

Categories of Gender & Sexuality: Exploring the
Relationship between Language and the Formation of
Non-Heteronormative Identities

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Introduction

Studying the origins of binary thinking sparked my interest in the transformation of categorical distinctions, especially with respect to gender and sexuality. I became interested in how people who do not fit the mold come to understand their gender and sexuality, and then create terms in an attempt to capture that essence. At Southern California College (name of institution has been changed), I discovered a support group for individuals who describe their gender and/or sexuality as “fluid.” I had never heard this newly adopted language, and the concept intrigued me. I pondered the significance of a concept like “fluidity” in the broader scheme of categorizing gender and sexuality. What is the process of creating terminology and adopting labels? How are certain labels used in different situations, and for what purpose(s)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using various terms to describe gender and sexual identity? When are labels used to help people better understand themselves and when are they used for convenience in social interaction? When are gender/sexual identity categories considered tools for social organizing versus political organizing? And most importantly, what effect does the inherently confining nature of language have on the process of identity formation?

Through my case study, I have found that my participants’ gender and sexual identities were realities despite the lack of language to explain or categorize them. Many of the participants attempted to identify with the more mainstream, recognized binary categories, but were left unsatisfied by their strict meanings. This led them down a rockier path of self-identification on which they needed to create and adopt new terminology that encompassed their feelings and desires. A major obstacle they

continuously encounter, however, is the need to create terminology that makes their identities accessible in communication with others. Because the majority of people tend to look at gender and sexuality in terms of black-and-white, reaching an understanding is an unremitting conflict in their lives.

Research Methods

I used qualitative research for this study because I wanted to find out how people came to understand their sexuality, how they identified themselves, and how they related to different categories of gender and sexual identity. I was not interested in validating my respondent's identities in terms of how much sexual activity they had or with what genders unless it was significant to them in the way they came to understand their gender and/or sexuality. Therefore, after gathering all relevant social science literature on gender, sexuality, language, meaning, and the process of identification, I conducted intensive interviews with members of the "Fluidity" support group at Southern California College. I spoke with one of the directors and received permission from the group to enter the setting for research purposes. I sat in on a meeting of seven students and one director, at which I addressed concerns regarding my presence and purpose in the group's intimate, safe space. The group meets in an upstairs loft of a building for diverse groups on campus. The room is filled with posters about cultural awareness and social movements for justice and equality. With the start of a new quarter, the group changed their meeting time, which conflicted with my schedule. Though I was not able to continue attending Fluidity meetings, I *was* able to build rapport with the members, who allowed me to conduct intensive one-on-one interviews with them. I also published a blurb about my research in the school's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender

Resource Center community newsletter, which produced another group of interviewees willing to discuss their gender identity, sexual identity, “coming out” process, and opinions on gender and sexual categorization.

After several weeks, I had conducted nine interviews, each of which lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. I met with respondents at their homes, in libraries, at coffee shops, random places on campus—anywhere they felt comfortable. Five of the participants are between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three, one participant is thirty-two, and three participants are in their mid- to late forties. In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, two participants identified as Mexican American, three identified as white although one said she is really Italian, two more identified as Caucasian, one identified as Thai and Chinese, and the last interviewee did not identify racially or ethnically because she was adopted and is unsure of her ancestry. I also asked the participants if there is a specific term they use to identify their gender. Responses included male, female, woman, womyn, bigender, gender queer, and “female for the moment”. I asked the same question regarding sexual identities, and responses included bisexual, queer, lesbian, gay, bi, femme dyke, fluid, and gay man. I realized that I had assumed people in the queer community would understand the differentiation between sex and gender when I asked how people identified their gender, so it really threw me off when one of the participants, “Paul,” did not distinguish his gender identity from his sexual identity. Instead, he offered “I’m bisexual, more masculine than feminine, physically male, and very fluid. Does that give you an idea of my gender and sexuality?” This became one more example of how language barriers complicate communication.

After I got a general sense of the way they identified themselves, I asked my interviewees what the terms meant to them, what led them to adopt their identities and reject more traditional notions of gender and sexuality, as well as what, in their experiences, they found to be most problematic with respect to mainstream conceptions of gender and sexuality. I moved on to discuss others' reactions to the way they identify, considering their coming out process as well as everyday occurrences. I also asked questions about categories of gender and sexuality such as how they came to view themselves in fluid terms, where they first heard the term, and what it meant to them. I also asked about the benefits and limitations of labels and in what contexts they tended to use them. Lastly, I asked my participants to give a brief account of their sexual history, including ages, genders, types of sexual activity, and how they identified their gender and sexuality along the way. This section did not end up serving much of a purpose as I formulated my arguments except that I was able to understand that their identities did not necessarily correspond to their sexual activities. I did find it interesting how willing every participant was to share their sexual histories. The goal of all these questions was to explore the interplay between sexual experience, sexual identity, and language barriers.

I am a fourth year senior studying for my B.A. in sociology at the college where this group was founded. I identify as a twenty-two year old white female. My sexual history is complex like it is for many of my interviewees, but to summarize, I am a member of the queer community. Throughout the process of defining and redefining my sexuality, I have become frustrated with rigid categorical boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. It has led me to question the validity of our society's binary categories and their functionality. In one sense, I am an insider in my setting because I avoid using

stagnant labels like “lesbian” or “gay” to describe my sexuality because words like that do not encompass all aspects of my sexual identity. The impact of my identity, in this case, is positive because my interviewees seem to trust me quite genuinely and are more willing to share personal, emotionally-charged experiences regarding their gender and sexuality. I am also an outsider because I am not impacted by intersections of oppression in the same way that a multiracial, transgendered bisexual would be, for instance.

Though I have experienced sexism and homophobia first hand, I am privileged to have only experienced racism indirectly. This may have a negative impact on racial and ethnic minorities’ willingness to elaborate on the impact that their cultural background has on their identity as a whole. I project that my age will be an advantage in my research because the majority of my participants are from the same generation, which is important in the gay/queer/LGBT community due to generational changes in the meanings and uses of terms like “lesbian” or “queer.”

