

HUMAN SEXUALITY, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

The essentialist / social constructionist controversy and the methodological problem of studying 'sexuality' in the New Testament and its world

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1. Introduction¹

Of late, there has been a marked proliferation of literature concerning the issue of sexuality in the New Testament and its world. Much of this work was stimulated by the societal and ecclesiastical debates concerning contemporary issues of sexual ethics, especially homosexuality. Strangely enough, most of these publications pay little or no attention to the relevant theoretical debate in the historical and social sciences where the study of 'sexual matters' in historical and cross-cultural perspective (which is, after all, what the historical study of the New Testament is concerned with), as well as the associated methodological problems, have been the subject of intense scholarly discussion during the last twenty odd years.² As a result, historical and cross-cultural scholarship tends to be much more sophisticated and methodologically sound than the field of New Testament Studies. This is despite the fact that recent trends in New Testament scholarship have shown a remarkable predilection for methodological issues.

It is a curious fact, then, that the issue of human sexuality has been largely excluded from such theoretical reflections. Works on 'matters sexual' are routinely produced without the slightest hint of methodological considerations. For instance, Scroggs' well-known and still widely used, pioneering book *The New Testament and Homosexuality* does not offer any theoretical reflection on what 'sexuality' is or on how one ought to study 'sexuality in history' (apart from some short 'psychological reflections'; 1983:145-9). The same applies to Furnish's study (1985:52-82), partially taking its cue from Scroggs' work, and Edward's book (1984). Since these were published in the early 1980's, this is perhaps understandable. It is a little disconcerting, however, that more recent works appear to continue along these lines. To give a few random examples: Countryman's innovative book *Dirt, Greed and Sex* (1988) views sexual issues through the lens of purity and therefore, perhaps justifiably so, also does not see the need for methodological reflections on the study of sexuality in history. Deming's book on marriage and celibacy in 1 Cor 7 (1995) and Rosner's study of Paul's ethics and use of scripture in 1 Cor 5-7 (1995) inevitably touch on 'sexual issues', but the authors perhaps feel that these do not lie at the very heart of the study; hence no methodological discussion. Similarly, Kirchoff's study of PORNE and PORNEIA in 1 Cor 6:12-20 (1994) is lacking methodological concern, and so is Callan's book on psychological aspects of Paul's life, which includes a chapter on the psychological

1 Several people have helped me to refine my thinking on the theoretical issues discussed in this essay, but I would like to thank Mr. Michael Lambert of the Dept. of Classics, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in particular. The theoretical reflections in this essay underpin work I have presented elsewhere (1994, 1995, 1996; cf. Lambert & Szesnat 1994).

2 For instance: Boswell (1980, 1989, 1989a, 1990b, 1994); Halperin (1990); Halperin, Winkler & Zeitlin (1990); D'Emilio & Freedman (1988); Faderman (1981); Jeffreys (1985, 1990); Richlin (1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993a, 1993b); Skinner (1996). The University of Chicago Press now publishes a quarterly journal called the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. - On the closely related issue of gender, there is obviously an even greater proliferation of writings.

interpretation of 'sexuality' in Paul's letters (1990:51-77). There do not appear to be any recent substantial monographs specifically on the field of 'sexuality in the New Testament', but a number of recent articles may be referred to. A good example is one of DeYoung's articles on topics related to 'homosexuality and the New Testament' (1988). DeYoung's work betrays no awareness of the problems associated with the study of sexuality in history: homosexuality appears to him as the same phenomenon, whether we talk about classical Greece, Palestinian Judaism in the Roman period, or contemporary societies. Commenting on Scroggs' suggestion (1983) that Paul's denunciation of same-sex relations is concerned with exploitative pederasty or prostitution as opposed to a relationship of an adult with another adult, based on mutual consent, DeYoung writes:

Scrogg's position suggests that the model of adult mutuality was unknown or little known in ancient times. Yet if it exists now, it certainly existed then. Man's nature has not changed... (1988:440).

DeYoung's virulently homophobic attitude aside, the basic assumption underlying this statement is shared by many other writers in the field although he spells this out more openly than most: sexuality is the essentially same in all historical periods and cultures; it is not a social phenomenon as such, but rather a 'natural given' (and hence does not require theoretical consideration). It appears to make no difference whether the general attitude of a writer is homophobic or not; pro-gay / lesbian liberation or not; radical, liberal, or conservative; fundamentalist or historical-critical; or whether it is felt that the Bible has a direct word for sexual matters today or not: with few notable exceptions,³ theoretical reflections or even an indication of awareness of methodological problems are usually absent.⁴ I hasten to add that this does not *eo ipso* make all of these studies entirely valueless. Nevertheless, it opens the door to a serious, fundamental misunderstanding of ancient cultures and their texts, as exemplified by DeYoung.

It is this very basic assumption about human sexuality, then, that I wish to query in this essay. In order to note some basic aspects of this complex field of sexuality, history and culture, I will discuss the controversy concerning essentialism and social constructionism in respect of human sexuality.⁵ Although this controversy is highly relevant for the whole, complex issue of sexuality in history (Padgug 1989:58-60), much of the following discussion will focus on 'homosexuality', as this is perhaps the best example of this controversy at this time: it is usually at the borderlines or seams of what a contemporary society deems to be 'typical' (ie. norms of dominant societal discourse) that the importance of theoretical perspectives become most patently obvious.

2. Social constructionist versus essentialist perspectives

Essentialism, very briefly, refers to a view that given phenomena in human beings can

3 Brooten (1985, 1992); Boyarin (1993, 1994, 1995); Fulkerson (1993); Martin (1995); Petersen (1986); Reiss (1994); Smith (1991); Stegemann (1993); cf. also Heyward in the systematic field (1994). To varying degrees, these authors show an awareness of the methodological problems of the study of sexuality in history, although none of them attempts a detailed study of this historiographical problem.

4 For example: Ukleja (1983); Hays (1986); Osten-Sacken (1986); Malick (1993a, 1993b); Siker (1994); Miller (1995), as well as those cited above.

