on a steady march towards “truth” or
"enlightenment". But, it remains much more difficult for us to examine our current discourses as the social and cultural constructions which I, and many others, believe that they are.

"The social constructionist denies that there are...'facts' about people's sexual orientation and would agree...that it is a mistake to look at an individual as being of a particular sexual orientation in the absence of a cultural construction of that orientation" (Stein, in Kitzinger 1995, p. 140). Not surprisingly, the refusal to view the homosexual as a person with a definable essence is the single most frequently cited aspect of social constructionist theory (Kitzinger 1995). This in no way is meant to downplay the very real and extremely powerful construction of gay and lesbian identity that currently exists in America today (my own personal, professional and academic life can attest to that!), but to challenge us to look at the formation of that identity in a broader context.

**Constructionist Assumption #2: Social Power Plays a Significant Role in Our Social Meaning-Making.**

A second aspect of social constructionist theory relates to the role of power in the social making of meaning. If there were but one person who could be credited with illuminating the power dynamics inherent in the current, Western construction of sexual identity, that person would be the French philosopher, Michel Foucault. His work on the history of sexuality became a new rallying point for social constructionists in the 1980’s (Epstein 1987). As well as questioning sexuality as an essential, constitutional core, Foucault queried the political implications of a construction which pressures us to privately believe and publicly proclaim our "sexual identities". His concern was that this sexual discourse is a means by which we moderns are managed (Katz 1995), and has the power to expand, engulf and oppress (Gergen 1994).
Here is one of the places where social constructionism moves out of the theoretical and into the practical and political. It is at this juncture that we look at sexual categories, not as benign, descriptive groupings, but as powerful tools of social organizing. When I hear American gays and lesbians apologetically demanding their rights because “we can not help who we are” I question just whose interests are served by this essentialist notion of sexual identities.

**Constructivist Assumption #3: Empirical Science Holds No Particular Claim to "Objective Truth".**

A third key aspect of social constructionism, which was present from the start of the social constructionist movement but is particularly prominent in the postmodern accounts, is a challenge to empirical science (Gergen 1985; Kitzinger 1995). According to Kenneth Gergen, the modernist believes in a knowable world with universal properties and principles where truth can be derived by using empirical methods (Gergen 1992); social constructionism, on the other hand, begins with a radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world and asks one to suspend belief that observation can "prove" the existence of commonly accepted categories (Gergen 1995). Science itself (for example the scientific, medical model of sexuality) becomes framed as a socially constituted and historical discourse which therefore has no claim to "objective truth" (Gergen 1985; Kitzinger 1995). In the context of such a world view, identity becomes not a unitary self, but a shifting, multiple, fragmented construction whose performance relies on texts and discourses that don't reflect "reality", but take their meaning from their audiences (Kitzinger 1995).

By self-identifying as "strong" social constructionists, some of the players in the sexuality "game" set themselves apart from the "weak" social constructionists or the
"closet essentialists", as Shelia Kitzinger refers to them (Kitzinger 1995, p. 147). These postmodernists go well beyond the uncontested psychological views that argue for the role of learning in human development. They actively distance themselves from the notions that categories of sexual orientation are appropriate categories to apply to individuals (Kitzinger 1995), that the self-attribution of a "homosexual identity" is simply the conscious recognition of a true "orientation" (Epstien 1987), and even that there is (or could be) scientific evidence offering facts about homosexuality against which theories and beliefs can be judged.

The 1990's ushered in a new body of literature about sexual identity that was more in keeping with the social constructionist paradigm. Even Vivienne Cass, the architect of what has been called the most sophisticated approach to identity development (Cox and Gallois, 1996, p. 8) and the most widely cited and extensively studied of the existing stage models (McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Eliason, 1996, p. 42), began to make major cultural disclaimers about her model, pointing out how the proposed stages are embedded in a “Western indigenous concept of homosexuality” (Cass, 1996). Although Cass headed toward century’s close reiterating the centrality of “coming out” to the homosexual identity development process, she stressed the importance of avoiding the pitfall of universalizing lesbian, gay or bisexual identity and remaining alert to future shifts and changes that may occur in our Western realities which will necessitate new models (Cass, 1996).

During the’90’s a few people began to formulate these "new models" or at least set out criteria by which new models should be conceptualized. These models will be reviewed briefly here, with special attention paid to the ways in which they support or contradict the previously highlighted problematic assumptions of the earlier stage models:
the assumption of linear development, the assumption of oppression and stigmatized
identity and the assumption of stable sexual categories.

“New” (1990’s) Models of Sexual Identity

Cox and Gallois, 1996: Social Identity Approach to Sexual Identity

Cox and Gallois offer us a model of development which focuses on the interaction
between individuals, their groups, and the social milieu. Based on social identity theory,
this model is concerned with the defensive strategies used by gays and lesbians to attain
positive self-identity in a hostile world. Of paramount importance are the dual processes
of self-categorization (i.e. “I am lesbian. I am not straight”) and social comparison (i.e.
“Lesbians are good people”).

Cox and Gallois’ model has much to offer the discussion of contemporary sexual
identity development. The possibility of lifelong change and the explicit references to the
broader social context, set the model apart from previous stage models of development
which focus on individuals passing through ordered stages ending with a point of
completed development.

Although this theory allows for individuals to develop different cognitive
representations of what it means to be homosexual, accounting for a large range of
identities which can change over time, it unfortunately still rests comfortably within the
homo-hetero dichotomy and perpetuates the assumption that sexual identity categories are
stable and nonproblematic and sexuality necessarily has to be rooted in the inequalities in
power relationships between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

McCam and Fissinger, 1996: Sexual Minority Identity Formation

McCarn and Fissinger propose a model of sexual identity formation which they
hope will address some of the deficits in existing models. Of particular importance to
them is the need to be “inclusive of the diverse paths one may take to a comfortable integrated lesbian identity” (p. 521). While this approach makes a positive contribution in debunking the assumption of an oversimplified, linear progression of development, it does nothing to problematize the notion of a stable, end-point identity. Referring to the “dual nature of lesbian identity”, McCarn and Fissinger inseparably link a personal, sexual lesbian identity to membership in an oppressed minority group. While their model acknowledges changing societal awareness of lesbian and bisexual women (which is more than most do), it still assumes a “context of pervasive environmental and internalized homophobia and expectation to be heterosexual” (p. 508). We are left wondering how a gay or lesbian identity could ever exist in a non-oppressive climate when McCarn and Fissinger conclude that “We must at all times remain aware that it is the context of homophobia that defines the meaning of lesbian or gay identity” (p. 532).

Rust, 1992: Identity Formation Process

Paula Rust uses a social constructionist paradigm to collect and analyze data about identity development from 365 lesbian- and bisexual-identified women. In her model she emphasizes that “on-going historical changes have led to considerable variety in the conceptualizations of sexuality that individuals use to construct their sexual identities” (Rust, 1992, p. 366). By explicitly calling into question our dichotomous model of sexuality and pointing to data that shows that deviations from the linear, stage model of identity development is the rule, not the exception, Rust problematizes the categories and processes that we currently use to organize our sexuality. Although Rust stresses the need to conceptualize sexual identity formation as a process of describing one’s social location within a changing social context, she does not explicitly include oppression as a potentially changing social climate.
Jenness, 1992: Lesbian Detypification Process

In her 1992 contribution in Ken Plummer’s book, Modern Homosexualities (1992), Valerie Jenness proposes that lesbian identity development hinges upon a process that she refers to as “dytypification” (the redefinition of the social category ‘lesbian’ such that it acquires increasingly concrete and precise meanings, positive connotations, and personal applicability). By challenging many of the assumptions of the old stage models, including the assumption that there is a linear path to a stable final end-point and the assumption that the current categories are in any way permanent, Jenness sheds considerable light on the data that I collected for this dissertation. Although Jenness acknowledges that the social categories we apply to ourselves are in a constant state of flux, her model rests on the notion that connotations associated with the term lesbian are, by definition, negative. She does not consider the possibility that the negative connotation of lesbian, may itself be in flux in some corners of the world such as Amsterdam.

D’Augelli, 1994: Human Development Model of Sexual Identity Development

Anthony D’Augelli is a professor of Human Development at Pennsylvania State University whose prolific writing on lesbian and gay male development (D’Augelli, 1991, 1993, 1994a 1994b, 1995, 1996), repeatedly challenges researchers and theorists to apply a human development metatheory to their work on sexual identity. Imploring us to view the developing individual within the context of historical time and culture and to understand that development is an environmentally responsive, life-long process, he creates a welcome challenge to some of the problematic assumptions of the early stage models. Enormously useful on a general level, D’Augelli’s specific model of lesbian-gay-bisexual development (1994) falls short. By focusing on exiting a heterosexual identity
and entering a gay and lesbian community as the path of development, D’Augelli’s model leaves unquestioned the categories themselves and does not allow for multiple changes in sexual categorization.

Although these latest sexual identity development models of the 1990’s are much more aligned with social constructionist theory than their stage model predecessors, none adequately address what I saw happening for the participants in this study. Although most problematize the linear path towards a stable end identity, and some have begun to question the permanence of our hetero-bi-homo categories, none have stepped out of the overshadowing frame of homophobia and oppression (see table 1 for summary). Given the current state of heterosexism in the United States, where most of the theorizing and model building is currently taking place, it is not difficult to understand the assumed permanent connection between a minority sexual identity and oppression. As will be explored in later chapters, this connection, however, is not universal.

Table 1: Problematic Assumptions Perpetuated or Left Unchallenged by the “New” (1990’s) Identity Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OPPRESSION BASED</th>
<th>LINEAR PATH</th>
<th>PERMANENT CATEGORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cox and Gallois, 1996</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Social Identity Approach)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCarn and Fissinger, 1996</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sexual Minority Identity Formation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rust, 1992</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Identity Formation Process)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenness, 1992</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Detypification Process)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’Augelli, 1994</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Human Development Model)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Challenge to Social Constructionism

Although there is some support for essentialist views of sexual identity within the field of psychology (Kitzinger 1995), the major obstacle to a social constructionist approach to sexuality is the domination of theory and research by the biomedical model (Tiefer 1995). Simon LeVay's 1991 report, in which he provided "evidence" of an anatomic difference in the hypothalamus of homosexual and heterosexual men, awoke the essentialist giant in the United States which seemed to have been dormant throughout the 80's. A similar "breakthrough" had just been reported in the Netherlands in the form of a study published in the journal *Brain Research* by Dick Swaab and Michael Hofman of the Netherlands Institute for Brain Research (McCoy 1994). (Although an exploration of it is beyond this study, it is interesting to note that the political and theoretical activity that would follow in the wake of these two studies took radically different forms in the Netherlands and the States.) A swing back towards an essentialist understanding of sexual "orientation" was gaining momentum, complete with a set of often questionable presumptions about biological and genetic "facts".

One of the first assumptions of the biomedical model of sexuality, and actually all essentialist models, is that the categories of "man" and "woman" exist as mutually exclusive, biologically "proven", natural, genetically-based categories. This assumption underlies existing sexual identity categories such as hetero, homo, and bisexual (Brown 1995; Butler 1993; Katz 1995; Kitzinger 1995). It is also foundational to the belief, common within the biomedical model, that "homosexuals are intermediate between heterosexual men and heterosexual women along various continua or dimensions of sexual differentiation" (Byne and Parsons 1993, p. 229). But, particularly in feminist
circles, there has been an active debate about the notion of a dichotomous gender construction. In her book, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Judith Butler states that

the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of 'the subject' as the ultimate candidate for representation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes the category of women" (Butler 1990, p. 1).

Listed among Jonathan Katz's four important areas to consider when approaching a historical study of sexuality is the period's particular mode of engendering persons as feminine or masculine, its making of women and men (Katz 1990).

Like gender, biological sex, is also of central importance to our current construction of sexuality. Without biological sex one cannot make meaning out of sexual "orientation". "Homosexual", "heterosexual" and "bisexual" are all categories which are based upon the "sameness" or "oppositeness" of an individual's biological sex and the biological sex of his/her partner. It is possible that, were it not for the salience of biological sex in our current construction of sexual identity, other aspects of relationships might move to the forefront of our sexual organizing. It is possible that relationships may occur for reasons unrelated, or indirectly related, to the biological sex of the participants involved. Ross, in his article "Beyond the Biological Model", offers the following list of other possible meanings that have been or could be attached to sexual relationships: reproduction, religious, financial, duty, ritual, recreational, dominance, dynastic, experimental, and mentoring. He asserts that it is only by looking at bisexuals, for whom biological sex is one of a number of determinants in partner choice, that other social or demographic variables such as class, race, income and religion can come into focus as being of equal or greater importance in the analysis of sexual relationships (Ross 1984).
Which leads us to a second questionable assumption of the biomedical model, the
dichotomous construct of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Despite the fact that bisexuality has existed as a concept and descriptive term
since the process of psychosexual development was first conceptualized and findings
suggest that sexual attractions, fantasy, and behavior of many bisexuals may vary
significantly from their lesbian or gay peers (Fox 1995), bisexuality is not seriously
considered in the biomedical studies. According to one renowned biological researcher,
"there are generally two approaches to bisexuals: either they are classified with
homosexuals or they are excluded" (Bailey 1995, p.125). By using as subjects only men
who rate "6" on the Kinsey scale, biological researchers conveniently eliminate the
diversity "problem".

Perhaps the single largest tool for the maintenance of rigid sexual categories
within the scientific literature has been the consistent exclusion of women’s experience
from the studies. Although theories about male homosexuality are frequently generalized
to include women, there is no reason to assume that the identity processes are the same
for lesbians and gay males. Many women simply do not fit the existing models of
homosexual identity. More women than men consider their homosexual identity to be a
choice, a decision often made on the basis of their political views about heterosexuality
(Faderman 1984). And women tend to be characterized more often than men by
bisexuality and shifts in orientation over time (Elliot 1985; Garnets and Kimmel 1993;
Sears 1992; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). Yet despite the fact that “women’s sexual
fluidity has long been apparent in the psychological and sexological literature...it is often
submerged in the data rather than explicitly theorized” (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). Essentialists, including the biologists, are spared having to account for the diversity of sexual expression by excluding women.

By looking for a biological or genetic “cause” of homosexuality the scientists seem to be asking the wrong questions: Given that experience can alter the physiology and structure of the brain, perhaps the questions should not be "is sexuality in the brain?", but "how is it represented, and when and how does it get there?" (Bailey 1995; Byne and Parsons 1994). Seeing as how the entire biological inquiry takes place within the context of a modern Western culture which enables these categories and limits universal claims, perhaps the scientists should be asking not "Do I satisfy the homosexual category?", but "Is homosexuality an empirically meaningful category?"

Perhaps the best argument that I read for some sort of link between "biological factors" and sexual orientation was in Michael Bailey's (1995) chapter “Biological Perspectives on Sexual Orientation” in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities over the Lifespan. He does not contradict the social constructionist premise when he says that

\[ \text{given a society that has constructed the sexual categories "heterosexual" and "homosexual," there is still the question of why people may adopt one or the other label (or are so labeled by others). The categories "priest," "Sumo wrestler," and "Fortune 500 executive" are surely more socially constructed than "homosexual" or "heterosexual," but within any society in which they are meaningful, there are probably "biological" (i.e., innate or genetic) factors that contribute to the likelihood that a person will be categorized within any one of them (Bailey 1995, pp. 106-107).} \]

In other words, there may indeed be biologically determined traits that incline one towards or away from fitting into socially and culturally constructed categories. Certainly, the genetic trait of tallness predisposes one to play basketball if one grows up in an environment where playing basketball is made available. But would it not seem
somewhat absurd if the scientific community were to begin investing time and money into studying the “genetically determined” category of “basketball players”?

A final note is in order with regards to current biological research on homosexuality. According to Garnets and Kimmel in their book *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Male Experience,*

Essentially all of the studies that have proposed some biological or biochemical difference between persons with a homosexual orientation and those with a heterosexual orientation have not been replicated successfully. The findings are reported in the media when they are first discovered; but the lack of replication is seldom reported as prominently, and often goes unnoted (Garnets and Douglas 1993).

Given the politically charged times in which we live and current media sensationalism, it is important to question whose interests are being served and whose world view is being perpetuated, not only in the scientific community which undertakes biological studies, but by the media establishment which interprets these studies for the general public.

**Social and Political Implications of Models of Sexual Identity**

The ways in which we choose to describe the world are not benign, but instead they are forms of social action, complete with social and political consequences. How we choose to identify ourselves has implications for the lives we live, the education and therapy we practice, and the politics we support. Social attitude and public policy towards gays and lesbians will undoubtedly be affected by beliefs in the essential or constructed nature of sexuality (Baumrind 1995; Epstein 1987; Tiefer 1995), but there seems to be a lack of clarity about just what the effects will be.

The constructionist critique of essentialism has become the received wisdom in left academic circles. And yet, curiously, the historical ascendancy of the new constructionist orthodoxy has paralleled a growing inclination within the gay movement in the United States to understand itself and project an image of itself in ever more "essentialist" terms (Epstein 1987, p.12).
There continues to be a lack of consensus on which approach is the most politically viable in achieving social justice for all, regardless of sexual inclination or identity. It seems that both essentialism and constructionism are simultaneously ingrained into our folk understandings of sexuality whether we identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual or whether we are among the ranks of the homophobic opponents to "gay rights" (Epstein 1987) and that neither theory is intrinsically best suited to be the precursor to lesbian and gay liberation (Kitzinger, 1995). As Jeffrey Weeks says in the first line of the first chapter of *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality* (1987), "the very idea of sexual identity is an ambiguous one" (p. 31). This certainly seems to be the case in the political arena.

Given the existence of gay and lesbian oppression, a main strategy of the gay and lesbian movement(s) in the United States has been to organize around these categories. By doing this, the movement has created a sense of personal unity and social location for (at least some) American gays and lesbians (Weeks 1987). Identity has played a powerful mediating function between (at least some) individual gays and lesbians and the larger group, between self-understanding and gay and lesbian politics (Epstein 1987). One of the key political problems that has arisen for the social constructionists is the deconstruction of the category "homosexual", which often is seen as running contrary not only to the individual identities of gays and lesbians, but the political interests of the gay and lesbian movement (Kitzinger 1995).

I find it difficult to believe that one can seriously explore the social constructionist theories of sexual identity without recognizing the limitations of the sexual identity labels - homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual - which not only describe but *shape* our sexual meaning-making. Yet, for at least some people, these “labels seem to be an important
part of identity development and psychological well-being" (Coleman 1987). The same holds true not only in the personal, psychological arena but in the more public and political domain. As Steven Epstein says, "people who base their claims to social rights on the basis of a group identity will not appreciate being told that that identity is just a social construction" (Epstein 1987, p. 22). The challenge becomes recognizing and honoring these identities, which are often experienced as stable and core realities, while simultaneously exploring their social constructedness. This is truly a paradoxical task.

Even if one has as their goal the deconstruction of rigid sexual categories, one is still faced with the familiar dilemma of how to protest these socially imposed categories without organizing around them (Epstein 1987; Kitzinger 1995). What are the political ramifications of charges of "essentialism" being leveled against those who organize on behalf of a group called "lesbian" or "gay"? To the degree that our legal and political apparatus is responsive to scientific "data" in making decisions about our lives, what's to happen to civil rights if we choose to vacate this dominant framework (Kitzinger 1995)? The "strong" social constructionists provide some interesting, although not totally satisfactory, perspectives on these political questions.

One of the arguments used to support essentialist strategies in the political struggle for equality and justice is that our "identities are fixed and natural and therefore to ban or punish them is itself against nature and wrong" (Katz 1995). This "we can't help ourselves" tactic is seen by the social constructionist as defensive and apologetic (Kitzinger 1995), short-sighted and ahistorical (Duggan in Katz 1995, p. 195). Do we really want to rest our politics on the assumption that what is "natural" is acceptable or on the hope that proving the "naturalness" of something will lead to its acceptance by society at large? Are there not many things presumed by our society to be "natural" (i.e.,
violence and greed), yet demanding of regulation? And despite the fact that dark skin is widely accepted as a "naturally" occurring phenomenon, this has done little to dismantle the oppression of people of color.

Even the affirmative political presentation of our gay identities adopted by many gay and lesbian liberationists (i.e., gay and lesbian as "good"), is considered suspect by those such as Foucault who believe that "it is a mechanical inversion, limited by the oppressive terms set originally by the bigot". He concedes that such a tactic has practical use in the struggle for homosexual rights and equality - the fight for a better deal within the dominant system - but states that "it does not challenge the deep social structure of homosexual oppression in which the heterosexual and the homosexual categories are implicated as basic terms" (Foucault in Katz 1995, p. 174). Others, such as Celia Kitzinger, concur that the relatively new, gay-affirmative interpretation of sexuality individualizes and depoliticizes lesbian and gay identity just as effectively as did the "illness" models of the past (Kitzinger 1987).