The next section situates my study within historical context, specifically on the birth of binary discourse. Then I give an overview of previous social science literature pertaining to my study, including a historical perspective on categories of gender and sexuality, the debate of biological essentialism versus social constructionism, identification as a political process, and the role language plays in understanding concepts of gender and sexual identity. My arguments are broken down into two main clusters: Creating Terms and Adopting & Using Labels. The first is broken down into three subcomponents, the first of which deals with language and meaning. The second addresses dichotomous thinking and how some participants still used binary discourse in their attempts to resist it. The third section in Creating Terms exposes the more

revolutionary language used by Fluidity members which has shifted away from binary discourse. The second cluster is broken down into two sections. The first explores what terms my respondents use in certain contexts and for what purposes, whether they are used to reach an understanding with others in social interaction or for personal clarification. The last section considers which labels are used for purposes of social versus political organization.

Unforeseen Consequences of the Enlightenment: The Birth of Binary Discourse

The Catholic Church and the nobility held a conservative alliance during the feudal era in Europe, by which they controlled knowledge and its production. Enlightenment thinkers, or *philosophes*, of the late 1500s-1600s such as Locke and Hobbes as well as Voltaire and Montesque, theorized about concepts like freedom, a secular society, empirical reason, individualism, and the importance of progress. On one hand, the Enlightenment era was a gift to powerless men under European feudal control because the *philosophes* asserted the importance of individual rights, the freedom of expression, and “opposition to feudal and traditional constraints on beliefs, trade, communication, social interaction, sexuality, and the ownership of property” (Hamilton, 1996: 23). Theorists of this intellectual period even agreed that “the beliefs of other races or civilizations are not inherently inferior to those of European Christianity” (*ibid*). Confidence and optimism escalated as men of the middle and upper classes came to believe in their own capabilities to produce knowledge, affect change, and create history free of the Church’s manipulation.

However, on the other hand, contemporary effects of Enlightenment thinking are problematic in the social world. Women and people of the lower class were regarded by

the *philosophes* as irrational, undeserving of basic rights, and in need of protection and guidance like children. Additionally, the *philosophes* focused on empiricism, or “the idea that all thought and knowledge about the natural and social world is based on empirical facts, things that all human beings can apprehend through their sense organs” (*ibid*).

While there are clear divisions in the natural sciences, these do not apply in society where reality is constantly created, reified, and experienced differently by various cultures in various times and places. By applying laws and facts to the social world, Enlightenment thinkers produced an unforeseen consequence: binary discourse. These binary categorical distinctions are problematic because they are linked to power, and therefore, the order of the terms themselves inherently implies the “norm” and the “other,” respectively. Examples of these binary categories are man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black, rich/poor, etc. While the categorization of knowledge makes it more accessible, it is innately oppressive because it acts as a master narrative for the way things “should” be. Therefore, anyone who falls outside of these rigid distinctions becomes problematic to societal conceptions of social facts.

Approaches to Gender & Sexual Identities

Before delving into more recent theoretical contributions scholars have made to the understanding of gender and sexuality, it is important to look back at the historical progression of categorical distinctions. Paula Rust, in her article *The Politics of Sexual Identity* (1992), notes that the concept of a “homosexual” person arose in the mid-nineteenth century, which transformed certain sexual acts into a sexual identity. The term “heterosexual” evolved shortly thereafter, and “for several decades the Western world contained two types of people, homosexuals and heterosexuals” (Rust, 1992: 367).

However, according to John De Cecco and John Elia (2003), this distinction actually arose in the eighteenth century, characterized by a reconceptualization of gender, meaning that two genders, male and female, became four: heterosexual males, heterosexual females, homosexual males, and homosexual females. Femininity, at this point, became associated with heterosexual females and homosexual males, while masculinity became attached to heterosexual males and homosexual females. Furthermore, De Cecco and Elia argue that science and medicine dominated the mainstream conceptions of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the nineteenth century [medicine] pathologized the two homosexual genders and the associated sexual behavior. In the twentieth century, medicine, now the scientific garb of sexology, has attempted to quantify the older qualitative division of heterosexual vs. homosexual while retaining the notion of the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy. (2003: 3)

This quantification moved Western understanding of gender and sexuality not only from being able to grasp the possibility of a hybrid form of sexuality (bisexuality) but also to the notion of a spectrum with heterosexuality on one end and homosexuality on the other. Alfred Kinsey developed this spectrum through his sex research in 1948. This spectrum, called the Kinsey Scale, allows people to label their sexual activity ranging from zero (exclusively heterosexual behavior) to six (exclusively homosexual behavior) with three as the midpoint (equally heterosexual and homosexual behavior). Kinsey's work was revolutionary because he focused on people's sexual *experiences* rather than their sexual *identities*, and used the terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" as adjectives to describe behavior, not people. Kinsey was actually a professor of zoology and an expert on taxonomy, and therefore classification, but he intended to use his research to show the continuum of heterosexual and homosexual behavior exhibited by his participants.

Kinsey had no concern about normality; however, others used his findings to make a general claim that since ten percent of Kinsey's research subjects identified their sexual activity as a six, or exclusively homosexual, then ten percent of the human race must be gay. Perhaps more intriguing is that the findings demonstrate that forty-six percent of his male subjects exhibited bisexual behavior, falling somewhere between a one and a five, inclusive, on the Kinsey Scale. Undoubtedly, Kinsey's work was groundbreaking, especially during his era's sexually repressive conformist culture, but it did have limitations: he failed to put experiences within a social context, he did not interview participants who identified with a range of ethnic backgrounds, and he did not include aspects of sexuality beyond sexual *acts* such as sexual fantasies and emotional involvement (Garber, 1996: 29).

