Construction of Gay and Lesbian Identities

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I've been gay ever since I've known me.—Study participant in Queer by Choice

Is sexual identity genetically determined? Is it melded in the rolling crucible of early childhood experience? Is it a mutable discursive construction, susceptible to language and cultural reinvention? Or does sexual identity dwell in a hidden mystical dimension of the self, impervious to all but the invincible will of desire? To be sure, few topics rival the complexity of sexual identity formation or generate questions so laden with philosophical significance. Fewer still mobilize the feverish affect we have witnessed in the last quarter-century.

In the almost 25 years since gay rights advocates lobbied successfully for the removal of homosexuality from DSM-III's canon of psychological disorders, the nation has witnessed a sea change in lesbian and gay politics and "queer" scholarship. Hundreds of thousands marched on Washington in 1987 and 1993, demanding full enfranchisement for lesbian, gay, and bisexual citizens. Colorado passed, and later overturned, antigay legislation.

The President endorsed the U.S. military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. Members of the far right wing orchestrated antigay initiatives in a number of states. Direct action organizations—ACT UP, Queer Nation, and the Lesbian Avengers—established the radical wing of a largely assimilationist lesbian and gay rights movement. Within the movement, transgender issues gained new prominence. And Hawaii's Supreme Court began deliberating the legalization of same-sex marriages.

Concurrent with these political developments were salient advances in lesbian and gay scholarship. Social scientists set about proving the genetic etiology of homosexuality. Meanwhile, those in the cross-disciplinary field of cultural studies questioned the utility of biological research and focused rather on the creation of "queer" identities, cultures, and languages, thus inaugurating the now burgeoning arena of "queer theory."

The three publications under consideration here are emblematic of this broad spectrum of scholarship. Advancing different epistemological agendas, each text grapples with the construction and articulation of lesbian and gay identities in the late 20th century. Two are of greater interest to mental health professionals, particularly when read in tandem.

Richard Isay's latest book sets forth an eloquent personally and clinically informed model of normal gay male development. Drawing on 30 years' experience as a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist, Dr. Isay, a prominent early apologist for a gay affirmative and politically responsible psychotherapy, continues in Becoming Gay the project he began in his first book, Being Homosexual.

Aptly enough, Isay distinguishes between being homosexual, a constitutional state, and becoming gay, a process by which homosexual men assume an ego-syntonic identity. Says Isay, "Although clinical observation and empirical studies suggest that we are born homosexual, my work with gay men has made it clear that we become gay." Isay has observed that in order to live healthy, fulfilling lives, homosexual men must acknowledge rather than repress their homoerotic impulses, heal their internalized homophobia, form loving relationships with other men, and create congruence between their personal and private selves. His book focuses on the developmental challenges of adolescence and old age, the resolution of injuries caused by homophobia in families and society at large, the exigencies of HIV-AIDS, and the often difficult task faced by homosexual men in heterosexual marriages. In addition, Isay entertains professionals to oppose institutional homophobia and chronicles his own arduous personal and professional journey to self-acceptance.

In Becoming Gay, Isay hopes "to help clinicians identify . . . aspects of the lives of their homosexual patients that may have kept them from affirming themselves and feeling positively about their gay identity." Moreover, the author directs this work to a larger audience of gay men. Written in clear, accessible language—clearly a feat of translation given the psychodynamic constructs on which Isay bases his formulations—this book is also intended to "deepen the understanding gay men have of themselves and their development."

I predict that Isay's monograph will be gratefully received by clinicians and gay men alike, for it is poignant, informative, and effortless to read. Isay writes with elegance and clarity and begins, courageously, with his own developmental biography. He takes us from a painful unrequited love affair with his college roommate, through his classic analytic graduate training at Yale's department of psychiatry in the 1960s, to a ten-year analysis focused on decreasing his "heterosexual inhibition" and banishing all homosexual impulses. He traces a history of professional success and private despair.

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Shortly after the conclusion of his analysis, removed from the almost daily inducements of his analyst to become heterosexual, Isay begins to reclaim his disavowed homoerotic desire. Married, with two children, and in the midst of a successful career as a psychoanalyst, Isay must accomplish the Sisyphean task of coming to love himself as a gay man in a culture founded on disapprobation and rigid gender roles.