Given the political climate in the United States today, a climate in which gay and lesbian rights seems to be slowly gaining momentum, it is understandable that one would be hesitant to proclaim the fluid and culturally sensitive nature of sexual identity. Yet, we must ask ourselves what is to be gained by perpetuating the commonly held essentialist belief that homosexuality is a fixed identity for roughly 10% of the population? Perhaps this can achieve some level of tolerance for a supposedly fixed minority, but does it not reinforce the belief in the validity of "heterosexuality" as "normal" for the vast majority of people? Does it not leave untouched existing social, cultural, and political practices and serve to stabilize rigid notions of gender that underlie sexual identity categories (Katz 1995; Kitzinger 1995)? Urvashi Vaid, one of the American gay movement's most
prominent activists and spokeswomen, describes the flaw at the center of the movement as “a false assumption....that there is something at once singular and universal that can be called gay and lesbian or bisexual or even transgendered identity” (in Miles 1995, p. 16). Vaid’s words reflect the unresolved contradictions inherent in gay and lesbian identity politics.

It goes almost without saying that social constructionist theory, as a paradigm for organizing our sexual meaning-making, has some pitfalls. I know few folks who have ventured into the social constructionist terrain without experiencing exasperation with its tendency towards political immobilization, discomfort with its challenges to tightly and widely held notions of truth, and frustration with its inaccessible language. However, it is my opinion, that none of these “shortcomings” outweigh its benefits.

Extreme social constructionism has been seen by some as a collapse into metaphysical relativism (Mohr 1992) and self-referential passivity (Weisstein 1993 in Kitzinger 1995), whereby moral criteria are assumed to be too culturally specific to be relevant. The result can be a dangerous paralysis in the face of unquestionable oppression. Kenneth Gergen has been the social constructionist advocate that I have found most articulate in his assertion that constructionism does not provide an escape from matters of moral and political consequence. On the contrary, he believes that

constructionism invites the practitioner to view the normative rules as historically and culturally situated thus subject to critique and transformation.....To the extent that....theory and related practices enter into the life of the culture, sustaining certain patterns of conduct and destroying others, such work must be evaluated in terms of good and ill (Gergen 1985, p. 273).

If knowledge and politics in the postmodern age are seen as productions, not as externally existing facts waiting to be discovered, then some knowledge and some politics may be more suitable for production than others. By acknowledging the social, cultural
and historical constructions of sexuality we are better able to critique those constructions and make a case for those expressions of sexuality that meet our criteria for “fair”, “moral”, or “just”. This in no way detracts from, but instead highlights the need for system-change in the fight against oppression.

The implications of social constructionism are profound, rattling the foundations of our own personal identities and the American gay and lesbian political movement, yet this discomfort cannot be taken as reason enough to abandon social constructionism. In the recent past we have seen the American gay and lesbian movements and communities struggling for clarity about who’s in and who’s out of our identity politics. Debates, ranging from the nature of Eleanor Roosevelt’s relationship with the journalist Lorena Hickok to the inclusion of male-to-female transsexuals who are now partnered with women in lesbian-only spaces, have been infusing the discourse on lesbian identity (Brown 1995). But, as of yet, I have seen no clear articulation of a social constructionist politic. To the extent that the American population, including many members of the gay and lesbian movement, are committed to the existing rigid sexual categories, it seems more expedient to work within the essentialist paradigm. Perhaps the essentialist paradigm is indeed expedient in the political arena (although my skepticism increases as time goes on), but I am adverse to political expedience leading academic theory. Whether it be the classroom in which I teach or the research projects that I undertake, I feel that an academic environment demands “a healthy, frank, and honest depiction of the [potential] fluidity of sexual behavior...the arbitrariness of sexual identities...and the capacity of people to create and recreate their sexual" self-concepts (Sears 1992 in Ember 1994, p.73). Perhaps the politics with follow.
The social constructionist literature, particularly the more recent postmodern discourse, has more often than not been densely written and very inaccessible to those outside of the academic arena. But although the theory is currently, and unfortunately, written in elitist language, I find the ideas contained within to be quite a bit more inclusive than the essentialist models. Speaking as a social constructionist, I would say that the most inviting element of postmodernism for me personally is its willingness to expose and deconstruct the Western philosophical and theoretical discourse that denies and represses difference. Putting aside the academic jargon, I would say that postmodernism allows for diversity and, if only for this reason, it wins my theoretical vote.

On an individual level I have seen women's lives destroyed by understandable, but regrettable, community reactions to what the social constructionist would consider "natural", healthy, sexual identity changes. And on a group level, I have seen racism and ethnocentrism supported by essentialist notions of fixed sexual categories. Working with young college-age students who are coming into their own sexual identity in a different cultural climate than those of us who came before them has clearly informed my convictions. Their experiences, and the alienation that they have felt from older generations of gays and lesbians, has pushed me to look for theories that do not only speak to me, but are inclusive of them as well. As Shane Phelan states in her book on lesbian feminist identity politics,

[women of color [and I would add young women, working class women and non-American women] are not to be taken simply as the voices of diversity breaking in upon the uniform consciousness of white women, but as [women] who remind all of us of the tentative, constructed, but historically real and particular natures of our identities (Phelan 1989, p.69).
My work across race, national boundaries, and age has convinced me that I would rather spend my academic, professional and personal energy working to make an inclusive theory more accessible and politically relevant than prop up a theory that is easily accessible and comfortable, yet dismissive of diversity.

The Individual: Active Participant or Passive Player in the Construction of Sexual Identity

In the essentialist models there is little need for discussion of the role of the individual, for he or she "is passive and sexual orientation is thrust upon him or her either by constitution or by early parental treatment" (Byne et al. 1993). But in the constructionist model, the questions of how the sexually identified individual comes to be socially and culturally constituted become central. Unfortunately, this is an area in which one finds contradictory and as yet undeveloped explanations in the social constructionists literature.

In his essay on the limits of social constructionism, Steven Epstein argues that

constructionism vacillates between a certain type of libertarian, individualism....in which sexual categories may be appropriated, transcended, and deconstructed at will; and just the opposite conception of the individual's sexual identity as created for him or her by the social and historical context (Epstein 1987, p. 23).

These two, seemingly mutually exclusive notions were recurrent in the social constructionist literature that I read, causing me more than a bit of confusion. The following is the meaning that I am currently able to make out of this apparent paradox.

It goes almost without saying that the historically and socially available categories of sexual identity exert a powerful influence on our evolving sense of sexual selves. Today's sexual identities exist in a setting in which group identity has assumed paramount importance, and where sexuality has become a central dimension of identity formation in general. Pressure to define oneself sexually, especially in adolescence and young
adulthood, is keenly felt and the available constructions of sexuality limit the possibilities of sexual identity from which one can easily choose. Yet, most people experience their sexual identities as neither voluntary nor socially constructed (Cass 1984; Epstein 1987). The question of "choice?" or "no choice?" continues, and the answers seem to only be increasing in complexity.

First off, it must be emphasized that gay and lesbian identities, like all social identities, are experienced as no less "real" or "profound" for being historically and culturally created (Katz 1990; Weeks 1987). Particularly in the U.S., "sexual identities are no longer arbitrary divisions of the field of possibilities; they are encoded in a complex web of social practices - legal, pedagogic, medical, moral, and personal" (Weeks 1987, p. 48). Even if we wanted to, we could not will these identities away.

Whether or not we choose to personally identify as lesbian, gay, heterosexual, or bisexual, there exists great pressure to conform to the existing models of a stable, dichotomous sexuality. To do otherwise, for instance to change one's sexual behavior, not only influences one's individual identity, but challenges one's identity within a social and community context as well. A familiar example of this can be seen in the experiences of women "coming out" as "heterosexual" after identifying themselves as "lesbian" and vice versa.

Categories of sexuality do not necessarily have to be valid descriptions of actual conduct in order to exert a powerful influence on our individual making of sexual meaning (Gergen 1985). Even when our personal experiences and those of our friends and acquaintances do not fit into the existing categories, we still find it difficult to reconsider those categories of sexual meaning making. Research has shown that even
people whose experience of sexuality is highly varied often try to fit themselves into the existing dichotomous and essentialist models of sexuality (Rust 1993).

We as gays and lesbians have added weight to the power of the hetero-homo sexuality model by forging politics and communities that are based upon the notion of stable, essential sexual identities. And many of us have been understandably resistant to considering the possibility of sexual identity as culturally constructed. It is perhaps the equating of "constructed" identity with "false" or "lesser" identity which pushes gays and lesbians to the opposite extreme of trying to locate the "reality" of our identity in our genes, early experiences or in our "essence". If we equate constructionism with an attack on our personal identities, communities and politics it is understandable that we would be resistant to exploring what it has to offer, particularly given the substantial emphasis that we place on our stigmatized identities (Gergen 1991). I contend that gays and lesbians should, and will, only be ready to explore the notion of the social construction of homosexuality when it is done in tandem with the deconstruction of heterosexuality as "normal" and "essential". Unfortunately, until recently most of the discussions pertaining to the social construction of sexual identities have centered on gay and lesbian identity, leaving heterosexual identity unanalyzed.

Assuming, as I do, that sexual identity categories exist as a powerful means of social organizing which profoundly effect the construction of our sense of sexual self-identity, what about the role of the individual? Have our identities been forced upon us, forged by us, or both?

Social constructionism teaches that

identity is a reflection of sociopolitical organization rather than a reflection of essential organization, and coming out is the process of describing oneself in terms of social constructs rather than a process of discovering one's essence. By
describing oneself in terms provided by one's social context, one locates oneself within this social context and defines one's relations to other individuals, groups, and sociopolitical institutions in this context (Rust 1993).

This process of self-description, this interpretation of personal experience, is considered by social constructionist theory to be the means by which all individuals actively participate in constructing their own identity. Although the process of identity construction is influenced by individual characteristics and by societal norms, the active process of self-creating and re-creating is seen by the constructionist as an artifact of these individual and societal limits (Garnets and Kimmel 1993).

The social constructionist does not necessarily believe that this active process is always a conscious process. On the contrary, "sexual orientation is assumed to be shaped and reshaped by a cascade of choices made in the context of changing circumstances in one's life and enormous social and cultural pressure" (Byne et al. 1993, p. 237). A pressure that some believe encourages us to "reconstruct" our own pasts in such a way that they fit the notion of essential sexuality (Epstein 1987; Rust 1993; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). The social constructionist contention is that “although the effects of [this pressure] often extend beyond our conscious awareness, we nonetheless play a significant role in shaping who we are as a person through the social interactions in which we engage” (Rhoads 1994, p 143). In other words, we all have a role in creating who we are, in shaping both our culture and our identity.

Whether consciously chosen or not, identity to the social constructionist is a performance (Ember 1994; Kitzinger 1995), a moment-to-moment playing out of social scripts (Garnets and Kimmel 1993; Tiefer 1987) on an ever-changing set. To close this section, I borrow from Jeffrey Week's chapter in The Cultural Construction of Sexuality:
Identity is not a destiny but a choice. But in a culture where homosexual desires, female or male, are still execrated and denied, the adoption of lesbian or gay identities inevitably constitutes a political choice. These identities are not expressions of secret essences. They are self creations, but they are creations on grounds not freely chosen but laid out by history." (Weeks 1987, p.47)

In this way, perhaps the “choice” of sexual identity is best described as a forced choice.

Current Status of the Constructionism/Essentialism Debate

Psychology has been forced in the last few decades to confront the socially constructed versus essential nature not only of sexuality, but of a variety of concepts, including gender, the individual, emotions, and notions of mental health and disorder (Kitzinger 1995). Scientists themselves concede that "the present state of biological research on biological influences on sexual orientation is one of inconclusive complexity" (Bailey 1995, p.129) and that "there is no evidence at present to substantiate a biological theory" of sexual orientation (Byne and Parsons 1994, p. 228). Even in his chapter focusing on the problems with the social constructionist models of homosexuality, Richard Mohr concedes that "there is nearly universal agreement among scholars that social factors are in some sense determinant in homosexuality, that homosexuality is culturally constituted or produced" (Mohr 1992, pp. 221-222). Yet, perhaps because of a desire to legitimize sex research, or because of the Western Judeo-Christian discourse, biological reductionism still maintains a grip on sexology long after it has been dethroned from other aspects of psychology (Tiefer 1995).

Currently the essentialism/social constructionism debate "no longer attracts the same passion that it did - not because one theory has gained precedence, but rather because the adversaries apparently became weary of the argument, and the debate itself came to be seen as impeding developments within each paradigm" (Kitzinger 1995, p.136). From the essentialist views of the biological scientist to the constructionist...
perspective of the cultural historian, contemporary research into the construction of homosexuality is diverse (Patterson 1995). My personal identity and recent academic studies have unquestionably been influenced by both paradigms, but it is the social construction of sexual identity as a culturally and historically specific process that speaks to me both as a lesbian and as a researcher. I find that social constructionism has provided me with the most insightful and interesting analyses to date of the diverse character of gay identity which I have witnessed in my travels and work in Europe, Africa and the Americas. It is for this reason that I chose to move within the boundaries of this paradigm as I pursued my own research.

LGB Identity in the Netherlands

Since this study rests upon the premise that American-educated college students experienced a considerable shift in social and cultural circumstance upon arriving in Amsterdam, this literature review would not be complete without an introduction to the unique construction of sexuality in the Netherlands. With information on both the historical and contemporary construction of gay identity in the Netherlands and a bit of insight into Dutch cultural in general, one begins to be able to understand the unique experiences of the research participants as they embarked upon their sexual identity journeys in Amsterdam.

A positive identity requires a community that supports that identity (Ferguson 1989; Phelan 1989), yet the American "ethnic model" of gay community or "culture" is not present in Holland. Most of the Dutch that I have met cringe at the concept of a "gay community"; they express little interest in what they refer to as American "ghettoization" of gays and lesbians. In a Dutch-American dialogue, published in the book Gay Life in Dutch Society (1987), Leny Jansen notes that "the Dutch tend to absorb variations from
the norm instead of coughing them out. They at first accept diverse behavior instead of isolating it. Isolation encourages dissent; the Dutch apply subtle group pressure to discourage dissent and non-conformity" (Pheterson and Jensen 1987, p. 29). Although this seems to be at least part of the picture as to why gays and lesbians in the Netherlands exist without an independent "community", I have heard very persuasive arguments from my Dutch friends and colleagues that they feel free to exist with as much dissent and non-conformity as they choose within relatively mainstream Dutch society.

It is sometimes difficult to compare the "progress" of Dutch and American gay and lesbian emancipation since each exists on its own trajectory, yet it is obvious that the Netherlands has seen a more continual and steady extension of social and cultural legitimacy to gays and lesbians than the United States (White 1995). But it is not only the gay and lesbian political landscape that influenced the cross-cultural experiences of my students. The Netherlands has a unique history which influences how the Dutch approach difference in general and sexuality in particular.

The much-noted Dutch "tolerance" of difference (not to be confused with "validation" or "acceptance") is rooted in a culture which until the mid-60's dealt with ideological diversity by creating highly institutionalized and independent societal "pillars" from which people tended to regard each other with a kind of guarded respect (Shetter 1987). In this system of "pillarization" political power and national wealth were shared among the four major interest blocks in the country, Calvinists, Roman Catholics, Socialist, and Liberals, thus demonstrating that competing philosophical positions and social interests could be woven into a stable social fabric. Pillarization offered Dutch gays and lesbians "a model for incorporative integration based on seeing differences as cultural or philosophical and, while important, such differences are not antagonistic to a
shared social experience" (White 1995, p. 15). This "tolerance" of diversity and respect for the individual's right to self-determination was reflected in a 1991 attitude survey by the National Social and Cultural Planning Office in which the vast majority of the Dutch population (89% or above) supported homosexuality on questions of equal treatment (Social en Culturenchen Planbureau 1992). It is this "tolerant" environment which supported and challenged the research participants throughout the course of this study.

Dutch society is more open about topics of sexuality in general than the United States. This can be seen in the large number of "ordinary" people who were actively involved in the well-organized Sexual Reform Movement of the 60's, the early introduction and wide availability of birth control, and the lenient restrictions on prostitution and pornography. In the Netherlands adolescents have more independence from their parents than they do in America, including a different set of laws around age of consent (Rob Tielman 1995). This, coupled with a lack of prohibition on youths' participation in the bar scene, provides the young Dutch gay man in particular, with a wider realm of sexual expression and choice than his American counterpart.

Clearly, most any person whose sexual identity was forged by American culture would experience the above mentioned changes in the terrain of sexual identity as somewhat surprising. Yet, perhaps the single most striking difference between the American sexual construction and the Dutch construction of sexual identity is best typified by what the Danish sociologist, Henning Bech, referred to in his lecture to my students as "the disappearance of the modern homosexual".

According to Bech, this "disappearance" is underway in all countries where the homosexual and heterosexual existence are becoming more similar due to the conditions of modern life. He is not alone in his conceptualizations. I draw not only from Bech's

- The nuclear family is becoming less and less the norm and "alternative" family structures are being recognized and created.
- The variety of types of socially acceptable living arrangements has multiplied.
- Sexuality has increasingly become divorced from a procreative intent.
- Studies show that heterosexuals are more likely to have oral sex, a behavior associated with homosexuality, than previously.
- Non-marital sexuality has become more commonplace and open.
- The instability of homosexual relationships, which are unsupported by law and dominant culture, no longer serves to distinguish them essentially from the many heterosexual relationships which are destabilized by divorce.
- And the public airing of heterosexual scandals has helped to destabilize heterosexuality as the "righteous" sexual identity.

If gay or lesbian identity implies a very different set of structural relations to groups, individuals, and institutions such as marriage, the church, the tax and social welfare systems (Rust 1993) then it seems obvious that that identity would shift as these relationships shift. What the participants in this study experienced in the Netherlands is a manifestation of that shifting. The notion that the crumbling of the hetero/homo hierarchy would yield a deterioration in the need for the hetero/homo distinction (Katz 1995) seemed to be playing itself out in Amsterdam. The participants’ personal experience of, and reaction to, this deterioration would prove to be of great importance to this study.
Conclusion

This chapter has presented to the reader both the historical and theoretical literature which was the foundation of this study of sexual identity. At two different points in the dissertation process I found myself drawing from literature which was not part of this broad, initial review. The first instance necessitated an exploration of the literature pertaining to social identity functions and the second required review of some of the more general theories of cognitive development. In both cases I will incorporate that literature into the analysis chapter of this dissertation.

As a way to wrap-up this chapter and move towards the specifics of this study I would like to offer the words of one of the students that participated in the pilot project for this dissertation. This rather long narrative is an excerpt from the final journal assignment in which students were asked to reflect upon their own changes in understanding over the course of their semester in the Netherlands program. I offer this student’s words as a way to introduce you to both the research site and the complex changes in how students feel, understand and practice their sexual identities that this dissertation set out to explore. This young man's observations about the continuum of sexual diversity will be a recurring theme as we explore the experiences of the thirteen, unique students whose journeys informed this dissertation.

Before this semester, if someone had asked me what it means to be gay....I would have been able to provide an answer. Now I am not so sure that I could do this or would even want to try.

It must be impossible that I didn't see for years that the other gay people I knew experienced their sexual identities in much different ways than I mine. Looking back it is quite apparent to me that even my best friends had not only very different ideas about being gay, but also much different ways in interpreting their gayness, in expressing it, and in considering the world from a gay perspective. But somehow I always had some conviction about a coreness of being gay that worked in some way or other to bind gay people together. I thought always that
there was some common bond of experience or some link of self and experience rendering some part of all gay people the same. I thought this in spite of all the difference apparent around me, and I thought it with a blind conviction I never really questioned.

I think it was the intensity of the semester that broke my conviction...Through the lectures it became clear that one does not need to go far through time or far across cultures to find expressions and interpretations of different sexualities radically disparate from my own. I had known this, to some degree and in principle before, but this semester drove the point home....with so many forceful examples and through so many face-on lectures.....And this was magnified by the cultural experience filled with difference....At points, it was near impossible to see my gayness as having anything at all to do with others' gayness. It is clear now that the topic of sexuality is much more complex than I had ever before imagined.