5 Naturally, I do not claim to address all pertinent aspects of historiographical concern. Many other questions need exploration, such as the relationship of gender and sexuality in historical perspective. The problems discussed in this paper form just one aspect (albeit a crucial one) of the necessary methodological reflections that Biblical scholars must take into account to avoid the continued use of a fundamentally ahistorical approach.

be understood with reference to an inherent 'essence' residing in the individual.⁶ Social constructionism,⁷ on the other hand, refers to the view that the very same phenomena ought to be understood as social constructs. For a number of reasons, the very terms 'essentialist / essentialism' and 'social constructionist / social constructionism' (often simply referred to as 'constructionism') are problematic. First of all, they appear to refer to definite 'camps' or 'schools of thought' to which individual scholars or works can be attributed. However, theoretical positions on human sexuality are often not clear-cut and straightforward. Therefore, essentialism and social constructionism should be thought of as extremes on a continuum, although this continuum is not linear but multi-dimensional (one's view might entail some strong essentialist and some strong social constructionist aspects at the same time).⁸ Thus Epstein suggests that one should think of both essentialism and social constructionism not as 'a specific school, but rather as a broader tendency of thinking that has found representations in a number of disciplines. (1987:14) In order to reflect this, I propose to use the terms essentialist and social constructionist *perspectives*.⁹

The terminology is also problematic on another level: it was coined by one of the two sides only (i.e. social constructionists). Some claim that an 'ideal essentialist' has been created by social constructionists in order to serve as a 'bogey-man' (cf. Stein 1990:326-7; Boswell 1989:34-35): this is necessary for the sake of symmetry in the controversy, argues Dynes (1990:216-7), but not fair to the actual positions held by such scholars. Indeed, social constructionists in the historical and social sciences are sometimes hard pressed to label recent research as purely 'essentialist': for instance, in the historical field, often the only recent, substantial work that is mentioned is Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980). Whether this label is fair to Boswell is another matter; what is important here is that those criticized by social constructionists feel that the label does not accurately describe their positions. Nevertheless, I would argue that the terms are still useful for the purpose of analysis,¹⁰ as long as one examines each position carefully to avoid labelling complex positions with simplistically conceptualised terminology.

To some extent, the division between essentialists and social constructionists reflects the old 'nature - nurture' debate: the question as to the extent of the influence of the environment on the individual, as opposed to hereditary influences (cf. Epstein 1987:13; Halperin 1990:42; Stein 1990:329-30).¹¹ On the other hand, some liken the debate to the controversy between 'nominalists' and 'realists', originating in the middle ages (Boswell 1989:18-19; cf. Hacking 1986, Weinrich 1987; Epstein 1987:13). Nevertheless, for the purpose of clarity, one should take care not to reduce the essentialist / social constructionist controversy to either of these earlier debates as they do not really concern exactly the same complex range of arguments (cf. Stein 1990:326-7; Weinrich 1987:87).¹²

6 For a more detailed analysis of social constructionist approaches in general, see for instance Burr (1995) and Holstein & Miller (1993).

7 The adjective 'social' is to be understood in its widest possible sense, incorporating for instance cultural, political, and economic aspects.

8 See Epstein (1987:11-12) for some examples of popular 'mixing' of perspectives in what he calls 'folk beliefs'. Sometimes, this mix of social constructionist and essentialist tendencies is a result of a conscious decision in favour of a (politically motivated) 'strategic essentialism' (see below).

9 My choice of the term 'perspective' takes its cue from Elliott's social-scientific distinction between 'perspectives', 'models', and 'paradigms' (1986:7).

10 Greenberg usefully refers to essentialist positions as an 'ideal type' in a Weberian sense (1988:485n4).

11 Of course, the underlying assumption of a simplistic dichotomy of 'nature' and 'culture' must be challenged by more recent work on the conception of 'nature' and 'culture' in philosophy as well as the natural sciences (eg. Macdonald 1993; Bleier 1984; Birke 1986; Rose, Lewontin & Kamin 1984; cf. also MacCormack & Strathern 1980). See also the 'postmodern debate' on the nature / culture dichotomy (eg. Phelan 1993).

12 The following discussion of essentialist and social constructionist views is necessarily a generalising one

3. Essentialist perspectives

Few, if any scholars who participate in the theoretical controversy concerning 'essentialism / social constructionism' would identify themselves as essentialists. The 'ideal essentialist' (as portrayed by social constructionists) oftentimes reflects unconsidered popular sentiment rather than substantial, conscious scholarly theoretical works of the last fifteen years or so. Nevertheless, to work with an essentialist perspective is still generally considered to be 'normal' (therefore supposedly not requiring any methodological reflection):

For all of us, essentialism was our first way of thinking about sexuality and still remains the hegemonic one in [Western] culture. (Vance 1989:14)

Hence, scholars who do not present methodological reflections are invariably essentialist in their basic perspective. There is a considerable body of wider scholarship which comes very close to this 'unreflected, popular understanding' (in the historical field, see the obvious examples of Rowse 1977 and Africa 1980), a position which can be called 'naive essentialism' (Donaldson & Dynes 1990:1333; cf. Escoffier 1992:17). As I indicated earlier, much of what New Testament scholarship has to offer at the moment also falls into this category. It is this broader term, 'naive essentialism' (as opposed to more complex positions such as Boswell's or Stein's), which I will mainly discuss here.

Basic essentialist notions

An essentialist perspective on human sexuality, is, generally speaking, an approach which regards 'sexuality' as a fixed, given entity in every human being. It finds representation in a number of different, though often related forms of viewing human sexuality, says Vance (1989:84):

a belief that human behavior is 'natural', predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanisms and thus not subject to change; or the notion that human behaviors which show some similarity in form are the same, an expression of an underlying human drive or tendency. Behaviors that share an outward similarity can be assumed to share an underlying essence and meaning.

As a result, sexuality is usually treated as some kind of a biological force where the sexual identities of individuals are considered as 'cognitive realizations of genuine, underlying differences' (Epstein 1987:11). Essentialists often (though not necessarily) presume a biological essence (hormonal, genetic, etc.):

In the beginning were the birds and the bees ... and the genes and the genitals and the protozoa. Every sexuality textbook gives the same testimony. The privileged position of biology in [essentialist] sexual discourse is based on the assumption that the body comes before everything else; it is the original source of action, experience, knowledge, and meaning for the species and the individual. (Tiefer 1990:312).

An essentialist form of psychoanalytical thought would presume sexual drives inherent in the individual which must be controlled or channeled. Essentialists would generally argue that human beings have some kind of innate 'sexual essence of being' (including *inter alia* a sexual orientation), which of course may be shaped differently by their environment, resulting in the variety of sexual behaviour in different cultures. Naive

which sometimes conflates positions propounded by different theorists. Both perspectives can be analysed to show distinct types of somewhat different essentialist / social constructionist views (cf. Boswell 1989, 1990a; Stein 1990).

essentialist positions are often tied to biological determinism: gender is seen as grounded in sexual anatomy, and both are perceived as a 'natural given'. Such views allow superficially powerful 'arguments from nature / creation' to be used to legitimate particular social structures and relations (cf. Rose, Lewontin & Kamin 1984; Szesnat 1995:37).

With regard to the modern notion of a 'sexual orientation',

essentialist theory will look for culture-independent, objective and intrinsic properties -- what might be called 'deep properties' -- which are involved in sexual orientation. (Stein 1990:338)

Therefore, the very terms 'homo- / heterosexuality' are a reference to universally applicable, culturally independent aspects or properties of human beings (Halperin 1990:41). Essentialists typically assume that the categories 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' 'reflect an underlying reality of difference' (Epstein 1987:13; cf. De Cecco & Elia 1993:2-4; Rubin 1984:275-6). Boswell, for instance, regards homosexuality as 'a human attribute varying in its occurrence and manifestations from one person or culture to another.' (1989:27) In this sense, an essentialist perspective typically views sexuality as an ontological category: sexuality is perceived as part of the 'innermost core' or 'being' of humans. Of particular importance in this regard is the notion of a sexual identity, which is supposed to shape 'what we really are' (see Weeks 1987).