Isay moves from his personal story to a compassionate discussion of issues germane to clinicians working with gay men. Throughout the book, he uses case examples to illustrate a variety of therapeutic impasses and achievements. Although I disagreed at times with Dr. Isay's analytic formulations, I was thoroughly captivated by the case studies and convinced by his careful scholarship and impressive candor. In light of the alarmingly disproportionate number of gay and lesbian youths who commit suicide, I found the chapter on gay adolescents to be particularly salient and helpful. This chapter, in fact, promoted a breakthrough in one of my own cases.

Paradoxically, my criticisms of Becoming Gay also compel my enthusiastic endorsement of this work to all mental health professionals, particularly those with psychodynamic leanings. Isay attempts a noble feat in this book. He wishes to wrest homosexuality from the fortress of deviance and pathology that has so long been its domain. He indicts the American Psychoanalytic Association for its collusion with homophobia and inveighs against the seemingly intransigent notion that homosexuality is the result of oedipal failure.

To do this, Isay skillfully deploys some rather controversial—some would say specious—genetic research that suggests a biological basis for homosexuality in men. Although I recognize the impetus to invoke the legitimizing sanction of science, I believe it to be a strategy that ultimately promotes rather serious epistemic foreclosures in the breadth and depth of our understanding of gay identities. For example, what about those gay men who do not share a "typical" developmental profile? Is their gayness less real?

On the research level, Isay's clinical observations, while provocative and convincing, are nonetheless limited in generalizability. On another, more theoretical level, the author elides lesbian identity by using genetic studies conducted almost exclusively on men. Obviously, Isay has chosen to focus solely on gay men in this book, and he cannot be faulted for things beyond the scope of his study. However, if his tacit goal is to reformulate the etiology of homosexuality, then it would behoove him to mention women. His own case could be strengthened by acknowledging the controversy surrounding the "gay gene" theory. Without at least a sideways glance at the detractors of biological determinism—many of whom are lesbian feminists—Isay has written an unacknowledged polemic.

Becoming Gay, however, is an excellent and much-needed polemic. It is a milestone and a generous gift of self that deserves a place of prominence on the reading lists of all conscientious clinicians. In times of increasing violence and hatred toward gay men and lesbians, Isay's book can attenuate the symptoms of despair. Indeed, Dr. Isay has given the field a masterfully concocted antidote to the scourge of homophobia in clinical settings and beyond.

Although quite a different sort of inoculation, Vera Whisman's cultural-studies interpretation of qualitative research conducted in the late 1980s is a significant and long-awaited contribution to the study of lesbian and gay identities. Whisman, a professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, has published an intellectually rigorous analysis of the discursive and thus political function of choice versus determinism in the accounts of 72 self-identified lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men from a variety of demographic cohorts.

Whisman sets out in Queer by Choice to test the hypothesis that "many lesbians and gay men exercise more choice [in the formation of their lesbian or gay identities] than they believe or are willing to say." Her findings, although admittedly limited by sampling strategy and study design, suggest a statistically (and politically) significant discrepancy in the accounts of lesbians and gay men with regard to their identity formation.

To oversimplify, Whisman finds that lesbians are more likely than gay men to admit that aspects of choice influenced their identity formation. Whisman takes issue with the widespread essentialist notion that there are "real" gay men and lesbians who follow a developmental trajectory that starts with early gender nonconformity in childhood and progresses to something like Isay's "consolidation of a stable and irreversible sexual identity."

Indeed, Whisman's somewhat obviously souped-up doctoral dissertation is worth the intellectual work it requires precisely because it makes problematic the very things Isay's book takes for granted. She calls into question a number of claims: that homosexuality has a genetic basis; that it is desirable to build a movement for social change around the notion of an immutable, biologically determined status; that such a thing as normative development exists; and that putatively normal gay male developmental milestones can be usefully applied to lesbians.

Whisman fearlessly recuperates a feminist-informed critical theory and throws a wrench into the apparent political unity of lesbians and gay men. Although she recognizes the value of this unity, the author demarcates differences between lesbians and gay men. She legitimizes women's more fluid, changeable accounts of sexuality.

Special section on gender issues . . .