In 1980, researcher Fritz Klein attempted to incorporate these aspects that Kinsey failed to address by formulating a multidimensional chart of one's past, present, and ideal "sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-identification, and straight/gay lifestyle" (*ibid*). However, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) still assumed two polar opposites, homosexuals and heterosexuals, with bisexuals occupying some middle ground. Furthermore, the grid "couldn't account for changes in people's patterns of relationships *over time*, nor the influence of social and cultural factors that continually shifted the boundaries and definitions of apparent 'opposites' like gay/straight, male/female..." (*ibid*). Despite this incremental advance, Marjorie Garber argues that "we have made virtually no progress since [Kinsey's] time in understanding bisexuality's place in sexual and cultural life" (1995: 252).

A key debate in the study of gender and sexuality is that of biological essentialism versus social constructionism, or nature versus nurture. Although both essentialists and constructionists concede an interaction between biological and cultural factors in the shaping of human experiences, each argues that only one acts as the primary force. Therefore, both ideologies represent the kind of reductionist, binary thinking that narrows our understanding of gender and sexuality. According to De Cecco and Elia (2003),

Biological essentialism is an academic version of conventional beliefs about sexuality and gender that had their origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries... [which] reduces sexuality to sex... [and] anchors sexual and gender expression in anatomy. (2)

In other words, essentialism links genetically proscribed sex to a heteronormative sexual orientation. Homosexuality, because it cannot follow the perceived destined path of reproduction, is understood as a genetic flaw in the biological norm. Therefore, biological essentialists have aimed to discover “causes” of this unnatural phenomenon.

On the other hand, De Cecco and Elia (2003) argue that social construction theory in the field of sexuality: “...propose[s] an extremely outrageous idea...that one of the last remaining outposts of the ‘natural’ in our thinking was fluid and changeable, the products of human action and history rather than the invariant result of the body, biology, or innate sex drive” (4). This means that instead of viewing gender and sexuality as biological realities, constructionists believe sexual identities are produced by society and culture. By looking at different cultures across time, variations in societal conceptions become clear. In Arabic culture and language, for instance, equivalent terms for “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” do not exist. Furthermore, among the Sambia tribe in New Guinea, cultural norms dictate that adolescent boys must ingest the semen of older men in order to

internalize masculinity as a rite of passage to manhood. The older men also have wives and children, and neither the men nor the boys are considered homosexual or bisexual as a result of this act. One of the most pronounced examples of gender and sexual identity as social constructions is the Native American *berdache*, or two-spirited person, who does not adopt the gender ordinarily associated with either biological sex and participates in sexual activity with men and/or women. In Native American culture, these people are not considered men, women, or transgendered. Nor are they considered heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. They are simply berdache, representing their own category. In Western cultures, however, language and cultural ideologies leave no room for such individuals. Like these examples, bisexuality shatters the essentialist notion of sexuality, which “fundamentally shakes up the ethnic model of being gay” (Seidman, 1993: 21) and undermines the power of “gay” and “lesbian” as political identities.

Previous social science literature has addressed gender and sexual identification as a political process as well. Didi Khayatt’s *Toward a Queer Identity* (2002) stresses the importance of Gramsci’s notion of ideology. He argues that there are:

...counter-hegemonic ideologies that exist and resist dominant values and norms...Dominant ideologies influence the way people understand, live, and practice their sexuality, and counter-hegemonic ideologies allow people to question the authority and significance of dominant ideologies. (490)

Therefore, breaking away from the categories of the dominant ideology is significant because even though any identity boundary is restrictive, the difference is that individuals who self-identify are empowered whereas those who are slotted into a recognized category according to another’s perception are confined.

Paula C. Rust addresses the political importance of identity formation in *The*

Politics of Sexual Identity (1992), claiming that the “consequences of identity are both social and political ... [which is] especially true when identity reflects membership in a disadvantaged or stigmatized group” (366). Due to the greater significance placed on the identity of oppressed groups, De Cecco and Elia (1993) quote Jeffrey Weeks (1988) saying that “although interpretations of sexuality and gender are historically modeled, they are of major importance in ‘challenging the imposition of arbitrary social norms’ and should be defended with passion and commitment” (4). “Fluid,” “queer,” and even “bisexual” are powerful because they uproot deeply held alignments to social norms for sexuality and gender identity.

Scholars have also studied categories of gender and sexual identity, as well as the role language plays in understanding these concepts. Heather Macalister, author of *In Defense of Ambiguity: Understanding Bisexuality’s Invisibility through Cognitive Psychology* (2003), notes that:

We create cognitive categories, called schemas, for everything... And this is extremely functional cognitively because it allows us to make inferences and predictions about novel members of a category without going through an extensive information-gathering process. (26)

It is when these schemas are challenged, or people we have assigned to a schema do not fit into it as we expect, that we become uncomfortable. However useful, schemas are not able to account for every aspect of our social reality, and therefore they can be restrictive to our understanding. In other words:

Just because we don’t have a label for something, it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. In cognitive psychology, the Whorfian hypothesis suggests that language constrains thought...thinking is limited by our vocabulary... [and] there is a whole world of concepts that lie beyond our labels. (Macalister, 2003: 31)

Therefore, we cannot even consider concepts which we do not have language or labels to discuss. That is why the creation of new categories of gender and sexual identity are so significant: new terminology and the ways in which they are used validate identities that were incomprehensible according to previous linguistic categories.

Because a large percentage of the United States population fails to conform to either of the ideal, stagnant binary categories of gender or sexuality (See Bell and Weinberg 1978; Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith 1981; Hunt 1974; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948, 1953), the creation and adoption of novel terms to validate one's own experiences and desires is an on-going process in American culture. In the past two decades, "queer" became a term of choice because it covers "the spectrum of genders and sexualities that were not and could not be accommodated by naming all the variations of perverse and marginalized sexualities: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, intersexual, male-to-female, female-to-male, butch and femme, etc." (Khayatt, 2002: 497). It is an umbrella term that is all-inclusive, flexible, and unstable. However, this term is limited in the sense that it can dull the diversity which it is supposed to acknowledge by lumping together all deviant identities. Therefore, it is too vague for some to adopt.