Essentialist history, contemporary politics, and the sexual subject's desire for history

Important for historical studies is that essentialists would generally assume that human sexuality is a transhistorical and transcultural entity. To write such an history of sexuality is therefore little more than 'an account of reactions to those basic biological givens' (Weeks 1991:153). Since in many cultures, throughout the ages, there is evidence that human beings have had sexual relations with members of the same sex, categories such as 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' (or 'gay' and 'straight') are generally assumed to be transhistorical and transcultural. From an essentialist perspective, 'homosexuality' may take various different 'forms' in different times and cultures, but it can still be seen, described, and analysed as 'homosexuality'. As a result, some 'naive essentialists' tend to regard certain historical figures as gays or lesbians (e.g. Sappho or Plato), sometimes in the attempt to create 'affectional ancestors' or role models (Dynes 1990:215; Duberman, Vicinus & Chauncey 1989:3). On a more sophisticated level, it is possible to write a 'history of gay people' as 'minority history' (Boswell 1980).

Scholars working from an essentialist perspective thus tend to stress continuity between cultures and ages. Hence the claim, for instance, that 'homosexuality has always been with us; it has been a constant in history' (Bullough, quoted in Halperin 1990:159n21). As we will see later on, social constructionists regard this transhistorical / transcultural continuity as a misinterpretation of the historical evidence (cf. Roscoe 1988:7). D'Emilio refers to this critically as the

historical myth that enjoys nearly universal acceptance in the gay movement, the myth of the 'eternal homosexual' (1983:101; cf. 1986).

Social constructionists would argue that the (politically legitimate) interest in writing 'popular minority history' results is problematic because of its tendency to override the serious theoretical problems of essentialism. This leads us to a political problem, namely the 'sexual subject's desire for history' (Vance 1989:27): the politically (and emotionally) legitimate desire of oppressed people to look for 'a history of our own', where this history

is used to support present activism in fighting discrimination and in asserting human rights today (cf. D'Emilio 1986; Epstein 1987; Weeks 1991:155-6). Critics of the social constructionist perspective on sexuality sometimes claim that 'constructionism deprives gay people of history and heritage' (Boswell 1990a:74), just as some feminist critics of a social constructionist perspective on gender argue that this potentially destroys women's history (eg Richlin 1993a; but see Scott 1993; Skinner 1996).

Of course, 'negative' political and social implications of theories do not disqualify them as such (cf. D'Emilio 1986; Greenberg 1988:492-3). Nevertheless, it is clear that to tackle essentialist basics is to raise serious contemporary problems; it is to deal with real life-problems of real people (cf. De Cecco & Elia 1993:15-18). Working with this or that theory / perspective is not merely an important theoretical decision; it has significant political implications (hence the difficulties of writers like Epstein 1987; cf. Cohen 1990, 1991). We will return to this problem later on.

4. Social constructionist perspectives

The term social constructionism should not be taken to imply that scholars working with such a label show uniformity: they often have very different intellectual backgrounds. Among these are: sociological labelling theory (McIntosh 1981 [original: 1968]; Plummer 1981a, 1981b) and symbolic interactionist approaches (Gagnon & Simon 1973; Plummer 1982); the reinterpretation and development of Freud's psychoanalytic work, especially by Lacan (1977), and by feminist scholars since the 1970's (Mitchell 1974; Turkle 1979); the work of Foucault, especially since the publication of the first volume of his planned multi-volume *History of Sexuality* (French original 1976; 1978, 1985a, 1985b, 1986); and socio-anthropological research (e.g. Mead 1928, 1935, 1949; Evans-Pritchard 1970), more particularly during more recent years (e.g. Ortner & Whitehead 1981; Blackwood 1985; Herdt 1981, 1982, 1984, 1987).

Of course, there is a wider philosophical background which includes Berger and Luckmann's seminal work *The social construction of reality* (1966), as social constructionist approaches have been developed for a wide array of fields of study (cf. Gergen 1985a). Of great importance in this connection is also feminist work on gender and sexuality over the last three decades, which has significantly influenced and shaped much of the contemporary debate.¹³

Basic social constructionist notions

In general, a social constructionist perspective on human sexuality maintains that 'sexuality' is a social construct. 'Sexuality' as such is not an independent category, objectively definable in every cultural and historical context: each culture determines what is 'sexual' and what is not -- indeed, cultures determine whether anything like a concept of 'sexuality' exists at all (Padgug 1989). Hence, as Epstein observes,

constructionists propose that sexuality should be investigated on the level of subjective meaning. Sexual acts have no inherent meaning, and in fact, no act is inherently sexual. Rather, in the course of interactions and over the course of time, individuals and societies spin webs of significance around the realm designated as 'sexual'. People learn to be sexual ... in the same way as they learn everything else. (1987:14; emphasis retained)

¹³ As Richlin (1991, 1992a, 1992b) for instance rightly pointed out, there has been a tendency to ignore or downplay such feminist work by some scholars working from a postmodern / Foucauldian perspective.

Categories and concepts employed in different cultures (such as sexuality, orgasm, desire) are not universal, objective notions but represent socio-cultural attempts to organise human experience (Tiefer 1990:304-5). Social relations in all their diversity (even within a single culture) significantly shape human experience, organisation and perception of sexuality (1986:57). However, as Weeks argues, this is a very complex process, far from a simplistic 'society moulds sexuality' idea. As a result, essentialist perspectives are criticised as reductionist and deterministic (Weeks 1986:15-16). Richardson (1984:85-6) summarises this critique:

there is no necessary relationship between a particular pattern of sexual behaviour and the taking on of a particular sexual identity ... what is crucial is the meaning that individuals ascribe to their sexual feelings, activity and relationships.

In historical terms, Padgug notes an important consequence of this perspective (1989:57-8): the fact that certain different

societies share general sexual forms, do not make the contexts and meaning of these impulses and forms identical or undifferentiated. They must be carefully distinguished and separately understood, since their inner structures and social meanings and articulations are very different ... Sexual categories do not make manifest essences implicit within individuals, but are the expression of the active relationships of the members of entire groups and collectivities.

For a 'history of sexuality' this means that the subject itself ('sexuality') is in constant flux: in a sense, such a history does not have a proper subject, stable and easily identifiable (Weeks 1986:21).

How, then, is 'sexuality' to be conceptualised? The modern, Western notion that there is a sexual identity to be acquired by each individual, is suspect from a social constructionist perspective; the universalisation of notions like 'sexual identity', 'sexual orientation', and, ultimately, 'sexuality' itself, is questioned: these very categories and their histories become the focus of research (Chauncey, Duberman & Vicinus 1989:6). Of course, this is not an entirely new idea. In an important feminist work originally published more than twenty years ago, Oakley for instance wrote (1985:96):

'sex' is not a particularly useful word in the analysis of cultures. To survive, a culture must reproduce, and copulation is the only way. But what is defined as 'sexual' in content or implication varies infinitely from one culture to another or within the same culture in different historical periods.