Gender issues, including gender identity choice, portrayals of women, and research on homosexuality, are the topic of this special section of book reviews.
Whisman further insists that women who come late to their lesbian identity, women who consciously choose to be with women, and women who form erotic attachments to both men and women are no less “real” lesbians than those who knew early that they were lesbian or those who have taken vows to be timeless and exclusively lesbian. She demonstrates how the notion of “real” lesbian identity capitulates to a dominant gay male ideal that ignores the particular effects of compulsory heterosexuality for women under capitalist patriarchy.

Furthermore, Whisman’s research disrupts the binary imperative of sexual preference. She calls into question the dichotomy of heterosexual versus homosexual and suggests that sexual identities are indeed multiple, flexible, and amenable to discursive appropriation. With characteristic intellectual care, she ultimately concedes the diffusion of multiple theoretical and political strategies in lesbian and gay identity politics.

Because of its cross-disciplinary approach, Whisman’s Queer by Choice may not be the first choice of some mental health professionals wanting to learn more about lesbian and gay identities. However, Whisman largely succeeds in skirting the structure-laden Scylla of sociology-speak and the Charybdis of cultural-studies obscurity. She provides an excellent example of ethnographically informed qualitative research and repays in theoretical epiphanies the sometimes arduous interpretive work her readers must do.

Most mental health professionals, save those devoted to new developments in narrative and constructionist theory, will not be similarly rewarded by the anthology Beyond the Lavender Lexicon. Aside from its disciplinary insularity, this collection of essays, edited by the well-known anthropologist William Leap, suffers at times from linguistic obscurity and markedly different levels of scholarship.

The essays in this collection attempt to “describe how lesbians and gay men use language in everyday life, and how particular forms of discourse and text-making contribute to the construction of lesbian and gay genders and to the expression of those genders within particular cultural and social domains.” Admittedly, some of the essays in this collection are brilliant. “Supermodels of the World, Unite!” by Rusty Barrett is a fascinating and adroit critical examination of African-American drag queens’ appropriation of white women’s language. Barrett escapes the reductionism often associated with this topic. Ruth Morgan and Kathleen Wood analyze a rhythmically co-constructed narrative in “Lesbians in the Living Room” and in so doing signal the birth of “queer linguistics.”

The essays of Roman Graf and Barbara Lippa, Jason Cromwell, and Ralph Bolton also contribute notably to this worthwhile endeavor. Other essays in the anthology address cross-cultural inflections of homosexuality and expand the known world of gay and lesbian identities. Leap’s introduction itself is pithy and provocative.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Beyond the Lavender Lexicon is its unapologetic foregrounding of gay and lesbian cultures and languages and its repudiation of the notion that queer cultures are subcultures, that queer languages are dialects. But while the anthology attempts to preserve self-determination and the legitimacy of lesbian and gay languages—many of the essays are apparently unedited personal accounts and experiences—its own linguistic inaccessibility undermines the very ethnographic task it sets out to accomplish. At the risk of sounding anti-intellectual—a charge readily meted out to critics of poststructuralist scholarship—I found many of the essays, despite pretensions of complexity, to be poorly rather than complexly written. If the lavender lexicon and its successors wish to reach their audience, they must do so in clearer terms.

Although I recommend Becoming Gay and Queer by Choice more highly than Beyond the Lavender Lexicon, all of these new works represent momentous advances in our understanding of lesbian and gay identities. For this, all deserve high praise.

Women, Men, and Gender: Ongoing Debates
edited by Mary Roth Walsh; New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1997, 445 pages, $45 hardcover, $20 softcover

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The book Women, Men, and Gender: Ongoing Debates, edited by Mary Roth Walsh, is a highly informative review of current debates in the field of gender issues. The major appeal of the book derives from the format chosen by the editor. As she successfully did in her previous book on the psychology of women (1), Dr. Walsh has selected intensely controversial issues and presented them in a debate format—for instance “Biological Causation: Are Gender Differences Wired Into Our Biology?”—with responses on both sides. The field covered by the various questions is vast, ranging from fundamental research topics to changes in today’s society. Yet despite the breadth of the subject, the questions remain focused and precisely defined so that the risk of meaningless generalizations is avoided.

The book is divided into eight parts, each grouping two or three debate questions according to a common theme—for instance, power and influence strategies, sexuality, violence, the workplace, and psychotherapy. As much as is possible in one book, the themes adequately cover the major topics currently debated in the field of gender issues.

The choice of the debate format

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