This reminds me of a theory of categories presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his Philosophical Investigations. The focus of the problem is the similarities between two items held under a single category. In this case, the items in question were how both the card game solitaire and a sport like soccer could be considered games. It is hard if not impossible to find a single thing in common between solitaire and soccer, yet there is no question at all that both are games. It cannot be said that games are based on competition (playing Frisbee or catch is a game, surely, and there is not competition), or on recreation (high level tennis is a profession and tournament chess is an obsession if not a life). For pages Wittgenstein presents what appears to be the plausible linking factor between all games and then finds the exception, in every case. In the end what we see is a sliding scale of connection; solitaire is based on winning, much like a soccer match; soccer is based on the physical acts of kicking a ball around, much like playing catch. So there is a continuity of what it means to be a game, while it is no contradiction for two things to be games and have absolutely nothing in common with each other.

I see homosexualities more like that now, a continuum of similarities, where two people can be both homosexual and agree perhaps not on a single point....What I see now is that there is no blanket of gayness that can be applied....to a whole class of people. Instead, gayness is fluid as much personally as categorically, with those who fall under its rubric broad and without any necessary similarities....

I have learned at once that there is no single way to categorize gayness, but instead a thousand little things that make for similarities, some shared here and others there, in a continuum of diversity. (student journal entry, Spring semester, 1995)
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine: (1) how the individual sexual identities of a small group of American-educated college students shift and change over the course of an intensive, four-month, cross-cultural experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual studies in the Netherlands; and (2) what are the facilitating conditions for, and the obstacles to, identity shifts and changes for these students. This chapter describes the methodology of the study including information about the match of methodology to theory, the research setting and participants, my role as researcher, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness.

Match of Theory and Methodology

In sexual identity studies, and perhaps in any area of academic exploration, the definitions a scholar chooses reflects a willingness to align with certain explanatory models, which in turn defines the parameters of ensuing theory and research (Brown 1995). Having accepted the definition, at least for the purposes of this study, of sexual identity as "a process of describing one's social location within a changing social context" (Rust 1993, p.50), and having aligned myself with the social constructionist theories of sexual identity formation, certain research considerations became apparent and certain methods and techniques of research surfaced as being the most appropriate for my study.

In the social constructionist model of sexual identity the aim of identity research is not to interrogate or reveal any "true" self, but to understand how experience is used to construct, negotiate and interpret one's sexual identity (Elliot 1985; Epstein 1987;
"Facts" and imposed categories were of little interest to me as a social constructionist researcher. Instead, my focus of inquiry was the participant’s accounts, perceptions and cognitions as he or she examined and defined "self". Whether or not someone is or is not a "lesbian", "gay man" or "other" is not of importance; the process by which that person constructs, deconstructs, or maintains that self-identity was. A central message of social constructionism is that persons actively construct the meanings that frame and organize their perceptions and experiences in relation to historically available categories. My goal was to get inside these perspectives by using qualitative methods of research.

By using open-ended questions for both interviews and journals, and encouraging participants to describe their activities, attitudes, and feelings in their own words, pictures and metaphors, I focused on the widest possible range of sexual identity constructions and experiences. Through the design, data collection and analysis of this research project, I found myself looking for diversity rather than for laws of behavior, trying to understand how my participants saw the world rather than slotting them into preconceived categories. By immersing myself in the details of my data I was able, through a process of inductive analysis, to explore relationships and themes which genuinely spoke to the experiences of the students who participated in the study.

Prolonged engagement with the research participants over a four-month period allowed for naturalistic inquiry that could not have been had under less intimate circumstances. What barriers existed, such as age and “rank”, were hard to maintain in the day-in-day-out experience of a shared cross-cultural immersion. The very real-world setting of this research project allowed for data collection in a wide variety of settings,
from informal discussions over a shared meal to heated arguments between participants after 12 hours in the confines of a train car. Clearly, my in-depth engagement with this research project was critical to understanding how students were experiencing their sexual identities.

The following was a list of “research reminders” which I gleaned from some of my social constructionist identity research mentors. I referred to this list regularly throughout my research process as way to check the match between my research methods and my constructionist theory:

- Am I using language which reflects a sense of sexual self-identity as fluid and evolutionary and does not imply a static, sexual essence (Capper 1992 in Ember 1994; Rust 1993)?

- Am I posing questions about sexual identity histories, as well as sexual identity "futures" and "goals" with the assumption that these may be different?

- In what ways does my framing of sexual identity development still reflect essentialist goals? Am I allowing my research subjects the possibility of creating and communicating their own identity goals (Rust 1993)?

- Have I given my research subjects the option of being "non-sexually identified" in the event that their current sexual self-representations are not organized into sexual identities (Rust, 1993)?

- Am I presenting sexual identity as a process in which the individual is actively engaged and has some choices (Capper 1992 in Ember 1994; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995)?

According to some theorists, the qualitative, naturalistic approaches which I used to step into the worlds of my students, and to portray these worlds through the authenticity of their own voices, represent a methodology well suited to social constructionist research (Tiefer 1995). If, by using these methods, I am able to shed light on how the experience of living and studying in the Netherlands was used by students to
“construct, negotiate and interpret” their own sexual identities, then I have successfully matched my qualitative methods with my social constructionist theory.

Methodological Challenges

There are particular challenges to undertaking a qualitative inquiry of the type which I am describing. Since sexual identity depends in part on the meanings that individuals attach to sexual categories (Weeks 1987) my study needed to stay responsive to each student’s particular way of making meaning of and identifying with the sexual categories which have been made available to them, while at the same time retaining a cohesive focus. My guiding research questions assumed neither a unified starting point, nor a common end point for any changes in sexual identity that my students might make. This work challenged me to recognize and honor all students’ identities, many of which were experienced as stable and core realities, while simultaneously exploring their social constructedness. This took a particular level of sensitivity to and rapport with students as they struggled to fit their new understandings with their own sense of themselves as sexual beings.

Research Setting

As one might imagine, the setting for this research project in a lesbian, gay and bisexual studies college semester abroad program based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, is of great significance to the finds of this study. Although the specific construction of sexuality in the Netherlands was outlined in the last chapter and more detail about the intersection between sexuality and Dutch culture will be provided in later chapters, it is important that the reader be familiar with the specific program that the research participants were involved in as well as the Dutch culture which supported that program.
The Netherlands lesbian, gay and bisexual studies program is one of many four-month, college semester abroad programs offered by the School for International Training (SIT). Based out of Brattleboro, Vermont, SIT sends students from various U.S. colleges and universities off on intensive cross-cultural programs. Regardless of whether the program is focused on environmental issues in Madagascar or multiculturalism in Australia, all SIT students participate in a rigorous academic program, extensive cross-cultural studies, and an extended homestay in a host-country household. The programs are small (rarely more than 15) and quite intimate in their nature.

The location of each SIT program is closely matched with the special topic of the semester and the Netherlands LGB studies program is no exception to this policy. Amsterdam was chosen as the site for the first ever lesbian, gay and bisexual semester abroad program for two reasons: the leading role which the Netherlands has played in creating an environment of gay and lesbian rights and the quality of “Homostudies” which has developed in tandem with that tolerant environment.

As the founding director of the Netherlands college semester abroad program I had available to me a wide array of renowned Dutch scholars who were able to lecture to my students [see appendix for list of lecturers in the LGB lecture series]. I also had numerous resources which I could and did use for out-of-class field excursions including representatives from the political, cultural, educational, health, military and arts arenas. Both in and out of the academic arena, the gay and lesbian resources which I had available to me were far more than I could have ever used in one semester.

It is very important to note, however, that despite the many resources that I had available to me and the seemingly gay-affirming reality that created them, Amsterdam was “lacking” in a strong gay identity. It was as if, despite its tolerance for sexual
diversity, Amsterdam did not support, but actually detracted from a strong sexual identity. This relatively "weak" or "diffused" sexual identity of Dutch gays and lesbians initially took me by surprise because, prior to my experience in Amsterdam, I had assumed that a gay-affirming environment would support and ultimately yield a strong gay identity. After spending time researching and writing this dissertation it came to make perfect sense that the strong gay identity which I had been expecting was actually a product of the American cultural and political environment. Further discussion of Dutch culture and its relationship to sexual identity will appear in later chapters.

Given both its academic content and its location in Amsterdam, one cannot underestimate the relevance of the Netherlands LGB Studies program as the site for this research project. This setting provided a combination of knowledge and experience that would be impossible to replicate elsewhere. As one might expect, this unique setting yielded unique and interesting findings.

The College Semester Abroad (CSA) Student As Research Participant

As stated in his article, "Qualitative Research on [Homo]Sexuality in Education", James Sears (1992) speaks of the power of qualitative data as resting not in the number of people interviewed, but in the researcher’s ability to know well a few people in their cultural contexts. Although I would argue that there is no such thing as a representative sample of gays and lesbians, it goes without saying that the thirteen students who were my research participants in no way represented the gay and lesbian community at large or even the large and diverse group of college-age American "queers". The goal of qualitative research is not to make generalizations (Guba and Lincoln, 1981), but to illuminate the richness and depth in the lives of a few well-chosen individuals (Sears 1992). My ability to know intimately the students who served as research participants,
and the cultural context in which they were residing, was instrumental to the success of this modest research project.

In a discussion of diversity and inclusiveness within higher education, Shane Phelan says that

perhaps the most difficult place in which to celebrate difference is the academy. The nature of theory has been to make connections, to tell grand stories that tie threads together. Until the advent of postmodernism, the aim of theoretical work was to smooth and connect, not to disrupt or disorient us. But people who are left out know the price of such simple smoothing (Phelan 1989, p. 165).

This has certainly been the case with the majority of the thirteen students who have been enrolled in the Netherlands LGB program and many other young "queers" whom I have encountered in the recent past. The categories of sexual identity which existed when I was "coming out" in the early 80's do not seem to fit so smoothly today; the models of gay identity development seem to be creating a rub which, although uncomfortable for many of us, seems particularly painful for young adults.

All of the participants in this study were between the ages of 20 and 25, with most in the 20-21 range. Because this study was set in an academic semester abroad program, all of the students were enrolled in a U.S. college or university. This program was expensive (approx. $9,000 for the semester), which means that it drew primarily from upper-income brackets. Three of the thirteen students were born and spent considerable time in their childhood outside of the U.S., one in Puerto Rico, one in Peru, one in the Dominican Republic. The first two identified as Latino, the latter as Black. One student identified as Native American/White, the other nine as White. One student was Jewish, the rest came from Christo-centered homes.
Most, but not all, of the research participants came into the program identifying themselves, either in their application material or during introductions, as "lesbian", "gay", "bisexual" or "queer". The others were either questioning their identity or preferred to remain "unlabeled". Some students had been actively involved in gay community in the States, and others said that the SIT group was "the most gay people that I've ever met". Some had been "out forever" and others had just "discovered" their homosexuality. They had all chosen to commit a semester to perusing gay and lesbian studies, which for some meant hiding the nature of the program from their parents, the financiers of their education.

The greatest differences among the research participants could be found in the academic arena. Reflecting the incredible diversity of American institutions of higher education, I had students who ranged from having little skill in dealing with abstract concepts to those who were steeped in theory. A few had explored LGB studies through their own universities, but most had no more knowledge of gay and lesbian issues than what they themselves had experienced or picked up through popular, mainstream sources of information. Some were brilliantly articulate, others were awkward thinkers and communicators. All were extremely motivated, if not academically then at least personally, to learn what they could from the Netherlands program.

Jonathan Katz summarizes a social constructionist tenet well when he says that human beings make their own different arrangement of reproduction and production, of sex differences and eroticism, their own history of pleasure and happiness. But they do not make that history just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (Katz 1995, p. 190).

So what of the unique pasts of the college age "queer student"? Certainly the history of the last century impacted upon these young students, but the particular realities of each
new age cohort presents possibilities of new understandings of gay and lesbian identity (Brown 1995). I believe that such is the case with the students on the Netherlands program.

The students that I studied have all been born into a post-Stonewall society. The gender politics of an earlier generation of lesbian-feminists seems to have lost significance for many in this group (Brown 1995). Although not necessarily versed in "Queer Theory", many of these young people were familiar with the "queer movement". Like many of their age cohorts, the majority of my research participants gravitated towards identifying as “queer”.

Identity is conferred through socialization, and sexual identity is no exception. But, one of the things that sets gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer identity apart from some other types of identity is that often it is developed after a person leaves their home environment; it is, therefore, described as secondary socialization (Rhoads 1994). Many of the students enrolled in the Netherlands LGB program were very dynamically engaged in this “secondary socialization” process. By shifting the site of this in-process socialization process from the American college campus to Amsterdam one could feel and see this dynamic process unfolding.

My Role As Researcher

In qualitative research the investigator is the primary instrument of data collection. Certainly, my own experiences and bias have profoundly influenced this study. I attempt to lay these out now in order to be as transparent as possible.

As stated earlier, my assumptions about the cultural constructedness of sexual identity has profoundly influenced the questions that I have asked and therefore the path that I have gone down in relationship to this dissertation. At the point that I undertook
this study I had been living in Amsterdam for a year and a half and had already seen a number of students through the experience of the Netherlands program. It was my own “culture shock” in the Netherlands, as well as that of my initial students, that prompted me to undertake this study. Clearly, there was something about the experiencing of living and studying in Amsterdam that was causing unexpected and confounding identity shifts for those whose sexual identities were shaped by American culture. That observation, and the lack of easily apparent explanations for it, were a prime motivational factor in this study.

My position as Academic Director of the Netherlands LGB studies program situated me in a unique, but not un-problematic position, from which to undertake this qualitative research project. I had the opportunity of participating in and observing my research participants as they worked day-to-day, over four months, to interpret and reinterpret their sexual desires, practices and understandings. But, managing the dual role of Academic Director and researcher was complex.

It was essential to both my role as Academic Director and my role as researcher that I be able to build trusting and cooperative relationships with my students. This was difficult for some students, given my role as evaluator of their academic work, but given the confidential, end-of-semester evaluations, I seem to have succeeded in this arena. (“Peg is a very fair grader, you always know where you stand with her.”; “She’s academically inspiring, but also really down to earth.”; “Peg managed to balance her professional and personal relationships with us very well.”; “She’s easy to relate to”).

Despite the fact that involvement in my research project was purely voluntary (see appendix 4), all of the students enrolled during the two research semesters chose to participate. Once again, in anonymous evaluation forms completed at the end of the
semester, students registered no complaints about the impact of my research on either my ability to perform my duties as Academic Director or their general experience of their college semester abroad program. In fact, more than half of the students said that participation in the research project was a positive addition to their semester, allowing them the time and individual attention that they needed to delve deeper into the issues which the semester surfaced. This sort of reciprocity was very important to me as a researcher.

Perhaps the most complex component of my role management was that not only was I a participant/observer in this particular research study, but I also had role in facilitating the change which I was interested in documenting. In deed it was part of my job as Academic Director to design a challenging academic program and to then help students reflect upon and contextualize learnings from that program. The experience of living for four months in the Netherlands would provide any “queer” American with certain challenges to their sexual meaning-making system, but the Netherlands LGB studies program built upon that experience with rigorous interventions, both academic and personal.

Concepts and language pertaining to postmodernism and social constructionism were peppered throughout the LGB lecture series, which I designed in conjunction with my Dutch colleagues at the University of Amsterdam’s Homostudies Department. Lecturers insisted on using historically and culturally specific terms in referring to those people, in prior times or non-Western cultures, who engage in same sex behavior. Some students had never before explored culture as a powerful force in shaping society in general, let alone their own personal, sexual identities. Even this research project, with its underlying assumption that sexual identity can change over time and across cultures,
exposed many students to a notion that they had never before considered...that their own sexual identities are culturally specific and that changes may be “normal”, “natural” and “healthy”.

Data Collection Methods

The primary purpose of gathering data in naturalistic inquiry is to gain the ability to construct reality in ways that are consistent and compatible with the constructions of a setting’s inhabitants (Erlandson et al. p. 81). For the purposes of my study that meant that I wanted to gather data that would help me to better understand the ways in which my students constructed their realities, in this case, their sexual identities. This required that I be able to, as much as possible, get inside the students’ worlds so as to see reality as they saw it. This was accomplished through the following on-going, three-part process of data collection.

- Observing and recording anecdotal data.
- Conducting individual interviews.
- Analyzing students’ written work (such as application materials, cultural fields study journals, independent study paper).

Data Collection #1: Observations and Anecdotal Data in Field Journal

As Academic Director, in any given week, I was with the students from 10-30 hours, observing their 15-part lecture series, teaching a Cultural Field Studies class, co-participating in a Dutch language course, and attending presentations by prominent gays and lesbians in the political, social service, military and cultural arenas. Weekly student-facilitated discussions, in which students struggled to understand the concepts, and personal implications, of what was being presented to them in the academic lecture series, were observed closely. The dialogue, disagreement, confusion and insight that surfaced
in the above-mentioned academic settings allowed me to observe and record the dynamic process of identity negotiation and re-negotiation in which the students were engaged.

I traveled with students on in-country day trips as well as a 10-day educational excursion to Copenhagen and Berlin, I hosted weekly, student-prepared dinners, and I socialized on occasion with the students and their Dutch home-stay hosts. These interactions, both formal and informal, provided me with ample opportunity for participant observation and anecdotal data collection. Although I did record a few of the above-mentioned group discussions, most observational data collection was accomplished by means of an on-going, almost daily field journal.

Data Collection #2: Pre- and Post-Program Interviews

Perhaps one of the most interesting and revealing sources of data for my project came from the pre-program and post-program interviews. Within the first week of arriving in the Netherlands I conducted hour-long interviews with each student. Through open-ended questioning, these interviews explored students’ current, past and ideal sexual self-identities (see appendix 1) and their very tentative reactions to Dutch society and culture. These interviews were then transcribed and presented to the students at their post-program interview, which took place within the last few days of the program. As well as being asked to answer a few new interview questions during the post-program interview (see appendix 2), students were requested to read over their earlier thoughts and respond to any ideas which seemed to contradict their current, end-of-semester understandings.

Data Collection #3: Written Work

The final source of data which I had available to me was the students’ written work. As part of my job as Academic Director I taught a course called “Cultural Field
Studies” which had the double focus of encouraging students to explore and understand the cross-cultural nature of their experiences in Europe while also preparing them to do their own, individual, month-long independent study project. A requirement for this course was that students keep a “Cultural Field Studies Journal” in which they reflected upon questions which I had posed for them (see appendix 3). As with the initial interview transcripts, I had students revisit their journals at the end of the semester and highlight changes in their ideas and feelings.

In addition to these journals, which every student kept, a few students each semester chose to focus their Independent Study Projects on some area of sexual identity (i.e. the interface between Jewish and gay identity; leather as a means of organizing one’s sexual identity). This provided yet another layer of written work which could be included in my study.

Other, more miscellaneous, written sources of data included poems and song lyrics which students wrote during the semester. Text from “postering sessions” on gay identity which some students participated in and program application material, which had been submitted some months prior to embarking on their college semester abroad, was also included in the “written work” data set.

Data Analysis

Although there was a certain amount of on-going analysis that took place within the pages of my field journal (e.g. my own very tentative thoughts about the changes that I was observing in the research participants), most of the analysis for this research project happened after the program, and the data collection phase of this project, had come to a close. At that point all field journal notes, all transcribed interviews, and all written work (with the exception of the program application materials) were entered into the computer.
The resulting hundreds of pages of data was coded both by date and by student allowing me to create two separate sets of data files. The first set consisted of data-by-student files, in which all data pertaining to a particular student was put together in chronological order of when it was collected. Most often these files consisted of the pre-program interview transcript, short sections transcribed from taped group discussions, field notes from my observations, student journal entries and other written assignments, and transcripts from the post-program interview. Sometimes this file would include excerpts from a student’s independent study project report and poetry or songs written for academic and/or personal reasons.

This set of data-by-student files allowed me to view each of the thirteen participants independently. From these files I was able to create an individual profile for each student which summarized the major changes that s/he experienced over the course of the semester. Although I rarely referenced these profiles throughout the rest of the data analysis process, they were useful as a springboard in giving me a very general sense of the degree, type and variety of changes which students had experienced.

The second set of data files consisted three data-by-phase-of-the-program files. These files, which were broken down by early-, middle- and late-program data, consisted of all the data that was collected during each of these three phases of the program. This included data from observations, interviews and written work. Being able to review the changes that took place over a four-month time period, in rough chronological order, was important to the developmental nature of my original research questions.

Using inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) and constant comparison (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) all middle- and late-semester data was analyzed as a single data set to
determine what type(s) of identity changes were common to the study participants. It was from “chunking” and sorting this data set that eleven identity shifts were derived.

Since my data was cross-referenced by both date-of-collection and student, I was quickly able to see which of the eleven identity shifts were experienced by each student. With this list of identity-shifts-by-student in hand, I returned to the data-by-student files to be sure that there were no glaring contradictions. There were not.