Furthermore, although according to Michaela D. E. Meyer in *Looking Toward InterSEXions* (2003), there is societal pressure to identify with one of the ends of the Kinsey Scale, scholars have observed that gender and sexuality appear to be fluid concepts (See Hutson & Schwartz 1996; Wood 2000, 2001). The problem is that there are language barriers to discussing this fluidity within the system of binary cognitive categories. This conflict is compounded for people who fall outside or in between the categories of male and female because there are "more opportunities within language to

discuss the dichotomy of sexuality, but this language has not been developed for discussing the dichotomy of gender” (Meyer, 2003: 162; See also Hausman, 2001).

This is where my case study will shed light on recent attempts by younger generations in the queer community to create language that can begin to explain gender nonconformity. But each label, especially those that can be situated along Kinsey’s spectrum, is inherently confining. Perhaps instead of binaries like gay/straight, man/woman, masculine/feminine, and so on, there are “infinite points and combinations—but suggesting this would make a blasphemer against our beloved cognitive categorization” (Macalister, 2003: 28). Marjorie Garber points out that a new bisexuality has emerged, an “unpigeonholed sexual identity [that is] not bisexuality as the ‘third choice’ between, or beyond hetero- and homosex” (1995: 18), and the members of Fluidity at Southern California College have adopted a term to bring it into public consciousness. It is for this reason that I chose to study the process of identification, creation, adoption, and utilization of labels by examining how constrictive binary language affects the members of this group on a daily basis as each of them struggles to understand their true self in a world conceptually and linguistically incapable of fostering that understanding. The very fact that they felt the need to socially organize, to create a support group in which people understand this struggle demonstrated how the identification process is problematic for those who fall outside of or between recognized binary categories. By conducting qualitative research, I became aware of my participants’ journeys from confusion to empowerment as they negotiated and contested meanings.

Creating Terms

Language & Definitions

Language is intrinsically confining because defining something, especially something intangible like gender or sexuality, places limitations on what it *could* be, as explained above by Heather Macalister. It is when people breach the boundaries of cognitive categories that people become frustrated or uncomfortable. Yet, at the same time, every person who violates the rigid schema is further evidence that the category does not work, that the term does not apply, and that language cannot grasp the complexity of gender and sexuality.

In accordance with the Whorfian hypothesis—that language constricts thought—Paul struggled to identify his desires because he was unaware of the proper terminology.

Before I really understood what it meant to be gay, since that wasn't a part of my universe, even though I had feelings toward men, I would still classify myself as straight for lack of better words. My self-awareness grew, and so 'oh, there's that part of the spectrum.' I moved to acknowledging that there's a gay component to my identity. How do I incorporate that? So that moved me, in terms of my sexual preference, to call myself bisexual.

Paul labeled himself straight, acknowledged gay feelings, and ended up identifying as bisexual. Melanie experienced a similar identity conflict.

Since I was really little [I felt like] well, I'm not a girl, and I'm not like a woman or a lady. I'm not a guy, and I don't *wanna* be a guy. So, like, whatever! La la la, you know? But when I came [to college] freshman year, one of the fourth years who was a principal member of LGBTQIA identified as 'gender queer' and I was like 'That's really cool—that's exactly the term I was looking for!'

These cases show that the lack of terminology did not mean that their identities were non-existent. Rather, their understanding of language pertaining to gender and sexuality at the time was limited and unable to grasp their reality.

I asked each of my interviewees to define “sex,” and unsurprisingly, all of them define it in significantly different ways. Some offered a simplistic understanding. Paul reduced it to “fun” while Jaq left it open to interpretation as “anything that gets you off.” Others disagreed as to whether sex involves emotions. Walter said, “It’s an act. It’s about coming—not about love” while Melanie offered:

Sex to me is if you are with another person, or multiple in some cases, and there is a giving or receiving of pleasure whether it be penetration or not. I personally see it as having an emotional thing in it whereas some people might consider sex and emotional sex different.

Jenny acknowledges that different types of sex still count as sex, but confined her meaning based on the number of participants and reaching climax. She says, “Any time two people get together and one of them ends up having an orgasm, I pretty much define that as sex whether it be oral, manual, or insertive intercourse.” However, Heather does not take such a hard stance. She admits:

I kind of joke that if two people have orgasms, then it’s sex. But a lot of girls that are with guys don’t have orgasms, so that’s not really good. I think it kind of depends what gender you’re having sex with. If it’s with a guy... Well, I think it’s anything below the belt. I think any touching in the genital area is sex.

Only one participant included masturbation as a form of sex. To Beta, sex is “any type of physical, sexual stimulation—including self-stimulation—of genitals or erogenous zones, but not solely arousal related to seeing people or images which are sexually arousing.” If

sexuality is based on the meaning of sex, then each of these people will have slightly different understandings of the concept. Heather said, “I hate the term sexuality because it’s all about sex. And it’s not all about sex. It’s about emotion, love” while Walter adamantly claims:

That is the biggest problem with mainstream conceptions of sexuality, is people think that it’s about love. Sexuality is about coming, and sex is about coming. And we, as we think about our sexuality, think about what is going to make our coming feel best... I think if people could get over the fact that it’s not all about love—that it’s about sex, it’s about coming—eventually I think most people would get to the place where they understand, ‘oh, if you’re in love, it’s even *better*’...The problem is we set up this rubric of you have to be in love before you even get a start at it...Love is woven into it. And it’s a step in the process, but sexuality is not about love.

Considering the discrepancies between these views on sex and sexuality, how can society agree upon categories within sexual identity when the concept of sexuality itself is too vague to pin down?