This profound ambiguity of what different cultures regard as 'sexual' leads us to an important problem. The very focus of this article ('sexuality') already implies the culturally specific view that there is a 'sexuality' at all. But what is sexuality? Why focus on it at all? Why do we regard it as more important than other aspects of human life? This problem is acutely raised by radical lesbian theorists:

Many historians of lesbianism have questioned the centrality given to genital sexuality in defining the 'erotic' content of women's relationships. Indeed many of them have asked a question different from that posed by historians of men: When did desire for intimate bonds with other women -- rather than for genital contact -- become eroticized and a basis for lesbian identity? (Dubermann, Vicinus & Chauncey 1989:6)

Faderman's classic work is a good example (1981; but see already Smith-Rosenberg 1975): she challenges the 'focus on the sexual' inherent in most studies of the subject as the remains of the modern Western medical model that limits a vast spectrum of emotions to a

single focus (the sexual). Faderman questions the validity of the notion that lesbian history is restricted to women who 'had sex' (however that is to be defined -- see Richardson 1992) with other women (cf. Vicinus 1989; Rupp 1980). Consequently, she defined the term 'lesbian' as one describing

a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. (1981:17-8).

Similarly, Rich's classic essay 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence' (distinguishing sharply between lesbians and gays), prefers the notion of a 'lesbian continuum' (1980).

The terms 'sex' or 'sexuality' are hence extremely problematic if used in an unreflective manner. What is understood and regarded as 'sexual' may differ from culture to culture, and from one historical period to another. The very terms and the conceptualisation that accompanies them is not necessarily present in cultures other than the modern West. In his programmatic article first published in 1979, Padgug argues thus (1989:55-6):

The most commonly held twentieth-century assumptions about sexuality imply that it is a separate category of existence (like 'the economy', or 'the state', other supposedly independent spheres of reality), almost identical with the sphere of private life. Such a view necessitates the location of sexuality within the individual as a fixed essence, leading to a classic division of individual and society and to a variety of psychological determinism, and, often enough, to a full-blown biological determinism as well.

Sexuality, asserts Padgug, ought not to be thought of as a 'thing in itself', an object, but rather as a complex set of human interrelations and interactions (ibid. 55-56). It is for this reason that Padgug claims that (ibid. 56-7),

Biological sexuality is the necessary precondition for human sexuality. But biological sexuality is only a precondition, a set of potentialities, which is never unmediated by human reality, and which becomes transformed in qualitatively new ways in human society.

The historical and cross-cultural study of sexualities therefore must be conducted in relation to the totality of the social systems of which they are a part, including connections to issues such as power, gender, economic relations, etc. (Ross & Rapp 1981:54). Obviously, such a view rejects the (essentialist) medical model of sexuality propounded since the 19th century sexologists who stressed the role of 'sexuality' at the level of individual experience, and hence as a personal / medical issue. In many ways, this medical model has characterised much of modern, Western thinking on sexuality (Tiefer 1990:304). Sexuality, from a social constructionist perspective, is hence an 'invention' of modernity, produced by a unique historical-cultural configuration (cf. Foucault 1978, 1985a). Rather than the common essentialist view of sexuality as part / aspect / attribute of a universalised understanding of the body, a social constructionist perspective can define sexuality as representing 'the appropriation of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse' (Halperin 1993:416).

Problematising 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality'

One implication of a social constructionist perspective is that sexual behaviour and, consequently, 'sexuality' does not come in two categories only (i.e. 'homo-' and 'heterosexual'); indeed, such bipolar / binary perceptions are inherently problematic (Stein 1990:336-7). For instance, they raise the issue of the categorisation of 'bisexuals'. Simply

creating a third category ('bisexuals') does not help us any further. It is the very categorisation that presents the problem (Padgug 1989:59; cf. Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1994:312). How else do we take account of the rich variety of sexual experiences in the history of Western cultures alone (not to mention other cultures)?

Social constructionists maintain that while most known societies have examples of 'sexual' behaviour between members of the same sex, the conception of 'the homosexual' as a distinct type of person is a relatively recent phenomenon (distinction between 'act' and 'person'): while the physical acts themselves may appear to be similar, the meaning that is attached to them, and the experience connected with it, is of a different kind (Weeks 1981:81). As Weeks argued (1985:6):

There is no essence of homosexuality whose historical unfolding can be illuminated. There are only changing patterns in the organisations of desire whose specific configuration can be decoded.

Therefore, the very categories 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual'

are artifacts of specific, unique, and non-repeatable cultural and social processes ... 'constructionists' assume that sexual desires are learned and that sexual identities come to be fashioned through an individual's interaction with others (Halperin 1990:41-2).

A social constructionist critique of essentialist assumptions therefore entails the assertion that sexual categories / distinctions are basically arbitrary and not fixed or largely immutable features of humankind. Biological, medical, and psychological theories that try to 'explain homosexuality', for example, -- by means of some sort of 'drive', gene, chromosome, pre-natal brain development, etc. -- are regarded as inconclusive and, ultimately, misleading.¹⁴

Hence, while essentialists tend to try to 'explain homosexuality', many social constructionists (at least in theory) tend to 'explain heterosexuality' first, although in practice, this has only recently become the focus of research and writing: what Miller and Fowlkes found more than 15 years ago (1980) is still largely correct -- the focus of most work has been on 'deviant behaviour' rather than 'normality'.¹⁵ From a social constructionist perspective, neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality can be taken for granted; as concepts, both are basically arbitrary, and hence need to be understood in the totality of their specific social contexts. At the root of this social constructionist repositioning of the research agenda lies, of course, the rejection of the a priori assumption that (Western) heterosexuality is the 'norm' from which other forms of sexuality deviate and against which everything else is measured (cf. Weeks 1987:35; cf. Jacobs & Cromwell 1993:58-59):

The invention of a creature whose feelings were legitimately 'hetero' and 'sexual' was something new in the late Victorian night, a creature quite as unique as the 'homosexual' under the late Victorian moon... That newly invented 'heterosexual' was no more 'natural' than the 'homosexual' was 'unnatural'. To paraphrase Mae West, nature had nothing to do with it. (Jonathan Katz, cited in Weeks 1985:61).

14 Cf. Halperin (1990:49-51). For critical reviews of biological / medical explanations, see Richardson (1981:6-22); Birke (1981); Futuyama & Risch (1984); Ricketts (1985); Gooren (1988, 1990); Paul (1993); and the entire vol. 28 (1995) of the *Journal of Homosexuality* (summary by DeCecco & Parker, 1995). On the psychological / psychoanalytical side, see: Bayer (1987:15-66); Friedman (1986); Murphy (1984, 1992); Richardson (1981:23-35); Ruse (1988:21-83); Weeks (1985:127-181); Abelow (1993).