In order to determine identity functions, I reviewed both the early-in-the-semester data files (interviews, assignments and observations within the first week or so of the program). It was at this point that I obtained students’ pre-program application materials and incorporated this data into the set which would be mined for student identity functions at the start of the program. It was from “chunking” and then sorting this data set that the eight identity functions were derived.

Once again, since my data was cross-referenced by date and student, I was quickly able to see which of the eight identity functions were experienced by each student. With this list of identity-functions-by-student in hand I returned to the data-by-student to be sure that there were no glaring contradictions. Once again, there were not.

As well as cross-referencing observation, interview and written data by both date and by student, I also coded it according to students’ descriptions of the Dutch culture. When students made an observation about Dutch culture, I highlighted it. Although at the beginning of the process I was not at all sure how or if these Dutch descriptors would be worked into my dissertation, they seemed important to the students’ experiences. I ended up revisiting these descriptions much later in the analysis process. The reader will find some of these descriptions in chapter five, where they help to set the cultural stage for students’ identity experiences.
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in the naturalistic paradigm is described as the combined qualities of being able to demonstrate an inquiry’s truth value, provide the basis for applying it, and allow for external judgments to be made about the consistency of its procedures and the neutrality of its findings or decisions (Guba and Lincoln 1989). Many of the proposed strategies for accomplishing this (Erlandson et al. 1993, Guba and Lincoln 1989, Jorgensen 1989, Marshall and Rossman 1989) were worked into my research design.

This study included prolonged and intensive engagement with my research participants over a four month period. It involved persistent observations in a variety of settings, both formal and informal. It included collection of data from a range of different sources (observations, interviews, journals) that allowed for “triangulation” in the analysis process (Patton 1990). And it allowed for built-in member checks.

The analysis process in naturalistic research is considered by most in the field to include unitizing and coding the data, designating emergent categories for organization of the data, and exploring themes, patterns and relationships between these categories (Erlandson et al. 1993, Guba and Lincoln 1989, Jorgensen 1989, Marshall and Rossman 1989). I completed and documented each of these steps throughout the process of my study. It was been the primary goal of this naturalistic research project that I be able to provide relevant explanations and interpretations of the unique experiences of my students. My secondary goal was to develop “grounded theory” that might help to bridge the gap between constructionist concepts of sexual identity and grounded descriptions of the identity formation process. I believe that I have met both of these goals.
CHAPTER IV
SEXUAL IDENTITY SHIFTS

Introduction

This research project set out to answer the following questions:

- How do the individual sexual identities of a small group of American-educated college students shift and change over the course of an intensive, four-month, cross-cultural experience of Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Netherlands?

- What are the facilitating conditions for, and the obstacles to, identity shifts and changes for these students?

These two questions have remained central to this study throughout the process of research design, execution, analysis and documentation. In order to answer these research questions I will present the data related to the first question, about identity shifts, in this chapter. That data which creates the foundation for answering the second question, about facilitating conditions, will be presented in the next chapter.

As stated above, this chapter is an exploration of sexual identity shifts and changes as described by the thirteen students who participated in the study, American-educated college students on a four-month, cross-cultural course of sexuality studies in the Netherlands. By "sexual identity shifts" I am referring to students' self-described changes in the relationship between their sexual selves and the world around them.

The data for this section of the study comes mostly from cross-cultural field study journals and end-of-the-semester interviews. In an attempt to concentrate on the most frequently occurring patterns of change, only those changes which were mentioned by at least five of the thirteen research participants are included in this section of the study. Thus, you will find the eleven most commonly reported shifts in sexual identity outlined. Although I recognize the inevitable overlap between categories of emotion, cognition and
behavior, for the sake of organization, I have chosen to divide these eleven identity shifts into sections which explore shifts in experience (how students “feel” their sexuality), shifts in cognition (how students “understand” their sexuality), and shifts in sexual practice (how students “do” their sexuality). The following is the list of the eleven most commonly reported sexual identity shifts that will be elaborated upon in this chapter:

Shifts in Experience (How students "feel" their sexuality)

• Shift in feelings about the liberatory nature of sexual identity (e.g. "I used to think that being gay was liberating and now I see it as constricting in its own right").
• Shift to a feeling of loss in relationship to sexual identity (e.g. "There's some part of me that's missing here, that's been erased").
• Shift in feelings about group membership (e.g. "I just don't know who the 'us' and the 'them' are anymore").

Shifts in Cognition (How students "understand" their sexuality)

• Shift in the belief about the "cause" of one's sexuality (e.g. "I don't think anymore that it's something that you are fated to be").
• Shift in understanding about the consistency of sexual identity (e.g. "I'm thinking more and more that it's not constant across my life.").
• Shift in the salience of one's sexual identity (e.g. "Maybe now it doesn't color every aspect of my life").
• Shift in understanding about having "the truth" about sexuality (e.g. "I used to think that my sexuality was the only right one.").

Shifts in Practice (How students "do" their sexuality)

• Shift in the use of sexual identity labels (e.g. "I think that I'm being more flexible about using labels now").
• Shift in the public presentation of one's sexual identity (e.g. "At this point I don't feel the need to find ways to say 'Hey, I'm gay!'").
• Shift in political involvement (e.g. "I think I'll stop using my sexuality as a political expression").

• Shift in sexual attraction and behavior (e.g. "Now I can envision having the same kind of relationship with both men and women").

Given this study’s underlying assumptions about cultural constructionism, it goes without saying that sexual identity in general and identity shifts in particular must be viewed within the cultural context in which they take place. Indeed, it is the cultural contrast between the Dutch and American sexual environment that inspired the college semester abroad program which drew all of the participants in this research project to Amsterdam in the first place. As the promotional material for the program states, “The Netherlands, particularly in recent history, has been known for its atmosphere of tolerance and progressive social thinking. ...Its laws in relationship to gay and lesbian rights and sexuality education and birth control, for example, set it apart from many of its European neighbors and the United States”.

As I will examine in depth later in chapter five, the cultural, sexual environment of the Netherlands often prompted, and at the very least served as a backdrop for, the sexual identity shifts and changes that this research project set out to explore. Although it is not within the scope of this study to explore all of the possibly relevant cultural variations between the US and the Netherlands, it is important that the reader understand some of the most glaring differences. With this goal in mind, both this chapter and the next include an on-going discussion of both students’ perceived and experienced differences between their “home” and their “host” culture, as well as some more general, “factual” American/Dutch comparisons.
Shifts in Experience

*I know things in theory, but I don't FEEL them. Living here I’ve come to FEEL different things.* -Student in the Netherlands Sexuality Studies Program

Students expressed a range of often contradictory emotions as they proceeded through their four-month program in the Netherlands. A typical student might swing from feeling comfortable and excited to feeling confused and frustrated and back again to feelings of confidence and inspiration...all within a matter of days. The cultural and academic challenges of a semester abroad are typically stressful for any college-age student, but when one’s own, very personal, identity becomes one of the focal points of that semester the atmosphere can be quite emotionally charged. In this section of the chapter I will focus on three particular shifts that were common among participants in this study, changes that are closely related to the way students feel about their sexuality, or what I refer to as “sexual experience”. Those shifts will include a change in feelings about the liberatory nature of sexual identity, a shift to a new experience of loss in relationship to one’s sexual identity, and changes in feelings about group membership.

**Shift in Feelings About the Liberatory Nature of Sexual Identity**

Prior to coming to the Netherlands most students felt quite comfortable with their strong attachments to their sexual identities and they would have described that attachment in mostly positive terms. Being adamantly and actively lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual or unidentified was consistently seen as a liberatory stance, a position which freed one from all sorts of societal pressures, most notably “heterosexual constraints”. But, as the semester proceeded, many students began to voice skepticism about the sexual identities which they had brought with them from the States and to feel that their American-inspired identities came with certain personal limitations.
My identification, my own declaration is leaving me, is setting me free...I guess I was caught in this web of words, not realizing how it limited me, not realizing how it denied aspects of me. -Gus

The personal issues that I had with myself, that I always attributed to sexuality and having a marginalized sexuality, I now can see have nothing to do with sexuality. It was an excuse. There was so much noise around sexuality in the States. To suddenly realize that I can’t use it as an excuse or a crutch. It’s easy to lump a lot of your problems together and to attribute them to being gay. -Chris

When I think of my future it's much easier to stay with the gay label, but I don't want to cut out having a relationship with a woman. I fear that I might be coming just as stuck into this gay sexual identity as I was in the straight sexual identity. That's discomforting... -Richard

The political nature of American gay identity was what students critiqued the most, often concluding that it created more oppression than it eradicated. For many the shift in feelings about the liberatory nature of their sexual identities included a sense that personal freedom or liberation had been over-shadowed by politics, that their lives in the States had become “a public issue”, “a duty to better my community”, or “a campus cause”.

I've felt so weird not being politically involved here, but at the same time for me it's a break...a very much needed break. .... This semester has given me so much time to just focus on who I am and not what I'm doing to further the cause or what I'm doing to change things on campus or in the country. -Molly

Shift to an Experience of Loss in Relationship to Sexual Identity

If asked, an overwhelming majority of participants in this study would have insisted that they preferred the “tolerant” Dutch environment, with its successful gay-lesbian social legacy, to what they were accustomed to in the States. Yet, many still experienced a deep sense of loss during their stay in the Netherlands. The sense that “there’s something missing”, although difficult to describe for some students, was deeply felt by most.
Gus, like some of his other classmates, spoke of losing a certain motivational force while living in the Netherlands. His experience supports the often heard speculation that oppression and creativity are closely linked.

I know that being here, the relaxed atmosphere has affected my art. When I have all this anger it sometimes gets to the point of frustration and I just go and color and do things....I didn't find the need to do that here. I tried, but the energy wasn't there, there was no motive. Artistically it stopped me. -Gus

For other students the experience of loss came in the disappearance of the “relevance” of their sexual identities. Prior to their stay in the Netherlands most students could rest assured that their non-heterosexual identities would be of interest to others, even if that “interest” was at times motivated by judgment, homophobia or a desire to mend them of their “evil” ways. Much to their surprise, many students found themselves, and their sexual identities, at a loss after arrival in Holland.

[When] I came to Amsterdam I was like "what the fuck! My identity is no longer relevant in any way." ... What does it mean to be a lesbian, a gay man, or a bisexual when all of the "givens" of our identities are being slowly dismantled, leaving us invisible - or at least unrecognizable? -Avi

My identity as a lesbian feels trivialized here [in Amsterdam]. -Joy

[Being here] makes me wonder just where I should, if I can, position my sexuality to regain some interest into what it means to be queer, gay, homo, etc. -Chris

One might not expect a group of young people who are frequently outspoken about their sexual radicalism to liken their experience of living in a more sexually tolerant environment to “drowning” or “losing a spouse”. Yet, if one takes into consideration the vibrant and dynamic American queer culture and its impact on the sexual identities of many of the participants in this study, the relatively staid and safe environment in the Netherlands can be better understood as “sad”, “haunting”, and “oh, so boring!”. For some the losses that they described went well beyond a temporary longing for missed
elements of one's home culture. Indeed, for a handful of students their losses can best be described as an unsettling disappearance of some previously core part of themselves.

I would argue that there is some part of me that has been subject to some sort of slow erasure over these last months, some sort of blending. -Chris.

Now suddenly this part of me. This big part of me is slowly fading, is slowly vanishing into thin, thin air...Living becomes a burden these days. I feel like a stranger in my own life. A part of me is gone. -Gus

Shift in Feelings about Group Membership

The third and final “experiential shift” to be explored is the change that students felt in their relationship to their previously held group status. Changes in in-group/out-group status and feelings could be seen as a shift in “understanding”, and they are also closely related to certain “practical shifts” that will be explored later in this chapter. I have, however, chosen to include changes in feelings about group membership status under the heading of “experiential shifts”. I made this decision because of the strong emotions that students often expressed in relationship to this particular shift which is, in essence, a rattling of the basic foundation of one’s sexual identity.

There seemed to be three types of shifts associated with group membership. The first was expressed in terms of “just not caring” anymore about how other people identify themselves sexually. Prior to their time in the Netherlands, many students felt that they needed to know how another person chose to identify so that they could determine how to interact. At the end of the semester it was common to hear students say, “I don’t care about knowing other people’s sexuality. Whatever! It’s just an aspect of who the person is.”

The second type of group membership shift that students made was expressed in terms of a change in feelings about heterosexuals. For these students an “us-them”
distinction still existed but one related to “them” with fewer “phobias” and less anger.

For these students there was the sense that, although you could still unproblematically divide the world into sexual categories, in the Netherlands “there really was no enemy”.

If anything had changed since being here it's that in my interactions with straight people there is not the same level of anxiety. In the States I knew that the moment that I came out in a conversation that things would take a more drastic turn than they do here. I don't buy that it doesn't matter here, I still think that there is something that happens in a conversation, but it's less drastic. Definitely less anxiety, less on guard, with defenses down. -Richard

The third, and final, type of group membership shift was the most drastic for those students who experienced it. This was a total shift in the “us-them” dichotomy, a move away from feeling that the way they do their sexuality was meaningful criteria for “grouping” themselves with others. For these students the “group” which served as a central organizing force in their lives only months ago seemed to lose its definable boundaries.

I do find myself practicing my sexuality differently here than in the US in terms of the amount of energy or time that was consumed across the Atlantic dwelling on sexual issues. It does seem paradoxical to say that I am more sexual, sexually active, and aware here [in the Netherlands] than in the US, while spending less time being conscious of the difference of being queer. -Chris

I have a totally different perspective on the whole queer thing. The whole idea of queer as being something that’s so different. That we are so unique, we have such a different perspective, that we are so special. I don’t feel that I’m so special anymore. What is it that makes me so different from a straight person? What? ...I don’t feel inherently different from a “straight” person anymore. -Daniel

Here in Amsterdam where [sexuality is] such a non-central, mainstay of people’s identities it’s kind of rocking my foundation a little bit. My whole identity of being a dyke was based on not always fitting in and here I do. So it’s sort of weird. -Avi

Perhaps the feelings that accompany the discovery that one is “fitting in” when one once found meaning and definition in being on the “outside” can best be summed up
by one exasperated student’s end-of-the-semester comments. “I just don’t know what the norm is anymore. Who is the ‘them’ and who is the ‘us’? I just don’t know anymore!”

**Shifts in Cognition**

*Amsterdam herself has allowed me to experience many more variations of the homosexual experience - tasting and trying out many different options. The way I perform as a gay male has not changed....yet. I am not more queeny, or more "leather", or more butch than I was before. However, my intellectual understanding of my own homosexuality is changing. -Student in the Netherlands Sexuality Studies Program*

Changes in the way students understanding their sexuality, or what I refer to as “sexual cognition”, seem to cluster around four areas. The first area I will explore consists of shifts in position on the debate about the “causation” of sexuality; more specifically, a move away from a biological understanding towards a cultural understanding of what “causes” sexuality. Attitude changes as they relate to the permanence of sexual identity across the life span constitute the second set of significant shifts. The third relates to changes in the salience of sexuality in the students’ lives. Lastly, I will review changes in the students’ attitudes about universal “truths” as they relate to sexual identity.

**Shift in Belief about the “Cause” of Sexuality**

Given the popularity of biological arguments for sexuality in the United States and the heavy emphasis on social constructionism in the SIT Netherlands Program it is no surprise that many students found themselves shifting their attention away from biology and towards culture when looking for explanations for sexual variations in general and their own sexual identities in particular. This shift, although seemingly quite “academic”, was a profound one for many students, calling into question not only their “coming out” stories and their politics, but their way of making meaning out of their position in the
world. As the semester proceeded many students became uncomfortable with the notion of a “true” sexuality and began to give “credit” for their “core, but created, sexuality” to something other than their biology.

Being around a bunch of dykes has made me the lesbian that I am today. -Joy

I can see now I wasn't born angry. I wasn't born gay. I was taught to be both...bashers, preachers, politicians and self-righteous homosexuals partially built me with their big signs and small ambitions, with their dreams of revolution... -Gus

Many international sojourners discover new understandings about their own “home” culture while venturing into another, contrasting culture. This certainly was the case with the students on the Netherlands Program. All of the School for International Training’s college semester abroad programs are designed to challenge students to explore not only their “host” culture, but their “home” culture, and to bring to light for students elements of their own cultural identities which frequently have gone unexplored in the past. The Netherlands Program is unique in that its emphasis on culture and sexuality pulls for changes both in students’ understanding of American culture and their own very personal, sexual identities. What had previously been assumed to be universal came to be recognized as culturally specific.

[One’s sexuality] is something that is constantly growing, changing and defining itself. I don't think that it's something that you are born with and fated to be....I see now that it isn't something that you are going to be anywhere. It's something that is influenced by where you are, your environment, your culture. -Philip

As students began to shift their attention from biological explanations for their sexual identities to more cultural perspectives, the question of “agency”, or the role that the individual plays in the creation and maintenance of his or her own sexual identity, moved to center stage. How students perceived their own “agency” was the subject of much discussion and debate over the course of the semester.
Many students, when first embarking on their semester in the Netherlands, stated that they were disinterested in any discussion about “the causation” of sexuality. Tired of being put on the defensive by heterosexism in the United States, these students seemed to retreat into an “it doesn’t matter” posture, a posture that shifted radically and quickly for many once arriving in Amsterdam. Whether it was the academic program with its emphasis on exploring the roots of sexuality, the tolerant Dutch culture, or some other factor or factors, many students shifted both their willingness to engage in questioning the “causation” of sexuality and their understandings based on that questioning.

Shift in Understanding about the Consistency of Sexual Identity

Most, although not all, of the students in this study began the semester with the belief that sexuality was constant across a person’s lifetime. These students felt that there was something permanent and “core” about sexuality, although one’s relationship to that “core” might change over time. By the end of their four-month program many students had changed their perspective about the “changability” of sexuality.

The semester has totally made me think differently about sexual orientation. I don't think about things black and white anymore. I don't think about things like so-and-so's a lesbian and that means that they will always have sex with women and that they have always been a lesbian and they always will be. -Avi

As often as not, this “changability” could be seen to relate to not only others, but to themselves as well.

I'm thinking more and more that no, sexual identity is not constant across my life. ... As soon as I think of how malleable sexuality has been for me and in the general population I think that we can change our desires, if not as individuals then society can change them. ...I don't think that you are stuck or inclined to any one sexual orientation. -Richard

There was only one participant in the study who shifted from feeling that his sexual identity was changeable to feeling that it was “fixed”, this being a student who,
over the course of his time in the Netherlands, found an identity label that seemed to suit his inclination towards a gender-neutral form of attraction. In this students’ own words, “The more I think about it, the more I think that my sexuality is constant for me....I’m pansexual!”

If one shifts perspective on the “causation” and “consistency” of one’s sexual inclinations it becomes possible to look at one’s personal, sexual narratives with a new lens. This certainly was the case for a number of students in this study who began to question the historical validity of their own personal sexual histories.

Now I’m not sure that I’ve always thought of myself as gay anymore. Over the semester, I’ve read things about internalizing labels.....it’s easier to conform to the label that’s been given to you rather than refute it....I wonder if that naming hadn’t happened maybe I wouldn’t be gay. I don’t know. -Chris

Thinking back I can see that maybe my story is different than I thought it was. Just being here makes me wonder... -Gus

I can see how I can go back and recreate anything I want. I could also just as much make a story about being heterosexual too. -Joy

Whether or not students left the Netherlands with a new perspective on their own past or current sexual identities, by the end of the semester most would have agreed with their classmate’s opinion that “sexual identities can be fixed, but that’s different than whether or not they are fixed.”

Shift in the “Salience” of One’s Sexual Identity

Most students described a marked shift over the course of the semester in the prominence, or “salience”, of sexual identity in their lives. For a small number of students that shift was towards increased salience, but for the majority it was towards a
feeling that their sexual identity had become a much less “prominent”, less “conspicuous” part of themselves. There are some very marked differences between the former group of students and the latter.

Of the four students who spoke of an increased salience in their sexual identities over the course of their time in the Netherlands three would have described themselves as “barely out of the closet” at the beginning of the semester. These students’ sexual identities were previously unremarkable and relatively “mainstream” by American standards until shortly before embarking upon their semester abroad. Since the salience of these three students’ sexual identities was quite low to begin with, the only available shift in salience was an increase. Four months of intensive focus on issues of sexuality seems to have been just the right environment for this sort of upward shift.

It opened up more opportunity for me to explore my own lesbianism. I don't have to live vicariously any more. I've actually done it myself now. I'm not just surrounded by lesbians, I am one. I got my membership in the mail...and I have no qualms about flaunting it. -Joy

I think that my sexual identity is a more important part of who I am now than when I came on the program. ... I realize that I am a part of a minority, a subculture. I think that I have more of a relationship with my gay identity than I did before. I'm acknowledging the importance of it to me more now. -Cory

The fourth student who experienced a shift towards increased salience of her sexual identity was in the unique position of claiming an identity which is neither common nor particularly supported in the Netherlands. Unlike most other students who experienced a high degree of acceptance for their sexual identities, this student continued to have to “fight” for her bisexual identity.