This ambiguity plays itself out in the various meanings the interviewees intend to convey when using terms like “gay” or “male”. To Lewis, “gay” means that he is “sexually and emotionally attracted to other men or males...Because gay is a pretty culturally acknowledged term, I think when I say that everyone pretty much gets the idea.” However, despite its seemingly obvious definition to Lewis, Paul acknowledges a slightly more open interpretation of the word:

I find limitations with ‘gay’ [because] what does it actually mean? Does it include bisexuals? Does it include lesbians? Some people would say...that it’s a broader term that is meant to be all-encompassing for the GLBT community. And other people say ‘No, gay is a male homosexual.’ So I have problems with it

because it's an imprecise term and I'm not sure when I use it if that's the right term I wanna use.

Although Lewis and Paul have different ideas of what "gay" means, they both struggled with the term "male". In consideration of his gender identity, Lewis offered:

I'm a male. I have a penis. I have male characteristics. And socially, I consider myself a man, but not that I necessarily fit into all the social expectations of men. I mean, I guess I really do consider myself a man, but I have zero interest in sports, I love dance, and these are all very stereotypically [not male].

Lewis questioned his gender identity because his interests do not fit the stereotype of male interests. Paul had a similar experience.

Other [terms] are very precise, like male and female, but don't necessarily convey gender identity, and they don't necessarily deal with the multi-facetedness of gender identity. Well, I'm male, but I like romances. I cry at movies. Do males do that? I don't think most people would say males do that. I love getting flowers. I love cuddling. I don't think most people would associate that with 'male'. So me using the term 'male,' limits [my gender expression].

First of all, Lewis described "male" as his sex and "man" as his gender whereas Paul did not differentiate, and used "male" to discuss his gender identity. Both of them, however, feel that their place in the category of "male" or "man" is in question due to their interests and personality traits. What constitutes these categories? People who claim to be members of this identity group are not even sure that they belong according to strict societal standards. Therefore, whether or not one accepts essentialist notions of gender and sexuality, that gender identity and sexual desires are proscribed by our genetic makeup, the very disagreement over the meanings of labels themselves reflect the fact that they are socially constructed realities based on the human need to categorize.

Dichotomous Thinking & Binary Resistance

Keeping the limitations of language in mind, even the most politically aware and active interviewees at times found that they slipped into dichotomous thinking. Lewis, who identifies as gay, described his coming out process as a binary experience:

I didn't really consider that there were other sexual identities to choose from along the sexual spectrum, and that there were options that not only could I identify with a particular sexuality, but I could identify with a particular gender. I could be everything from queer to gender queer...For me it was, 'Am I gay or am I not?' I only saw those options—of being straight or being gay. I never explored any other options—not that I couldn't now...

Because he was socialized to understand that there are gay people and straight people, he could not fathom other possibilities. Luckily for Lewis, his desires fit into one of the readily available, culturally recognized categories.

Individuals who discover that they do not fit into either end of the spectrum, whether it be regarding gender (male/female) or sexuality (gay/straight), eventually meet other people who feel the same way as they do. Together, they attempt to create a new term that encompasses the way they identify. However, they are limited by the language of dominant ideology. Some recognize that their sexual identity reflects dichotomous thinking, but due to a lack of better terminology, continue to use it. Jenny explained:

I guess I identify as bisexual but I really don't like that term. To me it's very binary. What does it mean to be bisexual? I'm attracted to men and women? But what about people who don't have any gender that they identify with?

Melanie, on the other hand, has some of the same qualms about the term "bisexual" but uses it not only because it is a culturally available term, but because (s)he struggled with it growing up. (S)he identifies as bisexual because:

[W]hen I was younger, either you're gay, you're lesbian, or you're bisexual. I still am attracted to men. I'm more attracted to women though. So, I would just

say bisexual when I was little. But now that I've seen the whole spectrum of everything else, I still stick with it because when I was little I kind of like fought with that term...And so it's kind of like I have an attachment to that term even though I could fall for someone who identifies as a woman but who is actually a male, which kind of doesn't fall under bisexual because then you're thinking just men and just women.

Both of these participants attempt to rid their vocabulary of binary opposition. However, it is an uphill battle since culturally accepted terminology has confined them to the intersectional label of "bisexual," and terms like "fluid" and "queer" are too broad and unfamiliar to people to get the desired information across.

Several participants even attempted to resist dichotomous thinking by creating new terms that employ binary terminology, showing just how deeply ingrained cultural knowledge can be. Jenny was in a relationship with a transgendered man, a biological female who identified as a male. At first, Jenny explained how this relationship truly allowed her to think outside the box and to understand gender and sexuality in entirely new ways. She said, "You can't define that relationship. Is it heterosexual? Is it homosexual? Just try to put it in a box—you can't." Yet, she surprised me by doing just that.

We actually came up with a really good term. It was a homosexual hetero-gendered relationship when it really came down to it. But, whatever. Who's gonna really know what that means? Yeah, we're homosexual because we have the same kind of bits down there and we're hetero-gendered because he's a guy and I'm a girl. But, at that point...you can't go around labeling it like that all day so why not just not label anything and be done with labels?

Jenny took something which even she considered indefinable and created a name for it, placed it in a box. While the term works logically, it reduces the relationship to a type or category. Even this term would become problematic in a relationship where at least one

of the members did not gender identify at all. What would that relationship be called? Therefore, any label is exclusive and confining. But, that *is* the purpose of labeling. So, why is it so important to be able to make these distinctions? Although its original purpose may be an attempt to understand the world we live in, or at the very least for ease of communication, the result of squeezing reality into binary discourse is empowering for the mainstream and oppressing for the other.

Heather pushes the gender envelope by using the term “bi-gender”:

I definitely categorize myself as a woman and identify as a woman, but I kind of feel like I’m a multifaceted person and my gender is kind of like that as well. So, I definitely have like “butch” qualities [*making quotes symbol with fingers*] but, I kind of wanna like move away from putting myself in boxes. So I wanna incorporate every aspect of my personality in how I identify. I’m kind of in that transition period, trying to figure out exactly what I wanna call myself.