15 Cf. also the comments of Plummer (1982:229), Weeks (1985:6), and Vance (1984:8). On the task itself, see Katz (1991); Wilkinson & Kitzinger (1994); cf. Chodorow (1992), D'Emilio & Freedman (1988), Jackson (1987), Seidler (1987).

Anthropology and a social constructionist perspective

In social constructionist writings, anthropological data is frequently a reference point. Halperin provides a good idea of how this is utilised (1990:42):

patterns of sexual preference and configuration of desire vary enormously from one culture to the next. I know of no way to explain why human beings in different cultures, en masse, with distinctly different sorts of sexual dispositions, temperaments, or tastes, which they themselves consider to be normal and natural, unless I am willing to grant a determining role to social or cultural factors.

Of course, anthropological examples are notoriously problematic (cf. Greenberg 1988:77-88); they are often misunderstood, misinterpreted, and used as a quarry for anything one wishes to 'prove'. The following examples clearly do not prove that a social constructionist perspective is 'correct' but rather indicate that such a perspective can be used as a powerful analytical tool in cross-cultural research.

A popular example is the reference to the Sambia, a primitive tribe in Papua New Guinea (Melanesia). Among the Sambia, it is customary for boys to have oral sexual intercourse with older male youths on a regular basis, during which the younger boys are orally inseminated by the older men. Roles are changed around the age of fourteen to sixteen, i.e. the (now) older, adolescent, boys become the 'active', 'inserting', rather than 'passive', 'receptive', partners in this sexual contact. However, this ritualised, male same-sex intercourse ends when men get married and father children: as from that moment, male sexual behaviour is 'heterosexual' (Herdt 1981, 1993; cf. Adam 1985a). Obviously, this phenomenon is difficult to explain if one presupposes a strict 'essentialist' point of view (cf. Halperin 1990:46.49).

A lesser known anthropological example is Gay's discussion of close relationships between girls / women in Lesotho, based on her field work during the late 1970's (1985). These relationships of 'institutionalised friendships' typically occur among adolescent girls (though some continue in later life) in rural villages and are 'closely related to heterosexual courtship that becomes dominant in late adolescence.' (ibid. 97). Nevertheless, they are based more on fictive kinship (mother - daughter) than fictive marriage (husband - wife) relationships. The sexual aspects of these relationships are difficult to define or generalise (ibid. 100):

The most important aspect of mummy-baby relationships is the exchange of affection and sensual satisfaction. My informants talked invariably about gifts, letters, visits, and advice, but were invariably reticent in discussing the emotional and sensual aspects of the relationships. Yet, when conversation became really intimate, they said that, yes, this was what these relationships were really about and why they were different from ordinary friendships. One informant explained: 'Friends may visit, love each other, even give gifts now and then. But between mummies and babies it's like an affair, a romance, and being alone together to hug and kiss each other is always part of it.' (ibid. 105)

While hugging and kissing may well have meanings in traditional Basotho culture which differ somewhat from other cultures (ibid 105-6), and while most informants are reluctant to talk openly,

several younger unmarried informants said matter-of-factly that certainly [genital sexual contact] does happen, that some school girls learn to make love that way, and that they personally see nothing wrong with it. (ibid. 105-6)

However, the girls 'do not consider genital contact essential to mummy-baby relationships.' (ibid. 102) What is also significant here is that such relationships do not

cease to exist if one or both of the participants have heterosexual relationships (including marriage) at the same time (ibid. 111). Again, it is difficult to force such relationships into the Western ideological dichotomy of hetero- / homosexuality.

Concepts that appear clear-cut in the dominant discourse of one culture may be 'strangely similar, yet different' in another. The average heterosexual male in the European / North American context is usually defined as someone with an exclusive sexual interest in women. A very different picture can be found, for instance, in Nicaragua (cf. Lancaster 1987; Adam 1993; Greenberg 1988:442; Jacobs & Cromwell 1993:58). Lancaster, following fieldwork in the barrios of Managua during the period 1984-1986, analyses the socio-cultural construction of male sexuality with reference to the *cochón* and his 'heterosexual' male partner. The *cochones* come closest to what in another context would be called 'gay men': as men, they take on some socio-cultural gender characteristics of women (though open gender transgression is somewhat stigmatised); they engage in sexual intercourse with other men, but always in the 'sexually passive position' in anal intercourse when with a 'non- *cochón*'. There are interesting aspects of the *cochones* that do not match the Western 'gay' stereotype, but the most important aspect of these relations for our purposes is not the *cochón* but his male lover. In principle, any male (meaning the *machista* or *hombre-hombre*, the 'manly man') is thought to be capable of desiring to inter alia penetrate a *cochón* anally (cf. Adam 1993:174-5). Hence, men can boast in terms of their 'sexual conquests' that they have had sex with women as well as with *cochones* (Lancaster 1987:113). Important here is the 'honor' associated with penetration, and the 'shame' associated with being penetrated -- regardless of the gender of the actors (ibid. 114):

The line that this transaction draws is not between those who practice homosexual intercourse and those who do not ... but between two standardized roles in that intercourse. *Machistas* make *cochones* out of other men and each is necessary to the definition of the other in a dynamic sense that is very different from the way North American categories of the hetero- and homosexual define each other.

As a result, Lancaster argues that the terminology of hetero- and homosexuality is completely inappropriate for this phenomenon (ibid. 121):

Such terminology, even when modified, obscures more than it clarifies. Nicaragua's *cochones* are ontologically different creatures of culture than are Anglo-American homosexuals ... An altogether different word is necessary to identify the praxis implicit in machismo, whereby men may simultaneously desire to use, fear being used by, and stigmatize, other men.

The point that I wish to make with such examples is simply the problematic assumption of positing, for instance, a universal category of sexual orientation. As Halperin aptly asks (1990:46, emphasis retained):

Does the 'paederast', the classical Greek adult, married male who periodically enjoys sexually penetrating a male adolescent share the same sexuality with the 'berdache', the Native American (Indian) adult male who from childhood has taken on many aspects of a woman and is regularly penetrated by the adult male to whom he has been married in a public and socially sanctioned ceremony?

Hence many social constructionists argue that anthropological evidence tends to support the notion that different cultures not only influence but in some way 'produce' different kinds of sexualities. However, the precise process of this production is a complicated and disputed one.

The invention of 'mine marriages' on the South African gold mines

Generally, little research on specifically South African historical formations of 'sexuality' has been undertaken. However, some work has lately been done which provides a good example of historical and cross-cultural research into 'matters sexual', illustrating the importance of a social constructionist perspective beyond the European / North American context (eg. Gay's work, cited above). Historical / cross-cultural inquiry along social constructionist lines is able to present a differentiated analysis of 'matters sexual', demonstrating how aspects of what the modern West coined 'sexuality' are involved with social, gender, and power relations. Such a theoretical perspective provides a powerful heuristic tool for historical and cross-cultural work. To illustrate this, I will briefly discuss some recent work on historical issues of sexuality among male miners on the Reef earlier this century.