I feel more political here than I do in the States. Bi isn't tolerated here like gay and lesbian is. I've had to fight harder for it...Being here has made me want to stick with my bisexual identity more, turn up the volume, even though I find it problematic. It has definitely solidified it for me being here. -Kara
Unlike the four students mentioned above, the majority of students in this study were quite attached to their current sexual identities long before embarking on their semester abroad. For these students the prominence of their sexual identity decreased considerably over the four months that they were in the Netherlands. End-of-the-semester descriptions of their sexuality included comments such as “more casual”, “slipping away”, “not as crucial”, “less intense and compelling”, “no longer such a defining force”. Perhaps the most poignant description of shift in salience comes from a student who at the beginning of his time in the Netherlands said, “My sexuality is to my whole person, what my skeleton is to my whole body. It’s that. It’s a big deal. It’s the underlying structure”. At the end of the semester his feelings had shifted considerably:

I'm much more casual about it now, or I feel more comfortable somehow...I'm not comfortable with [my beginning-of-the-semester] analogy anymore...I don't like skeleton-to-body anymore. I could certainly exist fine without my homosexuality, I think...It is very important to be out and gay for the rest of me to be supported and live healthy, but that's not what my whole sexuality means to me these days. It's more like a cherry on an ice-cream sundae... -Richard

It is interesting to note that as sexuality began to move more to the back burner, students found new arenas opening up. For some students this arena was academics, for others a chance to “soul search” or simply engage socially without always focusing on politics and sexuality. As one student put it at the end of the semester, “My sexual preference affects my social activities certainly, but maybe now it doesn't color every aspect of my life...I would wager now that I do have aspects of my personality and interests that really are irrelevant to my sexuality. It is still my core identity, but I have many other identities, too, circling around it.”

Many participants in this study took the opportunity in the Netherlands to explore some of these “other identities”. Whereas homosexuality was pretty “mainstream” in
Amsterdam, membership in some other social groups did markedly set students apart from the "norm". This was certainly the case for one Jewish student who frequently found her sexual identity taking a back seat while she explored the implications of being a Jew in Europe with all of its haunting past. As the volume became turned down on sexuality, students mentioned race, class, religion and gender as parts of their identities that were "speaking a little louder".

**Shift in Understanding about Having “The Truth” about Sexuality**

Prior to coming on the Netherlands program many students, particularly those who were heavily invested in a biological definition of sexual “orientation”, felt that their own personal experience of sexuality was a universal one. By the end of the semester this attitude had shifted considerably.

I now realize that the existence of [my sexual identity] is dependent on Western society and is only valid within the context it was created. The meaning that is attached will not be universal. -Kara

Before actually living in a different culture, [the cultural implication of sexuality] was an abstract idea, but I didn't feel it. Here I really feel it. There is absolutely no need for us to take the type of identities that we have in the US and insert them here....I can see that my identity is really shaped by my culture now and why I shouldn't try and go in and "enlighten" somebody else with my concept of identity. -Thomas

Even among those students who had previously considered the role of culture in the creation of sexuality, at the start of the semester many still felt a strong attachment to their particular model as the “right” one. Whether it was due to the diversity of sexual identities within their own small student group, the content of the academic material presented to them, or the cross-cultural experience of living in Amsterdam, by the end of their four-month stay many students had begun to shift their conviction that they held “the truth” about sexuality.
I became less dogmatic....before I thought that my sexuality was right... I see that the position that I'm in isn't more right than the position that [any other student] is in. That's how I think about it now. -Thomas

You've got to work it different ways depending on who you are talking to. Because now I see that there is no “truth”. -Joy

Whatever the sexual identities or behaviors which were up for consideration, by the end of the semester students were consistently expressing a more “tolerant” attitude of a wide range of what they, and Dutch society, considered personal choices.

I do definitely feel more totally accepting of anyone’s sexual choices now and not just towards sexual orientation and sex of the person that you are with. Now I see that you don’t have to fit into these categories. I think I’ve gotten more accepting since I came here. I’m just more accepting of different sexual activities, sexual lifestyles. It’s all more acceptable to me now. Whether you never have sex, whether you have sex five times a night with five different people, in a leather bar, getting fisted, whatever.....it’s all just do what you think is right for you. -Daniel.

**Shifts in Practice**

*It’s hard to know [to] what to attribute the changes that I have experienced since being here in Amsterdam. Eating mayo on my French fries? Everyone here eats mayonnaise on their fries and they are more comfortable with their sexuality, so maybe that’s it!* -Student in the Netherlands Sexuality Studies Program

For some students the changes that they underwent over the course of their time in the Netherlands seemed to be the result of being introduced to experiences, concepts and types of people that had never previously existed within their personal realm of possibility. For other students, however, the theoretical foundation for change existed long before embarking on their journey to Amsterdam. For this latter group, it was not uncommon to hear them marveling at how their Netherlands experience had allowed them to “take the stuff that GLB studies are made of - and apply it to oneself”.

Whether or not students were familiar with gender and sexuality theory, and whether or not they experienced any of the eight shifts that have been mentioned so far,
all the participants in this study spoke of changing some elements of their sexual practice by the end of the semester. These shifts, changes in what I call “doing sexuality”, clustered around four main themes: use of sexuality labels and categories, public presentation of sexual identity, political involvement and the experience of sexual attraction.

Shift in the Use of Identity Labels

For the purposes of this study, identity labels are considered to be those terms which students used to group themselves and others into what they considered to be relevant social sexual categories. Because shifts in the use of identity labels were often accompanied by a change in understanding about sexual categories, another researcher might have considered it more appropriate to place this section under the heading of “Shifts in Cognition”. Certainly a case can be made for language as a reflection of cognition, but then, in essence, all the shifts in this study find their root in some underlying movement in understanding. The unique element of the shifts explored under “Doing Sexuality” is that these changes all encompass elements of social behaviors, actions which are done in the presence of, or towards, others. Given the impact that the use of sexual identity labels has on students’ interpersonal relationships, I chose to include a shift in language use under this category which focuses on social behavior.

By the end of the semester a number of students had begun to experience change in their use of identity labels. These students can best be looked at in three groups: those that made shifts in label application, those that made shifts in label meaning, and those that shifted in both application and meaning.

For the students in the first group there was a feeling that they no longer belonged where they had previous belonged in their sexuality schema. For these students there was
not a fundamental shift in how they organized sexuality categories - in their minds there
still existed an unproblematic sexuality continuum that ranged from heterosexual to
homosexual - rather, they no longer belonged where they had previously belonged on that
continuum.

If someone had asked me before I came here "What does it mean to be gay?"....I
would have given an answer about my own lifestyle. Now I...wouldn't include
myself in that group. My answer would be more or less the same, but I wouldn't
apply it to myself now. I'm never going to call myself gay again...never. I'm not
gay. - Eduardo

The shift for the second group of students came not in their choice of identity
label, but in the meaning that they attached to that label. These students were inclined to
keep using the same identity labels that they had earlier, but due to a shift in their
understanding of those labels, they now used them more often and with less discomfort.

I've seen in the course of the program that lesbian has meant so many different
things at different times. That changing definition makes it even easier to use it
now because it's like "What the fuck...it doesn't mean anything other than what I
attach to it and I'm attaching my own meaning." - Joy

I've shifted the label "gay" to suit me more and so am more willing to use that
label now. I know that society in general hasn't shifted the meaning of the word
gay to suit my own definition, but I still feel that it's the most effective label that I
can come up with. - Richard

I think that I'm being a little more flexible about using labels now. If I say that I'm
gay now, it doesn't necessarily mean that I can't be something else in the future...at
least for myself...I can still use [the term gay] as long as I know I can give it some
of my own meaning. - Thomas

The third group of students spoke of changing the identity labels that they used for
themselves, but included in these students’ explanations were a shift in how they
perceived the underlying categories. For these students, their personal shifts
encompassed a larger shift in sexual categorization.
Here in Amsterdam, the "practice" of my sexuality is expanding more than ever before. I am truly finding it more difficult to identify with any of the old categories. -Richard

I don't see myself as ever dabbling in heterosexuality, but I don't see the need to define myself as definitely not. -Cory

Shift in Public Presentation of One’s Sexuality

Sexual identity labels are just one aspect of how one communicates one’s sexual identity. Equally important to most of the students in this study was their sexual presentation or “style”, something which had shifted considerably by the time the four-month program came to a close. These changes seemed to cluster around sexual “coding” or how students “wear” their sexuality and sexual “dialogue” or how they “talk” their sexuality.

“Gay codes” are very culturally specific and it did not take students long at all to realize that freedom rings and Act-up T-shirts did not have the same meaning in Amsterdam as they had had on their American campuses. But, a change in location meant more than a change in style. After being in Amsterdam for just a short time, students described themselves as less “extreme”, “flamboyant”, and “visible”. When questioned about gay coding, one student gave what had by then become a typical answer, "I can't directly ascertain if I use any coding here whatsoever. I don't think I do."

As well as a decrease in outward gay coding, the majority of students spoke of a decreased need to "talk" about their sexuality, including the need to be "out" to people that they meet. Whereas sexuality had been their presenting identity upon arrival in Amsterdam, it now took up much less "air space".

I do not feel the specific urge to announce my sexuality as statement, rather it becomes disclosed at this own rate/speed. -Chris
I was saying [earlier in the semester]...that I don't understand people who don't want to be out because it's an important thing in their lives. Now I see that for some people, maybe even me, it just isn't. I realized that here. -Avi

Since their "in-your-face" sexuality often triggered some of their most critical cultural incidents, this shift in public presentation of one's sexuality was a theme in students' Cultural Field Studies Journals throughout the semester. Here, one student reflects on changes in public presentation in both emotional and practical terms.

[In Amsterdam] everybody was like, "You're gay, you're gay...Whatever!" That was shocking! Maybe being a gay man in America made me like in-your-face, you insult me and I'm going to insult you twice as much. Here I don't need to do that. Maybe that's why I'm so calm. I just know that I've been very, very calm since I've been here. The level of hypemess has lowered and I have just as much coffee as usual. At this point I don't feel the need to find any ways to say "Hey, I'm gay". It is not necessary, I think. No need to be loud about it. -Gus

Shift in Political Involvement

It is difficult, if not impossible, to live a totally depoliticized gay identity in the United States; the American political environment is not conducive to it. The Netherlands, however, presented students with a contrasting experience, the possibility to live one's sexuality in an environemtn devoid of heavy political overtones. This created a particular challenge for many studnet and was described by a few as "an identity crisis". As I will explore in the next chapter, the American political sexual identity is quite foreign in the Netherlands. By the end of the semester, most students spoke of shifting their own plans for political involvement based upon their new cross-cultural experience. These shifts took three forms.

By the end of the semester, one group of student seemed to have gravitated towards a "de-politicized" strategy of political involvement. This strategy was expressed most often as a desire to stop using one's sexuality "as a political or radical expression" and to focus more on the "personal aspects of sexuality".
After experiencing a depoliticized gay environment for four months, a second group of students tended to move towards a "re-politicized" plan. For these students their experience in the Netherlands showed them "what can be", inspiring them to "become more political at home", to "go back and advocate for more visibility".

There were just a few students who found themselves missing terribly the "fringe" status that their sexual identities had always afforded them. For this small, third group of students, the political plan was to explore further the new edges of societal acceptability in order to find another identity that could accommodate their desire for "outlaw" status. The political shift for these students can best be summed up by the following end-of-semester comment:

I did notice a certain fascination in dressing in leather, not so much sexual, but more a part of something more subversive than the standard queer-fare. This may be a result of my impending boredom and lack of interest in more traditional manifestations of queer sexuality...I do quite like the freakishness of it all, the feeling of being on the edge.

-Chris

Shift in Sexual Attraction and Behavior

A shift in sexual attraction and behavior is the last area of sexual "practice" that will be explored in this chapter. While some students were able to put into "practice" their shifting sexual attractions during their stay in the Netherlands, others anticipated a practical change in the future. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this study to explore what, if any, behavioral change took place after the course of the semester under study.

With the exception of one woman, who felt that her attraction to men had decreased during her stay in the Netherlands, every student who noted a shift in sexual attraction over the course of the program described an increase in the range of whom or what they found attractive. All of these students found themselves liking more types of people and/or more types of sex than they had prior to coming to Amsterdam.
The biological sex of whom one is attracted to, is in most cases the most profound shaper of our contemporary, American sexual identities; whether or not one is attracted to a member of one’s “same” sex, “the opposite” sex, neither sex or both sexes, becomes a major force in slotting one into socially and politically powerful sexual categories in the United States. It is, therefore, no wonder that when thinking of a study that explores sexual identity shifts and changes, many people jump directly to questions such as “Did students shift from straight to gay?” or “Did they slide the opposite way on the continuum?” Although this research project did explore biological sex of partner as a significant area for change, it is important to note that this study has attempted to depart from the dichotomous, heterosexual-homosexual model of sexuality and include the sexual experiences of those people who fall outside of this traditional framework. While there were some students who describe their changes in terms of the hetero-homo continuum, there were quite a few others whose significant shifts did not fit these models. For this reason, questions that framed students’ shifts purely in terms of movement along a hetero-homo continuum were inappropriate to this study.

In end-of-semester interviews about a third of the students in the study mentioned that their attractions shifted to include a broader range of the sex and gender continuum. For a number of men who had previous only been attracted to other men, this meant a “freeing up or opening up to sexual attraction to women”. For a few students this meant a shift to something that they described as “more 50/50” or an ability to “envision having the same kind of relationship with both men and women”. Interestingly, none of the women who came into the program identifying as “lesbian” or “queer”, expressed a shift in their attractions towards or desire to engage in any sexual fashion with men.
Biological sex of one’s partner is not the only area of attraction which shifted for students and was not necessarily the most profoundly felt. More than one student spoke of “putting less emphasis on age” or “for the first time finding older women attractive”. Another described his change in sexual desires centering on being “more attracted to other people of color”. For yet another student, the shift came in rethinking his previously held model for attraction:

I'm starting to think that maybe being attracted to somebody, I have the wrong model. ... Maybe there are all kinds of different paradigms and models of how you can be attracted. I don't know. [My relationship this semester with Eduardo], that's new for me. That would never happen before coming here. ...I generally don't find myself attracted to somebody...or allow myself to be attracted to somebody...unless we can really talk and it turns out that we have shared past experiences and that we can have really good conversation about common interests or something. It's a model that's out there that is often held up. But I think that there is more to other models of attraction that I'm exploring since being here. -Richard

Conclusion

Whether they be shifts in “sexual experience”, “sexual understanding” or “sexual practice”, all thirteen students in this study underwent a number of different changes during their four-month, college semester abroad program in the Netherlands, even though the degree and type of change varied widely from student to student. (This variability of degree was not quantified this study.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>COGNITION</th>
<th>PRACTICE</th>
<th>Total Shifts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>liberatory feelings</td>
<td>causation</td>
<td>labels</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loss</td>
<td>consistency</td>
<td>presentation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group membership</td>
<td>salience</td>
<td>politics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“truth”</td>
<td>attraction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Avi</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Boe</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Chris</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cory</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Daniel</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Eduardo</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gus</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Joy</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Kara</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Molly</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Philip</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Richard</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Thomas</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER V

IDENTITY MOMENTUM

Introduction

The preceding chapter answered the initial research question (How do the individual experiences of sexual identity among a small group of American-educated college students shift and change over the course of an intensive, four-month, cross-cultural experience of gay and lesbian studies in the Netherlands?). In the preceding chapter I report on eleven shifts in sexual identity, including changes in the areas of feelings, cognition and sexual practice. Answering the second research question (What are the facilitating conditions for, and the obstacles to, identity shifts and changes for the students participating in this study?) proved more difficult.

During most of my study I had held onto the notion that facilitating conditions for, and obstacles to, identity shifts and changes would be clearly identifiable. But, after the data collection phase was complete and analysis well underway, my unexpected finding was that, despite marked changes in their experiences of sexual identity, neither myself nor my students were able to generalize about what had facilitate those changes. This lack of clear facilitating conditions for, and obstacles to, identity changes encouraged me to explore new areas, among them was the area of identity functions. Since I had pre-program interviews and application material available to me as sources of data, I was able to explore what functions students’ sexual identities served for them at the start of their time in Amsterdam. In pursuing this line of investigation I found a direct relationship between students’ sexual identity functions and their sexual identity shifts. Chapter Five: Identity Momentum will report these findings in answer to my second research question.
Clearly, the experience of living and studying in the Netherlands precipitated a wide variety of changes for all students. As one can see by referencing the following list, some students (i.e. Boe, Cory, Eduardo, Philip and Thomas) experienced only a few shifts, while others (i.e. Gus, Daniel, Avi and Chris) experienced a number of changes in their sexual identities. All of the students had spent the bulk of their waking hours participating in the same sexuality studies program. All had similar, although not identical, experiences with the Dutch culture. Yet some students experienced sweeping sexual identity shifts and others reported few.

Table 3: Shifts Experienced by Subject (in Descending Order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF CHANGES</th>
<th>STUDENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Gus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Avi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Molly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Kara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Boe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Cory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Eduardo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked in the end-of-the-semester interview what they believed had helped to shift their thinking or feeling about their sexual identities, participants provided a wide range of answers. Some students speculated that the catalyst for change came from the academic program that they were involved in and spoke of conversations with faculty members and program staff, particular readings and lectures, or the process of conducting their independent study projects as significant factors in their sexual identity shifts and changes. Moments of “cultural clash”, when their American sexual identities collided with the Dutch culture, were mentioned as points of change. And interactions between classmates, few of whom came into the program with identical ways of thinking about their sexuality, were also credited with stimulating changes in thoughts, feelings and behavior. However, by far the most common responses that could be heard from students to the what-do-you-think-caused-your-changes question were non-specific ones such as following:

*Everything* that I've experienced here has influenced me...the other students on the program, the Dutch people that I've met, being in Amsterdam, being in other cultures that had slightly different ways of doing sexuality, the coursework. I don't know to what extent each of them was responsible, they've all been a part of it. -Thomas

With such a seemingly disjointed list of sexual identity shifts and changes and such a range of student accounts for those changes, it seemed unlikely that I would be able to identify a neat list of facilitating conditions and obstacles to change. Degree, direction and types of change appeared to be something particular to each individual’s experience. It appeared that there were consideration beyond the shared experience of Dutch culture in general, and the college semester abroad program in particular, that had possibly shaped these students’ experiences. Ultimately, uncovering what those particular and personal elements were suggestive in answering my second research query about
what conditions could have facilitated end-of-semester remarks ranging from “I haven’t changed much” to “I’ll never look at my sexuality the same again”.

**Sexual Identity Functions**

In trying to untangle the web of possible conditions for, and obstacles to, identity shifts and changes, I made an unexpected observation. Although I had expected "out" and active gay and lesbian college students to thrive in the tolerant Dutch environment, I noticed that those students who came to the program as activists, the ones whose resumes included stints as leaders of their campus gay organization or their local ActUp affiliates, seemed to struggle mightily with adjusting to life within the Dutch culture. Since the depoliticized nature of Dutch gay identity is one of the most immediately apparent contrasts between the United States and the Netherlands, it led me to suspect that perhaps the contrast between the students’ American inspired attitudes and sexual self-understandings played an important role in their identity experiences in Amsterdam and ultimately their identity changes. This suspicion was reinforced when I read William Cross’ functional analysis of Black Identity Development (Cross, 1998).

Two premises in Cross’ Black identity model struck me as relevant to my own study: the first was the notion that particular functions or “identity operations” are key to social identity and the second was the observation that personal “identity profiles” will vary from person to person based upon which functions have been highlighted by that individual’s experiences. Although it was not immediately apparent what, if any, correlation might exist between the functions that students’ sexuality served at the start of the program and the changes that they reported at the end of the program, it seemed possible that these sexuality functions were of importance to my study. Defining sexuality functions as the expressed purposes that students’ sexual identities served as
they negotiated their relationship to their environment, I set out to identify what students’ sexual identity functions had been upon their arrival in Amsterdam.

I identified eight important sexual identity functions in the pre-program application materials, interviews that were conducted within the first week of arrival in the Netherlands, and early-in-the-semester journals and field notes. These are functions which are in many cases established parts of an American sexual identity. Some of these functions are congruent with Dutch culture and others proved dissonant. Later in this chapter I will show that dissonance, rather than congruence, has a strong relationship to shifts for the participants. Indeed, as I will argue, it seems that the greater dissonance between a students’ beginning-of-the-semester identity functions and the Dutch culture, the greater the sexual identity changes. It may be that “dissonance” is a facilitator of changes, an observation that is in keeping with the developmental literature. But, first a review of students’ identity functions.