Heather rejects the idea that because she is biologically female, her sex must translate into gender through solely feminine characteristics. However, she upholds binary thinking by using the term “bi-gender” because it assumes that there are distinct masculine and feminine personality traits, and that she embodies both. In other words, separating notions of masculinity and femininity from maleness and femaleness or discarding the masculine and feminine altogether would be more revolutionary, as it would break down gendered expectations. But what language could she use to describe that?

Mad Dog experiences the same problem in describing her sexuality as Heather does in labeling her gender.

The latest label I’ve adopted for myself is ‘femme dyke’. I’m trying to get a straight person to understand that they need to like come out of the box. The

picture of what they think ‘dyke’ is, is not gonna work. I don’t look like what they think a ‘dyke’ is. So they’re like, ‘oh you don’t *look* gay.’ I mean, what the fuck do gay people look like? When I use [femme dyke], I’m using it usually for heterosexuals, and I’m letting them know that they’re going to need to think outside the box of what they typically think a dyke looks like.

Language is not the only barrier to creating terminology outside of the binary box. If one is trying to reach an understanding with “a straight person,” then the label is not simply about how that person identifies, but how that person can communicate it in a way that is tangible for their audience. When the majority of Americans think in terms of dichotomies, and even people who are bisexual, biracial, or bicultural push them to the limits of their understanding, terms that completely disregard the binary will not work.

Shifting Away From Binary Discourse

Despite socio-cultural and linguistic barriers to resisting binary discourse, currently emerging terminology has gained some ground in thinking outside the box in terms of gender and sexuality. Walter explained that the transformation in his awareness was originally tied to Austin, a transgendered man, and even more so through contact with gender queers:

[Growing up] I saw sexuality as binary. I did not see it as fluid... I had to figure out gender fluidity first before I could understand that sexuality was fluid. And it was probably Austin more than anyone else that helped me understand gender fluidity. Although, in some ways not, because Austin was binary—full transitioned F-to-M...It’s more the gender queers that I’ve interacted with. The folks that are pushing the envelope of neutral gender expressions that help me truly understand the fluidity of it in some very concrete ways.

Walter realizes that transgendered identities uphold binary distinctions the same way that labels like “bi-gender” and “femme dyke” do. However, “gender queer” is a relatively

new term that breaks down gender dichotomies. Gender queers refuse to assign their positions along a gender spectrum with male at one end and female at the other.

According to Melanie, who identifies as gender queer, “People have been trying to find a gender-neutral pronoun for the longest time. There’s things like ‘z,’ ‘zer,’ ‘x,’ or ‘e’.

Some people use those because they don’t wanna use ‘he’ or ‘she’.” However, these words do not stick mostly because they are beyond the scope of the general public’s understanding. Change is difficult, so people will continue labeling according to the experience of the majority until their world of understanding is directly affected.

Gender queers are not the only ones resisting binary assumptions. Walter explained how he came to terms with his gender identity:

I’m masculine. I’m man-identified, but my gender expressions change...I push my own gender envelope. I know I don’t experience the world the same way that some of my male peers do. Some of that might be my sexual orientation. But some of it might be more an examined gendered life that I lead, that I experience. Like last weekend, I completely shaved all my body hair. But men don’t do that...I sit like this [*legs completely crossed*] a lot, which is not like this [*feet on floor, legs apart*] or like this [*one leg down, ankle resting on knee*]. I think it’s unlike a stereotypical masculine gender expression to shut the fuck up, and I shut the fuck up a lot...I’ll listen to other men talk and dominate, but I don’t because I recognize that men take up too much fucking space. And so I choose to take up less space. Sexually, I am often in what would stereotypically be called the feminine role. Interpersonally, in some of my primary relationships, I think I’m the emotional one. And so all that has to do with the way I understand my own gender because I’m not all about these boxes being so damn tight.

He continued to explain that he receives social punishments for pushing his gender envelope, but that he is willing to take it since he is dealt social punishments for being queer already.

Several of the interviewees pushed against the binary view of sexuality. Heather said that she has used “straight,” “bisexual,” “lesbian,” and “gay” to describe her sexuality at different times, but when recognized ends of the spectrum failed to capture her identity, she coined her own terminology.

When I was with my first girlfriend, I thought I was a lesbian because I had been with guys for so long and then I fell in love with this girl and we were together for two years and I thought I was going to be with her forever. It was a really intense relationship. So I thought I was a lesbian from then on. But then we broke up, and I ended up getting with a guy again, so I was like, ‘Shit, what the hell am I?’ So then I would use the term “the big rainbow question mark” because I knew I wasn’t straight, and I knew I wasn’t one or the other. But I didn’t like the term ‘bisexual’ because I felt like it was very trendy at the time.

Heather used “the big rainbow question mark” while she was grappling to adopt a sexual identity, which is remarkably progressive since she did not simply accept whichever recognized category she felt was the closest fit at the time.

People who describe their gender and/or sexuality as “fluid” also deviate from recognized, generally acceptable dichotomous categories (male/female and/or gay/straight) or their intersection (bi-gender or bisexual). All of my respondents have been involved, or are currently involved, to a large degree in activism for queer issues, as well as a range of other human rights concerns. Therefore, I believe they are more aware of the power dynamics associated with the language barriers discussed above. So, it is not necessarily that their identities are that much more fluid than others outside of the Fluid group, but that they are more conscious of the importance of meaning. They are aware that the lack of language to communicate who they are is a result of being marginalized within dominant social structures. They attempt to combat the resultant

feeling of powerlessness and inferiority by blazing their own trail in the process of identification. They are not attempting to find a new label within the old, confining structure. They are doing something much more progressive—attempting to create a new paradigm for the understanding of gender and sexuality altogether. In describing sexual fluidity, Lewis said it means that “sexuality is not static, that it is on a spectrum. Spectrum itself might even be too linear to describe sexuality. I think it could be three dimensional. It could be all over the place... [F]luid sexuality gives validity to any way that a person chooses to identify.” Because the fluidity of gender and sexuality itself a fluid concept, there was a range of interpretations among my respondents. To Jenny, “fluid” means that:

My identity today doesn't have anything to do with what my identity tomorrow is going to be. It changes over time. And not only can it change over time but even when it is static, it can't really be labeled. And so it's fluid, it transitions. It's not really definable. And for me the biggest point of that is that because I don't really believe in gender, there really isn't anything to define my sexuality by. I mean, I could give you a really good description of who I'm attracted to and why, but that's not what people are looking for.