T. Dunbar Moodie has recently discussed oral and archival evidence about certain socio-sexual formations on the mine compounds of migrant workers of the Gold Reef during the first half of the 20th century, especially during the 1920's to 1950's.¹⁶ At the core of his article lies a discussion of relationships between men and male youths / adolescent boys who lived on the mine compounds. He argues that such relationships occurred frequently, originally apparently among Shangaan workers from the Mozambique / Northeastern Transvaal area, but soon also involving men from other regions (eg. Basotho and AmaXhosa; 1988:248). These relationships occurred typically between older men who were placed in positions of relative power on the compound, and young, recently arrived youth between 12 and 25 years of age. The relationships seem to have been modelled on the traditional, rural husband-wife relationship, except that the boy was paid for his services (ibid. 238-9). The youths ('wives') involved were expected to perform certain domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and washing, apart from 'sharing the bed' of their 'husbands'. Moodie claims that the coital act between those 'husbands and wives' was virtually exclusively *inter crura* (between the thighs), always with the man as the penetrating partner, while the boy performed the 'passive-receptive role' (ibid. 231-2.235; cf. Sibuyi 1993:53-4). He claims that this excluded anal intercourse, suggesting that this was 'frowned upon'. Moodie links this inter-crural intercourse with certain sexual conventions between adolescent, unmarried girls and boys in traditional societies of Nguni peoples: while youth are to some extent even encouraged to engage sexually, vaginal penetration (carrying the possible risk of pregnancy) is prohibited; instead, inter-crural sex is practiced (ibid. 230-1; Harries 1990:326).

According to Moodie, mine marriages were strictly limited to the mines; they ceased to exist after either one of the two left to return to his rural homestead for an extended period of time. The boys were sometimes described as taking on certain culturally defined gender characteristics of women (such as gender-specific clothing). Some boys apparently changed roles when they grew older and acquired the necessary money: they ended their relationships with their 'husband' and themselves took boys as 'wives' (ibid. 235-6). Some of the people interviewed said that one of the main reasons for agreeing to such a relationship as a boy was to increase one's income in order to return more quickly to their rural home where they were expecting to marry and found their own homestead (ibid. 249): 'So men became 'wives' in order to become husbands and therefore full 'men' more rapidly at home.' (ibid. 240). 'Philemon' (in Sibuyi 1993:57) in fact said that the 'wife'

16 Moodie's article was later republished in a shortened form (1989); I refer to the 1988 version in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*. The interviews on which this article as well as Harries' (1990) were partly based were later published as well (Sibuyi 1993 & Ndatshe 1993).

often had a (female) wife at the rural homestead.

It is important to note that 'mine marriages' were not the only sexual outlet for men on the mines; after all, 'town women' lived on the reef as well, though originally in limited numbers, and contacts were restricted at least by official discouraging of town visits (ibid. 1988:240). Some of the interviewees indicated reservations with regard to those women in the cities. Moodie suggests this was due both to the fear of being robbed or catching diseases and the more fundamental anxiety of losing one's rural identity (ibid. 242-3; cf. Harries 1990).

Mine marriages were recognised on the mines as 'the way of the mines' and quickly internalised by newcomers (cf. Sibuyi 1993:61); even the white mine bosses usually turned a blind eye to a practice so abominable in the eyes of the missionaries. On the other hand, some boys consistently resisted the advances of older men. This resistance ties in with the insistence of the old Mpondo men interviewed by Ndatshe not to tell anyone in their village that they had been 'wives' on the mines (Ndatshe 1993:47-8). Yet 'Philemon' said that the wives of those boys who were themselves 'wives' on the mines knew and 'did not mind' (Sibuyi 1993:56.62). This, as well as a few other remarks of the interviewees, underlines the rather ambiguous evaluation of 'boys as wives' in the rural homesteads (ibid. 233-4).

More recently, as gay and lesbian analytical writing in South African has begun to appear, the initial work of Moodie has been critically reviewed. In an essay based on informal interviews with 20 contemporary black men in Reef townships 'who have sex with other men' (McLean & Ngcobo 1994:158), McLean and Ngcobo describe aspects of the contemporary lives of their interviewees (as opposed to Moodie's historical work). While they do not use the term, their study shows leanings towards a social constructionist perspective (ibid. 159.161). McLean and Ngcobo make two critical remarks which are of significance for our purposes (1994:166-167). They suggest that Moodie's paper 'typifies the view that sex between African men involves thigh sex and that anal penetration is rare and frowned upon.' Acknowledging that inter-crural sex was / is a wide-spread custom in several traditional African cultures of Southern Africa, they argue (ibid. 166-7; emphasis added):

While this cultural precedent might explain the widespread adoption of thigh sex on the mines as a form of intercourse between men, it does not explain why, for most of the men we spoke to, sex is synonymous with anal penetration. We have indicated previously the interrelation between male sex in the hostels and gay township life. It would be nonsensical to argue that homosexual practice in hostels and townships had independent and unrelated lines of historical development. A more likely argument is that the illegality and strong social taboos against sodomy make it unlikely that men will admit to it freely. ... It would be too far fetched to imagine that anal sex is a recent discovery ... The taboo against male sodomy must have something to do with the patriarchal conception that 'being penetrated' is somehow quintessential female.

There is an element in this argument which would appear to be an essentialist *non sequitur* which confuses historical evidence with contemporary evidence and concerns. Firstly, the term 'homosexual practice' would seem to imply straightforward continuity in terms of the respective socio-sexual formations to which mine marriages and contemporary gay sexuality on the Reef belong. This need not necessarily be so. Secondly, culturally conditioned, gender-status related considerations not only rule out anal sex but already the entire range of behaviours that the boy performs, including sex *inter crura*, which makes it also unlikely that men will admit it freely. Thirdly, with the exception of a single interviewee for McLean and Ngcobo's paper, all were in their twenties or younger. To

compare their evidence with the historical period of the 1920's to the 1950's (Moodie's main focus) is obviously problematic. It is possible that anal intercourse was frowned upon (that is, cultural stigma was attached to it during earlier periods as well) and yet that men on the mines practiced it (in the first half of this century). However, there is yet no evidence to support this. On the other hand, there is evidence of similar, male - female adolescent inter crural sexual behaviour. Mine marriages would appear to predate the development of large black urban townships on the Reef; hence, they may have developed their own social and sexual practices, isomorphic with certain traditional, rural patterns -- which could have changed over time. It is interesting to note that one of the interviewees, who describes occasional sex work on the mines in the early 1980s, indicates that all intercourse between him and the mine workers was strictly inter crural (ibid. 176-177):

we went to the mines. There, there is still strong role-playing [same-sex relationships based on stereotypical male / female relations]. But on the mines you don't do it for love -- you do thigh sex for money. ... They had no interest in cocks or anything, they just wanted to fuck your thighs. ... The men knew we were boys. They didn't think about hermaphrodites.¹⁷ On the mines it's done openly with all the young boys.