Prior to significant encounters with the Dutch culture, students reported eight sexuality functions. Although each function varied in its relevance to particular students, taken as a set, these eight functions covered the range of important, self-described sexual identity operations that were mentioned by the group. Of the eight sexual identity functions that students described only three fit smoothly within the Dutch context while the other five created much more of a cultural clash. Since it was this clash which led to a level of disconcerting dissonance and, as I will argue, ultimately to identity changes for many students, I will frame my presentation of students’ sexual identity functions according to their dissonance or congruence with Dutch culture. Following is the list of the eight sexual identity functions which were reported by students at the beginning of their semester in Amsterdam:
Sexual Identity Functions Congruent with Dutch Culture

- Flexibility (e.g. “My sexual identity lets me remain flexible”.)
- Ease (e.g. “My sexual identity makes things easier for me or others”.)
- Sex (e.g. “My sexual identity gets me kind of sex that I want”.)

Sexual Identity Functions Dissonant with Dutch Culture

- Personal defense (e.g. “My sexual identity is a way to defend myself”.)
- Political strategy (e.g. “My sexual identity serves a political purpose”.)
- Performance (e.g. “My sexual identity is a way to attract attention”.)
- Community building (e.g. “My sexual identity is a way to create or access community”.)
- Organizing tool (e.g. “My sexual identity serves as way to help organize myself and others”.)

In exploring beginning-of-the-semester sexuality functions I look first at Dutch-congruent functions, or those which have a comfortable fit with the Dutch culture. Because these functions did not cause a cultural “rub”, and therefore created less dissonance, students tended to focus less attention on them. For this reason, there is less data, be they journal entries, interview transcripts or general observations, that zero-in specifically on these sexuality functions which are congruent with Dutch culture. By contrast, those functions which were Dutch-dissonant, or not compatible with the Dutch culture, inspired reams of data, rich with student descriptions. Cultural Field Studies journals, class discussions, formal interviews and endless informal conversations centered around these identity functions and the ways in which they were being challenged by both the academic program and the Dutch culture. The second part of this section will highlight these identity functions which were dissonant with Dutch culture.
In both cases, congruent and dissonant, examples of specific identity functions will be followed up with an “in context” discussion. This follow-up section will include general information about Dutch culture as well as specific examples from student experiences of cultural “clashes” (some perceived, some real, all relevant). In this way, each identity function can be viewed within the context of the prevailing culture, in this case Dutch culture.

Sexual Identity Functions Congruent with Dutch Culture

Dutch-Congruent Function #1: Flexibility

For some students an important function of their sexuality upon entering the Amsterdam program was flexibility. In their early interviews and journals, these students spoke of their sexuality in terms of exploration, fluidity and change.

[I guess my sexuality is]...like a spectrum.....like a spectrum of colors. Kind of like changing colors. Not ever getting a defining color. -Philip

For me it's really important to be able to question and to not stick a label on myself now that is going to keep me from doing that questioning. I want to remain as open as I can. -Thomas

I can't really put it into words, how much sense it makes to not have those boundaries there that prevent you from loving whomever you want. -Eduardo

Flexibility in Context

Amsterdam in general and the Netherlands college semester abroad program in particular did not seem to create any conflict when it came to flexibility as a function of one’s sexuality. The academic program, with its emphasis on the cultural construction of sexuality, and the Amsterdam culture, which provided a range of sexual options, both supported students whose sexual identities rested, at least in part, on flexibility.
To see people living in ways that weren’t so defined by categories, was wonderful for me. It’s what I wanted to go more towards. -Thomas

I like being here because it's all over the place, there are so many more options, it makes it more fun to cultivate your sexuality. You can sort of play around with it, try to construct it in different ways as you go along. That won't be easy to do in the States because there's not as much of a pluralistic sexuality in the States. I'll either have to choose between homosexuality and heterosexuality, really. There is more of a gray area here. In the States, maybe there's one or two or three kinds of homosexuality whereas there are ten or twelve or fifteen here. -Richard

As I will explore later in this chapter, sexuality within the Dutch context is, for all practical purposes, a personal matter. Even in those situations where students may not have actually experienced support for their desire for sexual flexibility, they were unlikely to encounter much resistance. Because of this, flexibility as an identity function proved itself to be quite congruent with Dutch society.

Dutch-Congruent Function #2: Ease

When speaking of ways in which they organize and present their sexual selves, a number of students mentioned the importance of ease. For these students there was an acknowledgment that the current way in which they chose to label themselves or organize their sexual systems was not inherently “true” or “right”, but rather was practical, making things easier for either themselves or those around them.

I don't think that any of the labels are who I am. I don't often call myself gay....maybe just to say because it's easier...I don't really consider myself gay or bisexual or anything really. I'm just attracted to people. -Eduardo

I just call myself gay because people identify me with that. I think that it's easiest for them as well as for me. -Gus

I try to take the term that most people understand and make it fit for me. You have to have something that the general population understands. -Kara
Ease in Context

If, at the beginning of the semester, a student’s sexual identity served the explicit function of making things easier for themselves or others, there was no particular reason for this to present a profound challenge over the course of their stay in Amsterdam. Their old way of identifying may not have seemed particularly relevant in the Netherlands, but this function allowed for the incorporation of new, more Dutch-specific sexual identity constructions without undermining the students’ identity foundations. One could also make the case that ease as a function of one’s identity, sexual or otherwise, is very typically Dutch. Dutch culture is renowned for the value it places on practicality and usefulness (Shetter, 1987). It seems that their was little resistance to the students extending that practicality to the organization of their sexual selves.

Dutch-Congruent Function #3: Sex

For a number of students, their sexual identities upon arrival in the Netherlands functioned primarily to get them the sex that they wanted. This group described their identity as being “about what gets me off”, “about a sexual agenda”, “about erotic attachment”, “about fucking”. Some shied away from identity labels that they thought had become “de-sexualized” and gravitated towards identities that they considered more “explicitly sexual”. For them, sex was certainly a central component of their sexual identities.

For many students, the “sex component” of their identities served to get them the sex they wanted by communicating a specific erotic attachment “gender-wise”.

Generally I would say “Yes” to the “Are you gay?” question, because guys are usually asking this to see if they have a chance with me. They want to know if I am willing to do guys, I assume, and so I say “Yes”. -Thomas
But for others, whose sexual identities rested on more than just their inclination towards men or women, it was important be “more erotically inclusive” so as to leave open the option for a broader range of sexual possibilities.

[I use queer] because I’m interested in more than just men and women. Terms like gay and lesbian and bisexual, I feel that they are exclusive of other parts of my sexual identity, whether it’s a fetish or S/M or transexuality. -Molly

**Sex in Context**

Whether their identities functioned to get them sex with a particular type of person, sex in a particular environment or sex with a particular twist, it did not appear that this identity function was greatly challenged by their stay in the Netherlands. A more tolerant sexual environment in the Netherlands, an increased independence for Dutch adolescents, a more lenient set of laws pertaining to age of consent, and a lack of prohibition on young people’s participation in the bar scene...all of these provide Dutch youth with a broader range of sexual choices than their American counterparts. Particularly for young men who are exploring gay sex, the environment in Amsterdam provides access to an array of options that are much less available in the United States. From café scenes to saunas, discos to “dungeons”, many of the students lost no time in exploring their new-found sexual options. But, most found that the significance of their sexual identities decreased dramatically once they departed these sexual venues.

In the U.S. when you meet a queer person you have a bond with them. Whereas here, meeting another gay person means nothing unless you want to have sex with them. -Daniel
Sex in Amsterdam is often explicit and accessible and many students spoke of enjoying the very sexually intense scenes that were available to them. But, perhaps precisely because of the sexual availability, choosing to strongly identify oneself based on one’s sexual practices is less common in the Netherlands than in the States. There are certainly a handful of “sexual radicals” whose lifestyles center around their sexuality, but as one student who explored the Amsterdam S/M scene put it, “it’s great that these people can get all gussied up for big S/M parties, and during the week just blend in with everyone else.”

In journals, interviews, and class discussions, student after student reported that in Amsterdam “one’s sexuality is an issue only in finding sexual partners”. For those students whose sexual identities functioned to get them the type of sex that they wanted and then allowed them to “just blend in”, their stay in the Netherlands provided a buffet of sexual options, but little cultural rub.

Sexual Identity Functions Dissonant with Dutch Culture

Dutch-Dissonant Function #1: Personal Defense

Many, although certainly not all, of the students in this study had experienced overt forms of oppression at some point(s) in their lives for not adhering to societal sex and gender norms. According to some students, the claiming of a particular sexual identity functioned to deflect this sex and gender oppression and help them to cope with their “outsider” status.

Needing to defend what society would oppress in me made me identify more as gay. -Thomas

Finding something that I could hold onto...gave me a solid base. A point of defense. -Eduardo
Personal Defense in Context

The need to personally defend one's sexuality is basically non-existent in the Netherlands because there is, for the most part, nothing to defend oneself against. The “Dutch tolerance”, whether it be for prostitution, drugs, or sexual expression that falls well outside of the parameters of general acceptability in the USA, is reflected on both an individual and an institutional level. Attitude surveys show that the vast majority of the Dutch population support equal treatment for homosexuals (Social en Cultuureel Planbureau 1992) and the Dutch Constitutional amendment forbidding discrimination is clearly reflected in the relatively sex-friendly media, legal, and educational establishments. Students marvel that in Amsterdam the government sponsors gorilla theater sex education in the schools, that the news consists of encouraging updates on gay marriage, and that one can read the paper and surf the TV channels without a constant barrage of anti-gay propaganda.

This unexpected “tolerance” was very new for participants in this study, as it would be for most any American. The constant oppression which students were accustomed to in the States was lifted from their daily lives in Amsterdam. As the following student quotes highlight, surprise and delight at the lack of oppression were frequently recurring themes in interviews, journals and general dialogue throughout the semester.

It's different in America. [Homosexuality] is such a hated thing there. Homophobia is just like a parasite, an infection that the American culture fosters. That's one of the differences that I see here. -Philip
In the States you expect it not to be comfortable and are surprised when it is. Here it’s the opposite. When something happens you think, “God, I didn’t expect that”. It’s a mirror image here. -Eduardo

I can't think of a single person here that has any problem with my being a lesbian. For almost four months!! That's going to be totally different when I get back to the States! -Boe

For some students whose sexual identity had functioned as a form of personal defense, the issue of feeling “comfortable” and “accepted” in the Netherlands was second to the issue of feeling physically safe and able to live one’s life without constant fear of bodily harm. For these students, “defenses” which had perhaps been lifesaving in the U.S were superfluous now that the familiar fear was lifted. As one student put it

It feels nice to know that I could be kissing my boyfriend on the street here and I wouldn't feel like people were even looking, let alone chasing me with sticks. -Gus

Even for the rare student whose personal history in the States included supportive family and friends and tolerant social, religious and educational settings, it was still a surprise to find most all Dutch public spaces accessible and comfortable, regardless of their sexual expressions. Whether they were “gay boys” talking openly about their male dates alongside the beefy straight men in the gym, lesbians reading “dyke literature” in the local cafe, or male cross-dressers trying on women’s clothing in the downtown department store, students again and again told stories of encountering surprisingly nonchalant attitudes from the Dutch people that they met. As one student so aptly describes

...I’ve lost perspective on what is a gay environment because I haven’t had the contrast of going in and out of gay and straight environments. I don’t ever feel like I need to be more closeted here or I need to tone it down here. In America I think of those things (the grocery, the trams, the tourist places) as a straight environment and here I don’t think it is really. It’s more integrated...Even on a
I will have the same conversation that I would in this room. It’s more “anything goes!” I can’t think of a single time since I’ve been here when I’ve felt uncomfortable because of my sexual orientation. -Cory

It is interesting, and illuminating, to note a few of the unexpected reactions that students received when they chose to share with randomly encountered Dutch people that they were in the Netherlands for a four-month, lesbian, gay and bisexual studies program. Most students spoke of having to push through a bit of lingering discomfort when they were confronted by strangers with the question of “What are you studying here in Amsterdam?” But, whether it be from a clerk on duty at the University computing center, an elderly Dutch woman in line at an art museum or an Egyptian ex-patriot staffing the corner falafel stand, reactions were consistently friendly and supportive. Perhaps the only exception to that overwhelmingly positive reaction was voiced by one student who felt, “here it’s been weird to tell people, especially gay people, that you’re doing gay studies. But it’s weird for a different reason. Here they think it’s not an issue, so why are you doing that?”

As can be easily seen, there is little use in the Netherlands for personal defense as a function of one’s sexual identity. It is not hard to imagine what a contrast this is for a young person whose identity is wrapped up in “being sensitive to any little thing that could be oppressive, looking for things that are unjust, and feeling oppressed by every little thing here and there”. As one student put it, in the Netherlands “where there's not that constant oppression and homophobia, it seems that you can just live. Like you don't need to spend all your time defending your basic rights, defending your existence. Here you can just exist.”
Dutch-Dissonant Function #2: Political Strategy

Many students spoke of their experience and expression of sexual identity as being intimately tied into politics and serving an overtly political purpose.

I am very political in general and queer reflects that. -Molly.

My identity feeds on repression. It’s a political and sexual and “fuck you!” identity all in one. -Avi

[My sexuality’s] always been such a political thing...everything I’ve been involved with has had some political tinge to it...it’s against the government, the media...it’s in opposition to things. -Daniel.

Political Strategy in Context

Although there is debate as to whether the struggle for gay and lesbian liberation in the Netherlands has been won, it cannot be denied that Dutch culture includes civil liberties, toleration, integrated opportunities, social services and safety that sharply contrasts with the reality for American gays, lesbians and bisexuals (Pheterson 1987). Unlike the USA where about half of the states retain anti-sodomy and vice laws and homosexuals are routinely dismissed from military service, the Dutch Constitution prohibits all discrimination on any grounds whatsoever, which includes discrimination against homosexuals (Walldijk 1987) and gays and lesbians are actively recruited into both the military and the police force.

One way in which Dutch gay or lesbian identity differs from its American counterpart is its relative lack of politicization. On the Dutch socio-political landscape, where almost all gay and lesbian rights have been achieved, there does not exist the identifiable targets of opposition which are a necessary condition to the emergence and
maintenance of a politicized sexual identity (Duyvendak 1994; Rhoads 1994; Weeks 1987). Students whose sexual identities are tied tightly to political activism in the U.S.A. are quick to comment on the new political landscape they encounter upon arrival in the Netherlands.

In the States I was always a political organizer, but I don't really know that I had a vision of what I was really working towards, because I think I never believed that it could be achieved. I never thought that within my lifetime I would see anything like [what I see in the Netherlands]. What I always wanted before was a place where people could live their sexuality freely without shame or fear and I guess we have that here. -Daniel.

In the US I know that there are plenty of people who are queer who are not involved in queer politics as well, but I always thought that was lame because there is so much that we need to do in the US how can you not do all this stuff? But here there isn't this drive saying “How can you not go to this political march?” or “How can you not organize this letter writing campaign?” and "blah, blah, blah... " Here there's nothing to do almost. -Molly

Gayness is subcultural here, it's not a movement. The identities are still very much here. [But] it seems de-politicized. There are the bars that are for gay men. People here are like "Yeah, we're here and we're accepted. Why make a big deal out of it?" -Thomas

Early in the semester students were introduced to the COC, the Dutch national gay and lesbian body. Branches of the COC, the oldest existing organization for gay and lesbian emancipation, exist and are publicly supported in dozens of towns throughout the Netherlands. To get a sense of the wide support which the COC has enjoyed over the years one can compare its membership back in the 50’s (12,000 members in a country of 12 million people) with the Matachine Society, the largest gay group in the States at the time (200 members out of 200 million people). It is a surprise to many students to realize the strong relationship that exists between the COC and the national government.

Here when the guy from the COC says, “We are a political organization”, he means, “We are a liaison to the government, we help them with their policies, we have official seats on their committees”. It's not like that in America. -Cory
I was shocked at how different the meaning of a "political" gay group is in Holland than in the US and flabbergasted by the role of the [COC]. Going into the schools!?! Not where I'm from. And my immediate thought at the term "political" was of a role opposing the government and its policies, rather than actually working with the government. It seemed that there is virtually nothing that the gay/lesbian community wants and is not getting. -Daniel.

Most of the students involved in this research project had never studied, let alone experienced, a political system such as the one they found in the Netherlands. The fact that "regular folks", the students included, had access to policy makers, that consensus-building was a goal of politicians, and that dissenting voices were respectfully encouraged was a surprise for those students who had just stepped out of the American political land mine. To immediately encounter the friendly relationship between Dutch gays and lesbians and the local and national government was nothing short of shocking for many students.

The thing that is different here is the people who are in government, people who are in positions of power to help change whatever needs to be changed to make people happier, are always willing to listen. That's the Dutch attitude, the Dutch mentality...to listen. Anyone who wants to voice their opinion in order to bring about social change has that option. Ideally. I think that it works well from what I've seen. In the US it's different. We don't want to listen. -Thomas

Here [in the Netherlands] things started with a history of tolerance, in the States it started as a fight and it's still a fight. Given that and the fact that the whole fucking [American] government and anybody in power is part of the heterosexual establishment... It's an us-them dichotomy that you don't have here. -Philip

Many US students, including about half of those in this study, have an affinity with queer identity, an identity which is incompatible with the contemporary Dutch scene. Given that “the existence of queer identity cannot be understood except in relation to conflict with the dominant culture” (Nuehring et al, in Rhoads 1994, p 35), it is no wonder that it is not an identity construct which is widely available in a country such as the Netherlands. The depoliticized nature of Dutch gay and lesbian identity highlights
how the achievement of respect and equal rights may very likely undermine queer identity, an identity based in resistance and activism which is held dear by many of the students participating in this study.

On the whole my queer activist self has been very repressed here. I think that it's really sad about Dutch society. Even though things are socially a lot better than in the States, it feels like people are complacent. Not everything is exactly wonderful here. Maybe it's the cultural difference that you are supposed to go through the proper channels here. If you have a problem with something here you call your fuckin' representative or whatever. -Avi

It's like this point here in the Netherlands that you can reach, but if you take one small step over that line you're immediately put into some category of hyper-political, unnecessary, extravagant. Once you cross that line of activism, and I don't know what it is... You can be aware and you can have conversations and you can be active, but only up to a certain point. -Chris

As can be seen, political strategy as a function of one's sexual identity is antithetical to Dutch culture. Students whose personal sexual identities highlighted political strategy prior to coming to the Netherlands were quick to discover that "when there's not dominant ideology thrown on us by heterosexuals it's different, queer isn't necessary".

Dutch-Dissonant Function #3: Performance

For over half of the students an important function of their sexual identity was the "performance" factor that it provided back in the United States. Whether frivolous, serious, or some combination of both, the “performance” always seemed to contain an element of “playing with” or “playing for” an outside audience.

In the States I found myself doing extravagant things to shock people, because they thought sexuality was such a big deal and it was kind of funny to see their reactions. -Eduardo

In America it was really crucial to me that I didn't fit. So my hair was more purple. I always tried to stimulate some sort of fun, something interesting. -Chris
I really like playing with labels and names and stuff like that. I have fun with it....I like labels, I like trying them on, I like doing gender-fuck and playing mind games with people and shit like that. - Avi

I am just a boy in drag. It's not really a strong identity, just something I do for fun.
I enjoy the attention. -Gus

There is an identity that [I] can put on. I can dress more gay than other times.
There is an element of costuming and projection. Like when I get dressed up in certain ways it's letting out how I want to act, how I want to project myself. -Cory

**Performance in Context**

It does not take long for an American visitor to pick up on the relative uniformity, both geographic and demographic, in the Netherlands, particularly if you are a student who has been accustomed to the cultural diversity of an American urban setting. Given its relatively homogeneous population (as of 1996, only 7% of the population in the Netherlands was of non-Dutch origin), its small size (not much bigger than the state of Vermont), and its population density (second only to Bangladesh), it is not surprising that Dutch culture translates into some norms which many American students are unaccustomed to. This is certainly the case when it comes to the rules of public conduct.

Shortly after arrival in the Netherlands the students speak of feeling the cultural expectations which can best be summed up in the Dutch expression *Doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg*. (Act normally, that is strange enough.)