A couple of interviewees mentioned that they found masculinity attractive, for instance, regardless of the gender in which it manifested. However, terminology to explain this type of sexual orientation does not exist. There is no one-word response that could relate this information in terms of an identity. Furthermore, if one is attempting to remove the notions of masculine and feminine from maleness and femaleness, then what would masculinity be describing?

In Walter's estimation, “Probably more than anything, [fluid] means not binary. It means multidimensional. 'Cause I put everything in binaries at the beginning. And

now when I see things that really are binary to me, I always try to put them in a fluid box.” The fact that Walter used the word “box” shows that any label, even a word like “fluid,” has limitations. Any definition, even if the meaning refers to the obscurity of the concept, is confining. Therefore, someone who wants to resist labels and resist defining their gender or sexuality cannot do so by creating new terminology. Only the absence of terminology, or at least a concrete definition, would truly do that justice. Walter, in fact, was the only interviewee who seemed aware of this problem. He elaborates:

“Fluid still implies that there’s a rubric of a container that holds it. Because we’ve created this word “gender,” and this word “sexuality,” and we’ve pretended that they mean something, “fluid” is just a way of filling those containers with a word that works... [B]ecause words get in the way of reality, “fluid” does too. Am I fluid, or am I gas-like? Does my sexuality expand to fill the potential space that it could? See, fluidity is finite. If you pour water into a glass, then there’s that much water. In a vacuum, if you drop a cubic ounce of a gas, that gas expands to fill the space. Water will not. And so we’re using this term ‘fluid,’ but what does it really mean in terms of how we conceptualize gender and sexuality? It doesn’t grow...It moves, but it doesn’t change. So, is it the right term? ... We’re using these terms that are matter equivalent so we’re grounding ourselves in hard reality. I think we might learn a lot from theology. They [use terms that] tend to be harder to wrap our thoughts around... You know, you struggle when you talk about the “transfiguration of the soul.” You’re talking about concepts and words that are fundamentally not based in concrete reality. And so you have to think about them in a different way. But we’re still using boxes.

While the concept of fluidity does break away from binary thinking, it can retain the idea that one’s identity flows on a spectrum of gender and sexuality, which as Lewis pointed out, may also be too restrictive. How do we begin to re-conceptualize gender and sexuality in order to understand it in an abstract manner? In the same breath, the cognitive inconvenience of thinking about gender and sexuality in this way might be an insurmountable obstacle to shifting away from concrete reality. What consequences would that have for people who cannot assimilate their identities into mainstream binary discourse?

Adopting & Using Labels

Self-Understanding versus Convenience in Social Interaction

According to the testimonies given by respondents in my case study, people who discovered that the taken-for-granted categories of gender (male/female) and sexuality (heterosexual) failed to represent their identities used labels first for a sense of self-understanding and then for convenience in social interaction. Initially, they just wanted to make sense of their feelings and desires, so they used labels to help define their true essence. Then, once they became more comfortable with their deviant sexualities and gender identities, they felt that labels functioned more to help others categorize them.

Heather personifies this pattern:

Before I was comfortable with my sexuality, I would use terms to both tell people what I am and also to kind of convince myself. Now that I'm okay with it, I think it's more for other people. I know what I feel. I know that I look at guys and at girls. But I think people need to have terms that can make others understand who you are. So I think definitely now it's more for other people than myself.

Paul shared a very similar experience:

Labels help people better understand me, and I think it is really a way to communicate with other people, allowing us to categorize, bring things into other people's world of understanding. So, labels are useful in that sense. I find them valuable, useful for me in my self-awareness, self-education, self-understanding. I was much more in a period of self-analysis ten years ago, trying to define. So, maybe at that point I did use labels much more to say, "Okay, I want to be 'gay,'" whatever that meant, or wear leather or be more femme or whatever the situation. Now, I don't care anymore. I'm just gonna be whoever I happen to be when I wake up in the morning. I'm much more comfortable in the moment.

Walter believes that other language used to describe gender and sexuality, not only specific categories, assists in his understanding.

“Fluid” helps me understand myself. Gender expression, gender identity—Just even knowing those words helps me understand some of what I am and what I experience. And yeah, I think they help other people understand too, but I don’t use “fluid” with other people except for intimates and people in the [support] group. Usually it’s probably a timing thing, because you can’t just use the term and then not explain it. You have to have a conversation. And a lot of times I’m just not willing to have that conversation.

Jenny experiences some of the same conflicts with using “fluid” in public spaces.

If you’re talking to people who aren’t there with you—they’re not on the same page with you—you can’t use ‘fluid’ because it’s not going to make any sense. You’re going to have to explain yourself. It’s gonna take half an hour. If I am somewhere where I just wanna be left alone, then I need to identify as “bisexual” [because] even “queer” has the same sort of limitations. Fluidity, while it perfectly describes me, doesn’t give you any information. That is probably its greatest limitation is that even in the queer world you have to explain it to people because it’s so new. But maybe that will probably change.

Jenny also acknowledged that the fact that people do not understand fluidity also has an advantage because it gets people who actually want to understand to ask questions. The term lends itself to dialogue, which on one hand is beneficial because the person using it can avoid the stereotypes and assumptions that come along with existing, acknowledged terminology while, on the other hand, it can be a burden to those who must constantly explain and justify their identity.

Not only do the respondents use labels for convenience in social interaction, but also to reach a sense of understanding with others. Walter clarifies which terms he feels should be used in which circumstances depending on what information he is trying to get across.