A second point of criticism that McLean and Ngcobo make with regard to Moodie's work is that his article

seems to make male sexuality on the mine rather too much like a mechanical and necessary substitute for heterosexual life in a situation where here are no women. He makes no real concession to the fact that some men may in fact have enjoyed sex with other men or might even prefer it to having sex with women. (ibid. 166; cf. Gevisser 1994:18)

McLean and Ngcobo seem to suspect that Moodie sees same-sex relationships on the mine in terms of the modern, Western conception of 'circumstantial homosexuality'. While the tone of Moodie's article might give rise to this criticism, it is not entirely fair. In the context of his interpretation of the preference of certain men for boys rather than 'town women', Moodie eventually says (1989:421):

There is evidence that in the long term, 'some men preferred boys'.¹⁸ Next to alcohol and 'town women' my informants listed 'homosexuality' as the main reasons for men to abscond from home, abandoning wife and *umzi* [homestead] for the urban scene.

McLean and Ngcobo are a good example for the problematic combination of social constructionist history and essentialist gay politics mentioned earlier: while the authors agree with the social constructionist tenor of Moodie's work, they write as activists conscious of the interpretation of such work in terms of contemporary social and political reality, and this sometimes skews their interpretation of historical data. A similar example is Gevisser's review of the history of gay and lesbian organisations in South Africa (1994). Gevisser explicitly positions himself in the social constructionist theoretical framework and asks rhetorically (ibid. 16):

Given the specificity of class, race and ethnicity in South Africa, is it even possible to pin down a 'gay identity' using the terminology of Western culture? When I -- a white man -- called myself

17 According to McLean and Ngcobo, 'it is widely believed in the townships that homosexuals are hermaphrodites' (ibid. 168; cf. Dlamini 1992:17).

18 Cf. the comment of 'Philemon' (in Sibuyi, 1993:54): 'I know that some men enjoyed 'penetrating the thighs' more than they did the real thing!' Note that 'Philemon', while acknowledging freely that he had once taken a 'wife' on the mines himself, clearly distances himself from 'such men' who preferred 'thighs' to women.

'gay' and Linda Ngcobo -- a black man -- called himself 'gay', did we mean the same things? ... Is there a line of consciousness that leads from middle-class white homosexuals who called themselves 'queer' in the 1950s through to hip young black kids who now call themselves 'queer', with a new subversive edge, in the 1990s?

Significantly, Gevisser leaves these questions unanswered. He describes the essentialist / social constructionist debate in very brief terms, and later proceeds to recall his experience at the burial of Linda Ngcobo, a black gay activist, in Soweto during 1993 (*ibid.* 17):

As I stood in Phiri Hall behind the black gay mourners behind the hymn-singing congregants, I felt a proud commonality with Linda's black friends around me, despite our difference; we were all gay, all South African. My strongest feeling was this: we cannot afford to 'lose' Linda Ngcobo as we have lost to obscurity so many before him.

What this demonstrates is again the problem of combining social constructionist enquiry and 'the sexual subject's desire for history' (which, on the face of it, is catered for most easily and obviously by an essentialist perspective). As a result, the historian using a social constructionist perspective has to be conscious of the possibility in social constructionist enquiry to discuss historical or cross-cultural evidence in such a manner that it appears so foreign, so 'other', that it can be interpreted as being utterly unrelated to contemporary experience. While this should not detract from the need for a social constructionist perspective, it must be born in mind that research on human sexuality (including historical research) is by reason of our social and cultural environment potentially volatile, as such research always impacts on contemporary lives.

Finally, a further issue that is underlined by this discussion of mine marriages is the inappropriateness of the modern, Western terminology of 'homosexuality', 'heterosexuality', 'circumstantial homosexuality', etc., in this context: such terminology is incapable of describing, let alone analysing, the historical phenomenon.¹⁹ Without taking into account the totality of the socio-sexual experience within which certain forms of 'sexuality' are located, the researcher automatically distorts the interpretation of the data.

5. Beyond essentialism / social constructionism?

In recent years, some anti-essentialist scholars have begun to become more critical of the basic dichotomy of the essentialist / social constructionist controversy. De Cecco and Elia recently attempted a 'critique and synthesis' of both essentialist and social constructionist perspectives (1993). They argue that these perspectives are both basically reductionist in that they 'assign primacy and agency either to the biological or to the cultural' (*ibid.* 7). To move beyond this, De Cecco and Elia use what they call the 'dialectic approach' of Lewontin, Rose and Kamin (1984) as well as Doell and Longino's critique of linear biological models (1988). Lewontin *et alii* argue that neither of the conceptual pair 'nature' and 'culture' (or biological and social aspects) are to be given 'ontological priority over the other but ... [are to be seen as] related in a dialectical manner', which means that

19 Although a separation of 'homosexual behaviour' and 'homosexual identity' (cf. Escoffier 1985:122) goes a long way towards the aim of avoiding the inherent problems of the terms homosexuality, heterosexuality, etc., they have deep-seated, 19th-century roots in essentialist conceptualisations (cf. Halperin 1990:15-18), and are therefore extremely difficult to disentangle from their modern connotations (e.g. 'sexual orientation' as part of one's 'sexual identity' -- both typically modern, Western notions): 'To the ordinary person, unilluminated by an arcane sexology, a homosexual is [still] a person who engages in homosexual acts.' (De Cecco 1990a:409) The use of such terms in historical / cross-cultural research is therefore extremely problematic (Gagnon 1990:182-3) and ought to be abandoned. By the same token, the terms 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'straight' are not useful for our purposes (cf. DeCecco 1990b:383n11; pace Boswell).

'the biological and the social are neither separable, nor antithetical, nor alternatives, but complementary' (1984:75.11; cited by De Cecco & Elia 1993:7-8). Consequently, 'human beings are both the cause and result of their environments rather than the product of two sets of fixed, independent phenomena' (De Cecco 1993:8). On the basis of this emphasis on the inextricable inter-relatedness of 'biology and culture', De Cecco and Elia criticise social constructionist perspectives (as well as essentialist ones, which we can ignore here as taken for granted by social constructionists), arguing that the social constructionists are reductionist (*ibid.* 12) in that

their historical and cultural accounts of sexual and gender concepts of categories, when divorced from biology and personal consciousness, seem to suspend a disembodied individual in a sea of categories.

However, the notion of a dialectic interaction of 'biology' and 'society' is not really a new view among social constructionists. In his seminal essay, Padgug argued that a social constructionist perspective

does not seek to eliminate biology from human life, but to absorb it into a unity with social reality. Biology as a set of potentialities and insuperable necessities provides the material of social interpretations and extensions; it does not cause human behavior, but conditions and limits it. Biology is not a narrow set of absolute imperatives. (1989:56; emphasis retained; see also Altman 1982:41)

Similar reflections, though less detailed so far, have also come from other scholars who explicitly work with a social constructionist perspective, eg. Weeks (1989:199; see also other articles in Altman et alii 1989). While continuing to be anti-essentialist, they have begun to reflect on the usefulness of the essentialist / social constructionist debate. Hence, Vance cautions (1989:15):

Social constructionism is not a dogma, a religion, or an article of faith. If and when in the course of these discussion it becomes reified, its value is lost. Social construction theory does not predict a particular answer: whether something we call 'gay identity' existed in the 17th or 19th century, in London or in Polynesia, or whether 19th century female romantic friendship or crossing-women are properly called 'lesbian', is a matter for empirical examination. Contemporary gay identity might exist in other times and cultures or it might not; its construction could be the same as we know it now, or radically different.