Rarely does our screaming to each other [while riding our bikes], or singing, or whatever it may be, go unnoticed by me as something that makes us stand out.....Americans tend to attract attention to themselves whereas I get the feeling that the Dutch are content to deal privately with things and keep to themselves. - Boe

I just don't think the Dutch have the same tension and dynamism socialized into them as American urbanites do...I think generally speaking the Dutch don't get extremely excited or boisterous or "dynamic" about anything at all. Except maybe the Ajax [soccer team]. -Richard
I'm looking forward to going back [to the States]... Perhaps I'll miss...the tolerance. [But], I like being forward with people, in your face. When people give me attitude, if somebody doesn't like me, I give them attitude. That didn't happen here, cause nobody gave me drama. -Gus

There exists a unique combination of conformity, freedom and privacy in the Netherlands which may help to explain why the Dutch may not “give the drama” that American students are accustomed to. For those students who choose to publicly “perform” their sexuality, or any part of their identity for that matter, this is not necessarily experienced as a welcomed change. At times it can be felt as a dismissal of an important part of themselves.

When I got lost one day, I took out my map and made it very clear that I was lost...I was actually performing, "I'm lost! I'm lost! Help me!" And nobody helped. I thought, "They don't really care about me". That was one realization...that I'm just like anybody here. Just in general people don't really look at you unless they have to. I think being away from people’s eyes made me think. Back in NY you do something and everybody turns. They may not look right at you, but from the corner of their eyes they are paying attention. In the US if I need attention I can just do something crazy, like throw a plate and people will look. Here it was really hard to get people's attention. I feel out of place... -Gus

Here there seems to be a different definition of "shoving it down your throat". In the States if you are on TV or if you walk past someone’s house holding someone’s hand...all that is “shoving it down your throat”. Whereas here there seems to be a different line. All those things can happen and people don't feel affronted...they don't even notice. It's kind of anticlimactic. -Chris.

When we got [to the restaurant] we noticed, to our surprise, two men sitting at a table together, holding hands and kissing each other. We noticed no reaction from other patrons to this pair, although it is rather unlikely that no one saw them...I was very surprised that I observed no negative reactions. Do I simply attribute this to “Oh, it's just Amsterdam?” Actually, I think it has more to do with Dutch culture and the attitude of indifference, which extends to homosexuality...Those two men were probably invisible to everyone around them. Seriously, no one probably thought them out of the ordinary. Homos. Simply put, we're disappearing. -Cory

Even if the Dutch tend towards non-reaction when confronted with something outside of the ordinary, one must also consider that the range of “ordinary” in Dutch
culture is much wider than most of us experience in America. Sexual and moral boundaries have been pushed around all sorts of sexual issues in the Netherlands. Whether it’s homosexuality or prostitution, birth control or pornography, Dutch society is clearly more open about topics of sexuality than the United States. Student journals were frequently filled with surprised accounts of explicit sexual conversations with “unlikely” participants such as professors, acquaintances and members of one’s “parents’ generation”; encounters with public nudity in parks, at gyms, and through un-curtained windows; and scenes such as hand-holding leathermen strolling through one's neighborhood in outrageous outfits. Within this context, students whose identities had previously functioned to provide them a sense of performance are a bit shaken up by the fact that in the Netherlands they are playing to a disinterested and non-responsive audience.

Dutch-Dissonant Function #4: Community Building

The fourth important sexual identity function which came to light early in the semester was one of building “community” or “feeling part of something”. Identifying in particular ways gave the students access to particular “communities” of people in the United States, and, as the following quotes show, this was important to many participants in the study.

“Gay” fits...who I am in the sense that it's nice that there's a label. Labels are nice in some ways. When coming out it can be a wonderful experience to find a home. -Richard

I think that finding similarities can make it easier for someone to identify with a specific group, even if the only thing in common may be the sex you practice. -Gus

It automatically gives me a membership card. You get that membership card and then you are a part of it whether you want to or not. -Chris
By declaring yourself a lesbian, for example, by saying "This is who I am", it gives you a sense of power. Other women who chose the same identity are suddenly friends, you become part of a community, and you have a direction.

-Boe

Community Building in Context

For students whose sexual identities previously functioned as a way to build and identify “community”, their experience in the Netherlands was indeed unsettling. Whereas in the States students felt that they could count on a certain “bond” when they met another queer person, they found that sharing certain sexual inclinations or practices in the Netherlands did not necessarily provide them the “membership card” that they were accustomed to. Indeed, few people in the Netherlands seemed to be in possession of these “cards” because there was very little gay community, and thus few sexual identity based “membership clubs” to speak of. One student describes it this way,

I have seen a lot of queer people in Amsterdam. I mean A LOT of queer people. The scene is very queer. The fact that there's lots of leather men and drag queens and club kids and freaks and men in football uniforms and normal preppy gay men and women all dancing together that's very queer...I think the difference is community. If you asked one of those people, “Do you feel you’re part of a queer community?” they would say, “What's that?” They would say “No, I don't know any of these people, I don't share anything in common, I don't know any of these people's names. I'm gay, yes, or I'm queer, but that doesn't automatically give me a membership card.” Where I think in America it does, because of politics. - Chris.

By politics, this student is referring to the relative lack of oppression in the Netherlands which was described earlier in this chapter. Legal protection, physical safety, societal “tolerance”...Amsterdam has them all, creating less gay ghettoization, more integration, and a markedly different sense of “community”. As one student makes note, “because Amsterdam has all these things...it’s diffused the necessity to feel that you belong to something dictated by your sexuality”.

132
It is possible that politics goes hand and hand with geography in creating vastly different notions of gay "community" in the Netherlands and the United States. Constrained by the small size of their country and the lack of geographic mobility, the Dutch seem to have stronger and more stable social loyalties than Americans. This would seem to be a disincentive for investing a lot of time and energy into organizing around sexuality, a potentially divisive political issue. This is in direct contrast to the experiences which some of the American students brought with them to Amsterdam.

In the States you have to make a place for yourself in a community. The States are so huge with so many different cultures and so many different mixes of people. Especially in a place like San Francisco everything’s sort of divided off into groups. That is probably the main reason that I have any formulated identity about myself...in order to not be just a number, one of millions and millions. -Avi

It is odd that Amsterdam can rightly claim to be the “gay Mecca of Europe”, home to more than 80 gay bars and host to numerous national and international gay events, yet students again and again reported on the “death of the gay community”. But, commerce and community are not synonymous and students whose sexual identities previously had functioned to create and access community, found themselves at a considerable loss in the “totally different paradigm that was operating in the Netherlands.”

**Dutch Dissonant Function # 5: Organizing Tool**

That sexual identity serves to differentiate between people and then, in turn, to communicate that differentiation to others was, perhaps, the function which recurred most frequently in students’ interviews and writing at the beginning of their time in the Netherlands. The majority of students emphasized “differentiation” as a useful tool for organizing people, including themselves, into meaningful categories.

Although some students were very comfortable with the categorization implied in their sexual identity choices, others spoke of having ambivalent feelings about this
differentiation. For these students, the down side of their sexual identity organizing was its tendency “to solidify the linear continuum”, “to reinforce the dichotomy of homoheterosexuality” and “to box people in”. These students recognized it’s ability to be “both divisive and community building”.

Despite ambivalence, with few exceptions, the students stated that they chose their identity labels precisely because these labels made explicit that they were, in many cases, “other than normal” and, in most cases, “decidedly not heterosexual”.

If being normal is being heterosexual then that’s why I call myself a lesbian...not why, but one of the important dimensions...I don’t want to be assumed as normal if normal is heterosexual. -Joy

[I identify the way I do] because I don’t want people to assume that I’m heterosexual...[My identity is] very broad and encompassing to me, anything other than heterosexual. I don’t see it as one specific thing, but rather anything but heterosexual. -Molly

Regardless of the ways that students chose to identify themselves sexually, at the beginning of the semester the majority of students felt that organizing people into categories based on sexuality was important. Not only were these categories a “fit” with who they perceived themselves to be, but they were useful in communicating to others some important element(s) of themselves.

I see this as a way to project to others, so that they may understand [me]...It relays who I am and how I want to be seen. -Kara

My homosexuality is the first level of understanding that people can have of me - one that penetrates through all other levels. -Richard

I know that it’s true that this identity is very important to me when I meet somebody and I want them to know that I’m gay. O.K...I’m a young woman, I’m a white person, and I’m gay. That’s a big part of who I am. -Boe

But, in the Netherlands many students encountered a situation that would shake their sexual organizing and thus their sexual identities. For those students whose “whole
lives are directed by that sexual identification”, for whom “it is totally problematic to think of not having some tangible sexual identity”, their college semester abroad experience would provide them a unique challenge.

Organizing Tool in Context

Having one’s sexual identity function as a tool for organizing people into useful categories becomes problematic when the lines between those categories begin to disappear. Certainly the students involved in this study had faced challenges to their sexual organizing systems in the past, in fact within the program itself there were ongoing and heated debates about the relevance of these sexual categories. But, for the most part, these debates were theoretical since students’ personal experiences were shaped by the American culture, a culture in which sexual categories are anything but irrelevant.

Confusion around sexual identity categories was a recurring theme early in students’ stay in Amsterdam. On the train from the airport on her day of arrival in the Netherlands, one student could be overheard asking, “How the hell can you tell who’s queer and who’s just the regular Euro trash?” This inability to use one’s “gaydar” to identify who was and who wasn’t gay presented some challenges, which in the States may have been disastrous. In Amsterdam it proved more humorous.

I thought I was cruis ing a gay man and he just smiled and said, “I’m not gay, but, thank you”. I thought, “Oh, my god!!!”. If that would happen more, the world would be a much nicer world. -Gus

This decrease in straight-gay differentiation went well beyond style to encompass a variety of sociological factors. According to an array of scholars (Bech, ?; D’Emilio, 1988; Epstien, 1987; Katz, 1995) the homosexual and heterosexual existence are merging in a number of countries due to the conditions of modern life. These “conditions” (i.e. decrease in traditional marriage and increase in “alternative” family structures,
secularization of society, divorce of sexuality from procreative intent, increase in types of sex engaged in by heterosexuals, and destabilization of heterosexuality as the “righteous” sexual identity) have come together in the Netherlands at a much quicker rate than in the United States. The result seems to be a deterioration in the need for a homo/hetero distinction, a deterioration which was profoundly felt by the participants of this study who found themselves “less stereotype-affected”, “less judged”, “less categorized”, and “definitely less constrained by expectations and roles”.

Here [my fitting in] has nothing to do with the way that I’m thinking or the way that I’m behaving, but it’s that the heterosexuals are becoming more homosexual. That’s why it’s different. They are starting to resembled gay people. They are starting to do things, behave in ways that are closer and closer to the way we’ve lived our lives. -Chris

A discussion of boundaries between “heterosexual” and “homosexual” would be incomplete without at least some mention of gender, since it is such an important factor in constructing these categories. As can be seen in the following quotes, the male participants in this study were particularly surprised by their experiences of Dutch masculinity.

Seeing the openness, the ability to have gay and straight bars in the same street next to each other, you would hardly see that in America. You would never see really straight, macho guys standing next to a gay club in the States like you do here. Not caring that there's 500 gay men standing next to them. They don't feel intimidated or like they need to defend their masculinity. -Philip

The Dutch concept of masculinity -- I think that it's different from the US, but not so easy to pin down. Even in the leather scene (very macho in appearance) there is little posturing, machismo. I have never felt uncomfortable, even at sex parties for not being super-built, etc. It doesn't mean that looks or style aren't important, but the need to prove your maleness by being really masculine (and rude) isn't there. -Daniel.

The absence of macho posturing in it's most obvious breeding ground [a gym] took me very much by surprise. There didn't seem to be a sense of competitiveness among the body-builders nor was there a sense of disdain for the two scrawny (American) kids that we were. -Cory
Identity Profiles

When students’ beginning-of-semester data was analyzed using these three Dutch-congruent and five Dutch-dissonant identity functions a range of “identity profiles” emerged. As the following chart illustrates, variety characterized not only student’s identity shifts over the course of the semester, but beginning-of-semester identity functions as well:

Table 4: Identity Functions by Pseudonyms of Subject (in Alphabetical Order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>DUTCH CONGRUENT</strong></th>
<th></th>
<th><strong>DUTCH DISSONANT</strong></th>
<th></th>
<th><strong>TOTAL DISSONANCE</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>flexibility</td>
<td>ease</td>
<td>sex</td>
<td>defense</td>
<td>politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Avi</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Boe</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Chris</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cory</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Daniel</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Eduardo</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gus</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Joy</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Kara</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Molly</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Philip</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Richard</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Thomas</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As this chart clearly illustrates, students' beginning-of-semester identity functions varied greatly. Some students came into the program with identity profiles that fit comfortably into the Dutch culture and others came with profiles that would prove quite conflictual with their experiences in the Netherlands. Upon viewing this data, the following question arose: "Do these identity functions have any bearing upon the students' eleven identity shifts that were reported in chapter four?" I present the following
query, articulated by one of the study participants, as a way to lead us into the next section of this chapter, an exploration of the relationship between sexual identity shifts and sexual identity functions:

My whole identity of being a dyke was based on not always fitting in and [In Amsterdam] it's no big thing. So it's sort of weird. It makes me wonder what would happen in the States if all of a sudden ... the whole political alignment shifted and ... it didn’t matter who was queer or it was no big thing....what would happen to our identities? - Avi

Relationship Between Identity Functions and Identity Shifts

It would not be unreasonable to expect all students who are engaged in an intensive cross-cultural experience, such as the one under consideration in this study, to undergo some identity shifts and changes. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, each student participating in the Netherlands program did experience at least some shift in their feelings, their understandings, or their practices of their sexual identities [see chart #1]. However, more noteworthy than the fact that students' sexual identities changed, was the observation that the degree of that change seemed to correspond to the amount of dissonance that existed between the students' American-constructed sexual identities and the Dutch culture. The following chart and matrix further illustrate this relationship.

Table 5: Pseudonym of Subject with Corresponding Dissonant Functions and Identity Shifts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOTAL DISSONANCE</th>
<th>NAMES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF SHIFTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ari</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gus</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on next page.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOTAL DISSONANCE</th>
<th>NAMES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF SHIFTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Boe</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Eduardo</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cory</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Matrix of Identity Shifts and Functions
By holding students' sexual identity functions along-side their sexual identity shifts a clear relationship quickly emerged. With only one exception (Kara), students who reported the greatest number of dissonant identity functions also reported the greatest number of identity shifts. Similarly, students who reported the fewest dissonant identity functions also reported fewer identity shifts. For the participants in this research project, cultural support for their sexual identity functions seems to have served as a reinforcement of their sexual identities, and a disincentive to sexual identity changes. Cultural challenge to sexual identity functions, on the other hand, seems to have caused dissonance which proved to be a facilitating condition for sexual identity changes.

Piagetian Theory and the Process of Sexual Identity Change

The notion of dissonance as a prime facilitating condition for change is a basic premise of much cognitive development literature. Dissonance, and its resulting disequilibrium, have been central to a number of theorists who have sought over the years to understand motivation for change (Kitchener, 1982; Festinger, 1957), with Jean Piaget and his theory of cognitive development being the most widely known. Taking a Piagetian perspective, one could reasonably predict that dissonance would yield change, this is certainly not new to this particular study. What is unique to this study, however, is the application of this perspective to the domain of sexual identity development.

Like the sexual identity researchers who came before me, I had not originally thought to apply elements of Piagetian theory to the domain of sexual identity development. Nor had it occurred to me to included in among my research questions or literature review. His work, which makes little reference to either the cultural influences on cognitive development or the nature of development as it relates to social processes such as identity development (Miller, 1989), was not a part of my original literature
review and therefore does not appear in earlier chapters of this dissertation. It was only after my data repeatedly pointed to students’ experiences of dissonance as a possible facilitating condition for their sexual identity shifts and changes that I was inspired to revisit some of the Piagetian descriptions of mechanisms of development. His emphasis on these mechanisms of development and the active role of the individual in the developmental process have proved foundational in interpreting my students’ experiences and designing the Process Model of Identity Development, which will be introduced in the next chapter.

So many of Piaget’s assumptions about the nature of development have been incorporated into the thinking of researchers and lay persons alike, that they frequently go unrecognized. (Miller, 1989). The notion of knowledge as process rather than a static state was revolutionary when first proposed by Piaget, yet is widely accepted today. A quick review of some of these Piagetian assumptions is important in understanding their application to sexual identity development, an arena which certainly was left untouched by Piaget himself and which has so far shown no inclination towards incorporation of Piagetian principles.

Although there is admittedly considerable tension between Piaget’s emphasis on structural change and the constructivist framework of his theory (Bidell and Fischer, 1992), his view of the individual as active participant in his/her own development is of great significance to this study. By viewing development as “the relation between the acting or thinking subject and the objects of his [sic] experience” (Piaget, 1952, p. 245), Piaget lays the groundwork for exploring the interaction between what were students’ internal understandings (in this case, their sexual identity functions) and the world around them (in this case, the Dutch culture.) Piaget’s assumptions about the process by which
individuals undergo change, or what he refers to as the mechanisms of development, have equally useful application to the experiences of this study's research participants.

According to Piaget every organism strives toward a state of equilibrium, both within themselves and with the environment (Piaget, 1952). A change in either the organism or the environment, a dissonant experience, leads to a state of disequilibrium. The organism is compelled to correct this disequilibrium in order to reestablish equilibrium. This extremely simplified description of the Piagetian process of development can be applied to students whose experience of dissonance and disequilibrium motivated them to shift some of their sexual self-understandings in order to reach a new state of equilibrium. For these students equilibrium was reestablished when their personal experiences and understandings could once again converge with their sexual identities. There is, however, no guarantee that this new found equilibrium will be permanent.

Piaget’s cognitive approach to development supports the notion that a person's understandings of the world, will remain in a dynamic state of equilibrium until something allows or forces a questioning or contraction of previously held assumptions. This can be described quite aptly as follows:

The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but she meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or she hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in her which they cease to satisfy. The result is inward trouble which she seeks to escape by modifying her previous mass of opinion. (John Dewey quoted in Jenness, 1992, p. 69)

This "inward trouble", what I have been referring to as “dissonance”, was keenly and uncomfortably felt by many students for whom the Dutch environment seemed to be causing almost constant states of disequilibrium, forcing them to change, to adjust.
It appears that the students’ attempts to escape these awkward experiences of “inward trouble” indeed led them, as predicted by Piagetian principles, to change some aspects of their sexual self-understanding. Some accomplished that modification by assimilating new awareness into existing understandings, others by changing current understandings to accommodate new ideas. While the data collected for this study shows specific outcomes of sexual identity changes to be almost as varied as the students themselves, it points to the conclusion that, given dissonance between students’ sexual identity functions and the Dutch environment, change, in one form or another, was inevitable.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

This study points to three clear findings. The first is that the small group of students engaged in the Netherlands college semester abroad program underwent changes in their experiences of their sexual identities: changes in their feelings about their sexual identities, changes in their understandings about their sexual identities and changes in their practice of their sexual identities. The second finding is that dissonance between a student’s sexual identity functions and the functions that sexual identity served in the Netherlands yielded change. And the third finding is that, although some degree of change was experienced by all students, the range and type of change was variable.

Although these specific findings are interesting in and of themselves, they have wider implications for our use of existing models of sexual identity, for our work with college students, or others, who are actively engaged in the sexual identity development process, and for our future studies of sexual identity development. This concluding chapter is designed to explore these wider implications of this study’s findings.

Implications of Findings for the Use of Existing Sexual Identity Development Models

The data that emerged from this study was in direct contrast to the existing stage models of sexual identity development. This can best be demonstrated by briefly revisiting the three assumptions embedded in these models of sexual identity development which were highlighted in chapter two: 1. the assumption that there is but one linear path of development; 2. the assumption of a context of oppression and shared stigmatized identity; and 3. the assumption that "homosexual" and "heterosexual" represent stable
sexual identities. These assumptions support predictions as to how sexual identity will proceed, but these predictions did not account for the range of changes experienced by my research participants.

Based on the assumption of linear development and given the sexually tolerant environment in the Netherlands, one would predict that students, all of whom were constructing their sexual identities around some degree of homo-erotic desire, would develop their identities along the lesbian/gay identity trajectory. If development were to proceed as predicted, lesbian/gay identity should have either moved from the recesses of a student’s self-concept to the center stage or shifted from the center of self-concept to take its place among a number of firmly acknowledged parts of oneself. While some students experienced movement along this predicted path, others did not. For this latter group of students their previous homosexual identities became surprisingly problematic in the Netherlands. Clearly, an assumption of linear development does not speak to the experience of those students who, despite what appeared to be strong support for their gay and lesbian selves, found themselves moving away from, not towards a self-affirming homosexual identity.

Similarly, according to the stage models, one could almost certainly expect a gay-affirming society such as the one found in the Netherlands to help students progress from an internalized state of oppression to one in which homosexuality is increasingly seen as acceptable. According to the stage models most of the participants in this study had begun a commitment to homosexual identity prior to arriving in Amsterdam. Given that, one would reasonably predict considerable movement towards firmer homosexual identities as the semester proceeded. But, despite (or I might argue, because of) the
decrease in oppression, the homosexual identities which the students brought to the Netherlands proved increasingly problematic as their four-month stay progressed.

The third assumption of the stage models of sexual identity development also proved problematic. Adhering to the assumption of stable sexual categories, one might predict that students, all of whom were forging decidedly non-heterosexual identities, would gravitate towards existing gay and lesbian categories during their time in the Netherlands. But, once again, this prediction didn't ring true for my research participants. Not only did some students arrive in the Netherlands with a range of "non-traditional" sexual identities (i.e. "boydyke", "queer", "unidentified"), even many of those who brought with them more "traditional" lesbian and gay identities found it difficult to make sense out of those identities in a Dutch context where "lesbian" and "gay" did not necessarily imply what it did in the States. The notion of homosexualities, as opposed to a singular homosexuality became clear within this cross-cultural context. Even when students used the more traditional labels of "lesbian" and "gay" they were often used to name identities that may have been unrecognizable to the stage model creators of a quarter century ago.

The Process Model of Sexual Identity Development

Because the experiences of my research participants did not fit the unidirectional, oppression-based, homo-hetero models of sexual identity that have dominated the discourse on sexual identity development, I found myself in uncharted territory when trying to answer my original research questions about how and why students' experiences of their sexual identities changed. As previous models of sexual identity became less and less useful in analyzing the experiences of my students, it became clear that a new way of
conceptualizing sexual identity development was needed in order to describe and account for the changes evident in my data.

While my data pointed toward neither specific outcomes for sexual identity shifts and changes nor a universal trajectory, it did suggest certain processes which have yet to be incorporated into any existing sexual identity development models. For this reason, I have conceptualized a Process Model of Sexual Identity Development as a way to describe and account for the experiences of my research participants. Unlike the models that have preceded it, this Process Model of Sexual Identity Development incorporates a range of identity paths and outcomes, it does not assume an oppressive environment and an accompanying stigmatized identity, it allows for multiple changes in sexual identification and it takes into consideration the important relationship between dissonance and identity momentum.

As mentioned earlier, in order to account for the changes that I saw in the students in the Netherlands, a sexual identity model cannot be based upon the assumptions of linear progression, of an oppressive social context, or of stable sexual categories that characterize the current models. It should be noted, however, that neither can a model assume the opposite: non-linear progression, a non-oppressive social context or flexible sexual categories. While the experiences of some of my research participants defied the typical linear progress of identity development, the experiences of others did not. Some participants’ identities seemed to be formed outside of the context of overt oppression; others experienced blatant discrimination along their identity paths. Some students found nothing recognizable in the traditional categories of lesbian or gay; others claimed them as their own. Clearly, in order for a model to speak to the experiences of all of my research participant it must assume and be able to incorporate the widest ranges of
possible sexual identity experiences. It is my hope that the following, proposed Process Model of Sexual Identity does just that.

Table 7: Process Model of Sexual Identity Development
One can readily see that this model is referencing both the individual and the social sexual category. In keeping with the earliest conceptualizations of psychosocial identity (Erikson, 1950/56), this model is interested in the nexus where the individual joined the culture, in this case the intersection of student and social sexual organization. Taking into consideration that social sexual categories available to my research participant changed with time and culture, this model intentionally leaves open the naming of these social sexual categories. The specific content of sexual identity is less at issue here than the potentially cyclical process by which change occurs, or does not occur in one, or the other, or both of the individual and the social sexual category that the individual is applying to his/herself.

In order to illustrate the various phases of this model, I will review it quickly. In brackets you will find examples from the pre-program experience of one of my research participants, Boe. These experiences, shared by Boe in both her beginning-of-the-semester interview and informal conversations, will highlight the various phases of the model. Although there is nothing that precludes an individual’s stepping into this model at the “disequilibrium phase”, for the purposes of clarity I will begin at the top, with the “equilibrium phase” of the model.

Equilibrium

This phase of the Process Model refers to a point at which an individual is in a state of equilibrium with his/her social sexual category. Equilibrium is rarely static, but can be looked at as a dynamic congruence between the individual’s understandings about oneself and one’s current social sexual category.

[Prior to puberty Boe has few conscious sexual feelings and is comfortable with the societal assumption that she is heterosexual. She dates boys early in high school and feels comfortable with her heterosexual identity.]
Dissonance

A change in either the individual or the environment or both can result in dissonance, a shift in the individual’s state of equilibrium with her/his social sexual category.

Disequilibrium

Dissonance yields disequilibrium, an incongruence between the individual’s understandings and feelings about oneself and one’s current social sexual category. This dissonance is experienced by the individual as uncomfortable and confusing, prompting one to find some way to “correct” it.

[At 15, Boe finds herself attracted to another girl on her sports team. The two of them act on this attraction by engaging in some sexual experimentation. Boe's understanding and feelings about her same-sex behavior are no longer congruent with her heterosexual identity and she experiences this as an uncomfortable and confusing disequilibrium.]

Although uncomfortable, one could remain in a state of long-term disequilibrium.

[Boe could continue to have sex with her friend, feeling shamed and confused by her contradictory understandings that she is straight and that "normal straight girls" don't do what she does.]

Assimilation/Accommodation

At this point, if an individual is to move out of an uncomfortable state of internal turmoil or disequilibrium, s/he can either revamp her/his existing social sexual category (Assimilation) or explore a new social sexual category (Accommodation).

[Boe can either assimilate her current experience into her existing category by broadening her definition of "heterosexual" to include someone like herself who experiments with sex with girls. Or she can begin to explore a new sexual identity such as "gay" or "bisexual".]

Whether one revamps one’s existing social sexual category or explores a new one, in order to reach equilibrium once again the revamped or new category must be positively applied to oneself. If this is not possible the individual will return to a place of disequilibrium as illustrated by the double-ended arrows in the model.
[Over the next year and after much consideration, Boe toys with the idea that perhaps she is a lesbian. After enrolling in an all-women's college, she meets a number of young lesbians and begins to apply this social sexual identity to herself. Although she continues to struggle with the homophobia that she experiences in her environment, she accepts "lesbian" as an identity that fits her and she moves back into a state of relative equilibrium. Another, hypothetical, outcome might have seen Boe positively applying a new, revised definition of heterosexual to herself. ("I like playing around with girls, but that's the way some straight girls are") and taking this revised heterosexual identity into a new phase of equilibrium.]

Return to Equilibrium

Once back to equilibrium, one again feels a "fit" or a sense of congruence between one's understandings and feelings about oneself and the social sexual category that one is applying to oneself.

Given a new "lesbian" identity, Boe's sexual identity journey as described thus far, could fit easily into existing stage models of coming out. This movement from an internalized state of oppression in which homosexual feelings and identity were unacknowledged to one in which homosexuality is seen as both personally relevant and acceptable is an accurate description of the "coming out process" for many of the participants in this study. Although this is the end of the line for the existing stage models, this is not where the journeys of a number of study participants ended. This new model, with its ability to recycle through identity phases multiple times, can help us make sense of these continued sexual identity journeys. We will use two of these journeys, one which incorporates the Accommodation Route and one which incorporates the Assimilation Route, as case examples.

Accommodation Case Example: Eduardo

Like most of the students who participated in this research project Eduardo went through his early years assuming that he was straight. It wasn't until high school, when he
encountered other students who identified themselves as gay that Eduardo experienced a sense of dissonance with the previously assumed "straight" category. Having experienced attraction to and sexual experience with both girls and boys, Eduardo was certain that this label "straight" no longer fit him...but he knew of no other category that worked any better. For the next four years Eduardo explored new social sexual categories, first "gay" and then "bisexual". But, despite these explorations, he was unable to positively apply either category to himself. As he describes it,

I was trying to figure stuff out. I was leaning first towards homosexuality and then towards bisexuality, but then I learned more about myself and just figured that I like people in general and that I shouldn't be forced into either of those camps.

Trying, but unable to apply a new identity to himself, Eduardo found himself back at a state of extended disequilibrium.

I kept thinking that maybe these labels ARE important, maybe I'm denying some part of myself.

At the point where Eduardo arrived in the Netherlands he seemed somewhat exasperated by years of failed attempts at finding an identity that he could embrace. This frustration and exhaustion upon arrival in Amsterdam ("I REALLY want to identify with some sexuality, but I don't want to have to identify with being one specific way.") turned to anger a few weeks into the program ("So what should a person like myself, who doesn't fit, call themselves? Unstable? Confused? Freak?").

It was halfway through the semester, as Eduardo was working on a project with his Dutch homestay host, that the notion of "pansexuality" was introduced to him. He described his reaction this way,

I was brainstorming about what I wanted to convey in my presentation and my host came up with the term 'pansexual'. Pansexual, that's what I am! It's about transcending the gender roles that you have in both the heterosexual and gay worlds. Pansexual transcends all those things. It goes beyond the love for a penis
or the love for a vagina. This was a turning point, where something started to root, to spring up. The more I thought about this term, the more it really comes to terms with myself.

By the end of the semester, Eduardo had applied the new social sexual category, pansexual, to himself.

I'm never going to call myself gay again...never. I'm not gay. I am not gay!!! I'm not in flux. I have found something constant...I'm pan.

Although this study does not follow students back into the American cultural milieu, so therefore cannot speak to Eduardo's continued experience of his pan identity, he left the Netherlands having undoubtedly reached a new equilibrium in his relationship to his social sexual category.

Now I have the identity that I want. Pan is something I can hold onto...it is as if some light shed upon me...some new ways, some new goals are opening up. This is the most important thing of this semester. I think that I'm going back to the States stronger...now I'm encouraged...and I'm not so confused anymore.

Assimilation Case Example: Joy

Unlike many young people, Joy had positive exposure to gay and lesbian role models while growing up. Although she had relatives and family friends who were gay, Joy never applied these labels to herself.

It wasn’t that it was foreign to me, it’s just that it wasn’t something that I thought about, that I could be a lesbian.

She went off to college with a boyfriend and an intact relationship to her heterosexual identity.

Although Joy had been active in gay rights politics as an ally, she never questioned her own heterosexual identity. According to Joy, a crush on one of her women's studies professors caused enough disequilibrium that it forced her to question that identity.
At first it was that I wished that I could be her, that I could think like her. Then I realized that I had a crush on her. That’s when I started questioning it. I must be bisexual I thought.

But, although willing and eager to question her heterosexual identity, Joy was unable to positively apply a bisexual identity to herself.

I realized that it was about loving women and it was a political statement and bisexuality didn't fit with my growing women-centered goals.

A few months before embarking on her college semester abroad program, Joy began to call herself a lesbian. In her early-in-the-semester interviews, she seemed to have applied this identity to herself with a good deal of pride and comfort.

I identify myself as a lesbian. Nothing added to it, just a lesbian. I think that it's a good fit for me because I'm woman-identified in every aspect of my life. It's partly a political statement, although a very personal one. It's defining who I love, who I want as a partner.

Soon, however, the combination of the academic program, her cross-cultural experiences, and the perspectives of a new set of peers would all help to create yet another considerable dissonance for Joy, throwing her into renewed confusion about what it meant to be a lesbian and what her own relationship to that social sexual category was.

I don't know that I want to be called a lesbian anymore. Maybe I don't want a fixed label. What if I say I'm a lesbian and ten years down the road my life is not what people consider a lesbian's to be? My lesbian identity was to a huge extent formed by pressure...pressure from my ex-girlfriend, pressure from within the lesbian group...It also came from my being sick of being assumed to be heterosexual...Maybe these aren't good enough reasons?

Unlike Eduardo who explored a new social sexual category when his original one was not working for him, Joy chose to revamp her existing social sexual category. As evidenced by journal entries, interviews and in- and out-of-class conversations, Joy began
to question the notion of "lesbian" as a fixed, essential identity and was thereby able to create a new definition of "lesbian" which she could once again relate to in a non-problematic way.

I realized that there really isn't any way to put your finger on an identity whether it's sexual identity or any other kind of identity. To a certain extent we are always what people want to hear and that's o.k. with me now...if using 'lesbian' is going to make things easier and make people understand better...it's not like there's any real truth to this stuff anyway...the lesbian label does not rule my life, it is just a label that is helpful and helps me put my identity in perspective...It's because the word lesbian has changed so many times that I don't feel the necessity to have to fit some mold. That's specific enough for me... Now that 'lesbian' has revealed itself as such a socially constructed label anyway, it brings up something new for me. I've shifted the label lesbian to suit me, even if society doesn't...My identity changes and it's going to keep on changing and as far as I can tell, the label 'lesbian' can accommodate that.

It is important to reiterate that this model does not imply a stable end-point of sexual identity development. Despite the fact that both Eduardo and Joy left the Netherlands in a state of equilibrium with their sexual identities, one cannot make predictions about how their re-entry into the United States (or any of the myriad of experiences that they will encounter in their futures) will impact upon their sexual identities. This study would support the notion that the changes that Eduardo or Joy face in their future sexual identities will depend upon their evolving sexual identity functions and the ways in which these are supported or challenged by the cultural environments that they find themselves in.

Hopefully this Process Model of Sexual Identity Development provides a useful framework for understanding the answers to this study's original questions about facilitating conditions for sexual identity shifts and change. Although it remains a hypothetical model, this Process Model has the potential to inform our understanding of
sexual identity development beyond the confines of this dissertation. Further study will
be needed in order to determine the model’s broader applicability.

Implications of Findings for Working with Those Engaged in the Sexual Identity
Development Process

The results of this study and the proposed Process Model of Sexual Identity has
implications for the work of teachers, counselors and others who are seeking a better
understanding of the on-going process of sexual identity development. Because this study
is based upon a premise that sexual identity is a process that takes place across the
lifespan, it is hoped that findings presented here would be useful in a wide range of
settings. However, given both the cultural expectation and the current reality that many
American, college-age students are grappling with issues of sexual identity, the findings
of this study seem particularly useful to those of us working in a college setting.

Perhaps the first implication that this study has for the ways in which we work
with others is to challenge us to be reflective about our own sexual identities and
assumptions. This study supports the notions that we, as educators and members of other
“helping professions”, do not stand on neutral ground, but are embedded in our own
historical and cultural realities when it comes to sexual identity. Clearly there is a
relationship between the depth of our understandings of our biases and our ability to
understand and help others deal effectively with the challenges of sexual identity
development. If, as the social constructionist theory that supports this study contends,
sexual identity is indeed an on-going negotiation rather than a one-time self-discovery
then the implications for our own identities are profound. We must be prepared not only
to help others whose identities are “developing”, but to remain open to the sometimes
uncomfortable possibility that our own identities may shift in the process.
This study points to a shift in our role as teachers and members of the helping profession. Whereas stage models would encourage us to support students along a particular path to a stable end-point, this study highlights the importance of helping students to find equilibrium. For one student this might mean an unchanging relationship to a particular identity, but for another it might mean multiple changes in identity. "Health" is no longer defined as a stable end-point identity, but instead can be measured by the state of equilibrium that is achieved between an individual and the social sexual category that s/he applies to him/herself. It also becomes our role to encourage society to make available the social sexual categories that seem to best speak to the experiences of our students.

This research challenges us to simultaneously assume sexual identity while calling it into question. The results of this study support the assumption that most all of the people we encounter will have sexual identities, but that the meanings of these identities may be in flux, varying from person to person, from time to time, from culture to culture. For example, one needs to recognize the role that oppression has played in the sexual identity of one person, while leaving open the possibility that another's identity process has taken place outside of the constraints of oppression. One needs to accept the existence of a stable, unchanging identity for one individual, while allowing for a fluid, flexible identity for another.

The findings of this study remind us that the identities of our students emerge and are transformed as we place them, and they place themselves, in various situations. To the degree that we create these identity-transforming situations, we must take some responsibility for helping students to negotiate the potentially unsettling shake-up of their meaning-making systems. As teachers and members of the "helping professions" it is
necessary to understand that searching for sexual identity today means doing so in a world of conceptual confusion, disagreement and change (Rust, 1992). As well as challenging students, we need to support them as they develop not only their sexual identities, but their ability to manage the complexity and contradictions that come with the terrain of sexual identity.

It is important that we explore with students the wide variety of ways to conceive of sexuality and therefore to construct their own sexual identity. By helping students to anticipate and deal with paradoxes and confusions, by helping them to see themselves not as “finished products” but as “on-going processes”, we can build their critical thinking abilities and prepare them not only for the contemporary sexual identity journey, but the complex and ever-changing world in which they are living.

A potentially fluid sexual identity model poses some serious dilemmas not only for ourselves and our students, but also for social action movements and psychological theories based on the notion of a common, stable sexual identity. Broader and more fluid notions of identity threaten not only personal identities, but communities, social networks and politics. Changing the sexual identity labels and categories involves more than semantics. The distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual, “oppressor” and “oppressed”, is a cornerstone of the gay liberation movement. By implying that there is not only no common route to gay identity, but no common gay identity to speak of, this study can be seen to undermine much of contemporary gay politics. I would contend, however, that change efforts and social policy are only effective when they reflect the experiences of those they wish to “liberate”. The results of this study point to a need for a much more complex and multidimensional approach to sexuality whether our efforts are aimed at education, counseling, or social change.
Implications of Findings for Studies of Sexual Identity

The fact that this study revealed such a range of sexual identity shifts and changes suggests that future studies might uncover interesting findings by focusing explicitly on variations in the sexual identity process. By looking for variations rather than patterns of similarity we might get a better understanding of the role of unique individual temperaments, experiences and beliefs in sexual identity development. By exploring differences we might expose the impact of societal expectations that either encourage or discourage exploration and change at particular points in the life cycle. By problematizing universal notions of sexual identity we might find particular historical and cultural trends that encourage sexual identity differentiation or promote sexual identity same-ness. The options are fascinating and endless.

This study points to the importance that sexual identity functions serve for the individual...either limiting or creating the dissonance that leads to identity changes. Given that the sexual feelings and behaviors of individuals who identify themselves as homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual are frequently indistinguishable (Klein, et. al. 1985, Rust, 1992, Weinberg, et. al. 1994), the notion of sexual identity functions seems all the more important. We need to look at the functions that sexuality serves for not only the individual, but for the community as well.

Valerie Jenness, in her study of lesbian identities and the categorization problem, states that

[w]e are active in the establishment of our identities as we undergo changes in our knowledge base, including our understanding and interpretations of social categories and ourselves as instances of them. As our understandings of the meanings associated with the kinds of people it is possible to be in society undergo substantive changes, we continually reassess the personal applicability of any given category. (Jenness 1992, p. 69).
This study reinforces the notion that, although we are impacted profoundly by our culture’s construction of sexual categories, we are also “active in the establishment of our identities”. Clearly it was an active choice of all of the research participants to enroll in the Netherlands program and thereby leave themselves open to changes in their “knowledge base”. Certainly our understanding of sexual identity development would be furthered greatly by future studies that explored in depth the role that individuals plays in impacting their sexual identity journey.

Clearly this study was informed by the application of Piagetian principles of cognitive development to the domain of sexual identity. It was only after applying Piaget’s mechanisms of development to the data that I had available, that facilitating conditions for identity change began to emerge. This study would suggest further research that links the theories of cognitive development to the study of sexual identity. Clearly, this research could be furthered by the application of Piagetian measures to the study of sexual identity development.

Back in 1975 Ken Plummer, in his symbolic interactionist account of the developmental process of homosexual identity formation, speculated that change in society’s attitudes towards homosexuality could lead to change in the process by which one establishes one’s identity (Plummer, 1975). Twenty five years later, we may be experiencing such a change in both attitudes and identity...at least in places such as the Netherlands. Certainly, cross-cultural studies are one way to further illuminate the contextual process of sexual identity. I would hope that such studies are on the horizon.

**Final Statement**

According to the results of this dissertation, sexual identity shifts and changes can best be understood in the context of a larger discussion of individual sexual identity
functions and their role in the creation of cognitive dissonance or equilibrium for each individual. Thomas Bidell and Kurt Fischer, both neo-Piagetians concerned with context-specific cognitive development, offer an analogy which they use to conceptualize and describe change over time. Applying their analogy to this study allows us to envision students' sexual identity development as a constructive process in which both the student and Dutch culture contributed to the shape and direction of the developmental pathway. Clearly, the data presented in this study supports this notion that development, in this case sexual identity development, should be viewed as an intricate web-building process in which, “each strand is determined jointly by the current position of the web builder and available environmental support on which the strand is built” (Bidell and Fischer, 1992, p. 27).