Vance's note is important since some proponents of a social constructionist perspective do sometimes seem to forget that while we may suspect that there is not a great deal of historical / cultural continuity, research might actually show that there is more continuity than social constructionists think. Conversely, for critics of social constructionist perspectives to 'prove continuity' is not to disprove social constructionist methodology and presuppositions as such (*cf.* Vance 1989:17).

Perhaps one ought to emphasise that, ontologically and etiologically, a social constructionist approach may be proven 'wrong' some day, although only a much altered, sophisticated essentialist perspective (*cf.* Stein 1990) would be able to provide an alternative. Put differently, a social constructionist perspective ought not to make any ontological or etiological claims as such (*cf.* Greenberg 1988:488-9). Nevertheless, it is my contention that, for the historian, a social constructionist approach is heuristically the most appropriate perspective (*cf.* D'Emilio 1992:108). Sexuality is 'an agreement that resides in social interchange' (*cf.* Bohan 1993:13, on gender). The difference between essentialist and social constructionist perspective on sexuality should not be seen as the issue of the 'origin'

of sexuality (cf. also Kitzinger 1995; Stein 1990:330). Sexuality' does not reside 'as such', it does not exist in the individual, but is a matter of constructed knowledge. 'Sexuality' is reconstituted anew in each culture / society and consists of nothing more (but also nothing less!) than the meanings attributed to 'it' by participants of that society / culture. In terms of the conceptualisation of historical research, what matters is, ultimately, not the 'origin of sexualities' in their myriad modes. Rather, what matters to the historian are the meanings attached to the play of 'sexualities' (cf. also Weeks 1991:154).

If, as I want to suggest, the sexual only exists in and through the modes of its organisation and representation, if it only has relevant meaning via cultural forms, then no search for a founding moment of oppression, nor glory in past struggles around it, can contribute to an analysis of its current hold on our thought, action and politics. What is needed is a history of the historical present as a site of definition, regulation and resistance. (Weeks 1985:10)

A social constructionist perspective safeguards against the universalising ideology implicit in essentialist perspectives. It is therefore heuristically (not necessarily ontologically or etiologically) the most adequate perspective for historical enquiry, and it ought to be used creatively in this process. As Gergen said in a different context: 'Social constructionism offers no 'truth' through method.' (1985a:14; cf. Greenberg 1988:486; Dynes 1990:235)

6. Conclusions

My discussion of essentialist and social constructionist perspectives has shown a number of important points that must be taken into account in any analysis of the phenomenon of human sexualities in history and across different cultures:

- ◆ Essentialist perspectives entrench a universalising ideology and related values (e.g. those of the 19th century Western bourgeoisie) and are therefore not useful in historical and cross-cultural research. A social constructionist perspective is, for the purpose of historical / cross-cultural research, the most appropriate one. Indeed, for the historian, it presents the logical consequence of the attempt to understand and take seriously any culture within its historical context.
- ◆ A social constructionist perspective should be used as a heuristic tool for the cross-cultural and historical study of sexuality. Ontology and etiology are outside of the primary focus of such an historical study.
- ◆ Neither historical / cross-cultural continuity nor discontinuity is to be presupposed but must be demonstrated from the available evidence. Whether Paul's writing on the threat of PORNEIA or the problem of AKRASIA (1 Cor 7) bear any relation to what I, today, conceptualise as 'immorality' or 'lack of self-control', must be shown in the analysis of the text in its historical context.
- ◆ 'Sexual matters' need to be understood in their socio-cultural totality (eg. power relations, economic relations, gender conceptions, etc.). For instance, discussing Paul's view of homosexuality is pointless unless we discuss Paul's view of the whole field of human sexuality in the context of Hellenistic, Roman and Ancient Near Eastern cultures, exploring the dynamic interconnections of human sexualities with other areas of social relations. Ultimately, such a broad-based study may also lead us to question the very categories of analysis that we use for this purpose.
- ◆ Consequently, care must be taken not to regard what has remained of the public discourse of the elite with the totality of a history of sexuality: the almost complete

silence of subjugated voices (eg. women), which often comprise the vast majority in a given society, must not be forgotten. By the same token, however, the discussion of this public discourse of the (usually male) elite is useful if its limits are recognised.

- ◆ We must separate analytically the issues of female and male sexualities. In most if not all societies these two phenomena (however we define them) will be fundamentally different as gender always plays a role. For instance, the criteria for what is regarded as 'licit' sexual behaviour for a person usually primarily depend on gender conceptions. Not to separate the two will ultimately run the danger of seeing the male as the norm. This implies that female same-sex relations for instance must not be treated as if they were basically the same as male same-sex relations: they must not be treated as if they were two sides of the same experience, but as separate, though interconnected, socio-sexual histories.
- ◆ The essentialist / social constructionist controversy and the underlying issues are not limited to the northern hemisphere. Historical / cross-cultural inquiry along social constructionist lines is able to present a differentiated analysis of 'matters sexual' in any society; it demonstrates how aspects of what the modern West coined 'sexuality' are involved with relations of power, with social (including gender) and power relations.
- ◆ Terminology laden with cultural stereotypes must be avoided -- such as homosexuality and heterosexuality. Terms must be precise and minimally value-laden (e.g. 'sexual acts between members of the same sex', or 'same-sex / other-sex sexual activity', Stein 1990:335), despite the awkwardness of such terms. Even 'sexuality', or the plural 'sexualities', are problematic, though it may not always be possible to avoid their use.
- ◆ The historian will have to be conscious of the possibility in social constructionist enquiry of discussing historical or cross-cultural evidence in such a manner that it appears so foreign, so 'other', that it can be interpreted as being utterly unrelated to contemporary experience. This has both advantages and disadvantages: 'strangeness' can facilitate taking one's own culture less normatively (normative in a universalising sense), but it can also lead to conflict with contemporary political concerns. While these concerns must not divert research, they ought to be remembered as the concerns of real people.
- ◆ Historical data and its interpretation within its own context is by no means immediately and directly accessible and 'translatable' into another, contemporary context. Hence, the appropriation of such research in Biblical texts necessitates taking seriously the task of hermeneutics. This is nothing new, of course. However, the dominant essentialist perspective on sexuality (which implies that we already know what we are talking about) makes the issue of 'sexuality' a particularly important test case for such careful historical and hermeneutical work as part of the theological process of reflection.²⁰

²⁰ For some recent, interesting hermeneutical reflections in this regard, see Scroggs (1995) and Barton (1994).

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