Saying that I’m queer doesn’t help somebody understand much about me in a lot of ways except they know that I’m fundamentally different. And so if all I want

to communicate is fundamental difference, I'll use "queer." But if I want somebody to know who I sleep with, I'll say bi. And I'm afraid if I say "queer," they translate it into "gay." And, well that's not fair because I'm not.

Walter is expressing one of the difficulties with language in general, which is that one cannot be certain how other people define or understand words. Meaning, therefore, is left to the imagination of the listener unless it is explicitly explained, which as several participants point out, becomes an issue of time and energy. This has a profound effect on the way that labels are used, including to whom and in what situations they are used.

Several participants explain that when using labels to describe gender and sexuality to others, one must use terminology that is age-appropriate because categories and meanings change over time. Jaq explained this phenomenon in terms of how she came out to her grand father: "I had to cut out 'queer' because it's definitely not something that [he] could conceptualize. And so to tell him I'm bisexual, it was like, 'Yeah, okay, I'm what your generation called a "sexual deviant." He's eighty-four."

Walter also found that this kind of generational awareness is critical because some words that younger generations find empowering, older generations find to be incredibly degrading and insulting.

I often use words that are specific to the group that I'm in [and] that make sense for them. Sometimes in these spaces [at the LGBT Resource Center on campus] I'll use "queer" a lot more. But at the [greater LGBT Community Center], they don't use the term "queer". [laughs] So I respect that. I'm not gonna force—I mean, the generation directly above me, around forty, *really* have a problem with that word in general. I mean, [the LGBT Community Center] is a \$3 million dollar organization and we *raise* \$1 million from the LGBT community [of southern California]. You don't be calling your donors 'queers' when they're primarily in the 40-70 range. It's generationally appropriate.

Both of my participants who were in their forties upheld this idea that different terms are accepted in different eras. Paul, 47, offers:

To the extent that [labels] are empowering, [that they're] being used to try to describe someone's place in life, there's value to them, regardless of how I may actually feel about it. I mean, I wouldn't wanna call myself "queer"! [*laughs as he scrunches up his nose*] You know? But, you wanna call yourself queer? Then there's a certain value [in that] and I'd be more interested knowing what that meant to you rather than arguing whether that was a valid label for you or not. I don't know that "queer" necessarily describes me. Part of it, I think, is that I'm not sure what it means. And so I don't feel comfortable using it.

Beta, 46, is not as accepting of the way other people use gender and sexuality labels. He admits, "I am somewhat comfortable with others using the terms they use to describe themselves as long as they are not applied to me, but I am not too excited in general about terms like 'queer,' 'fag,' 'Mary,' 'girlfriend,' or 'sister'."

Labels as Organizing Tools: Social versus Political Identities

In most cases, the interviewees could recall identifying in a particular way because they wanted to take on political responsibilities. In order to organize politically with the LGBTQ community, they felt that they needed to own the deviant status by "coming out" to unite under common community goals. Lewis' experience is a prime example of this trend.

At first, I was like going through the whole coming out process, and I was like, "No, I'm not gay. I just like men" because I felt that gay was a term that had a lot of social and cultural implications that came with it. It's a political identity. And then, as I became more and more comfortable with it, I wanted to take on the political identity of it, because I wanted to situate myself within the LGBT community. I wanted to use the word so that it became a culturally accepted word

to use and a culturally accepted identity to have. And the more that I can be vocal that this is my *identity*, the less it will be used in derogatory phrasing.

Jaq shared a similar experience as she had bisexual feelings, but did not adopt the label until she thought of it as a political identity.

It was part of who I was but I didn't verbally put words to it or really announce it until I got more involved in politics. And when I came to [college] I got more involved in activist things about trying to get equal rights, marches for marriage rights and stuff like that. That helped put a voice to who I was.

Mad Dog's identification process followed this pattern in the beginning, but now she has a different perspective on labeling.

I have been through so many different identities...I'm 48. I grew up in the crazy '70s. And...there was this thing of trying to fit in to all these different political groups, in what was the second wave of feminism, so first I identified as a feminist, then I identified as a dyke, then I identified as all these different entities, and many of them were political. And then I came to the reality that they were all very restraining for me, and so I kind of dropped the labels, and that's how I got to where I am today. I went through all of these different...boxes I guess [I] would call them, and developed like a little bit of this and a little bit of that to be who I am today and to be comfortable to say, 'I don't have a label anymore.'

The age gap between college student respondents and Mad Dog, for instance, may begin to explain the difference between feeling the political need to label and realizing that self-confidence and the ability to feel comfortable with one's self is of greater importance than adopting a label. Paul, who is 47 years of age, stressed the importance of being comfortable with himself as well, which is quoted above in the Self-Understanding section.

Another interesting aspect of political identities is that one participant allowed himself to be categorized as "gay" while he was in a committed homosexual relationship even though he identifies as bisexual because he felt that it was a political necessity. Paul explains:

I haven't had a relationship with a woman since [before] I was involved in a gay relationship for fourteen years... And that was five years ago when he passed away. There's that initial, "okay, you're with a man. That's your lover. You must be gay." So 99% of the time, that's fine. People can have that image. I think there's political capital in people seeing that, so I didn't care. My friends and family would know that, 'well, he's in a gay relationship, but his sexual identity is [bisexual]... So, I call myself 'gay' in my first encounter because it is political and it carries political weight.

However, many people in the bisexual community find this attitude to be politically problematic. Jenny explains the conflict as tied into the struggle to get bisexuality acknowledged as a category and a political identity.

There's such a fight for the bisexual identity that a lot of people within the bisexual identity are very upset that people are turning away from the word "bisexual". And [they are] sort of like, "We just need to unite under it." And it's like—[pause] I can't! I just can't identify as that. I think that it really in a lot of ways divided a community when it should be [pause] not worrying about that.

Paul further explained his position as to why he takes on "gay" as a political identity but not "bisexual" or "bi".

I'm too tired for that fight right now. I think that's more of a question of energy, because, that's another fight. Do I wanna take that on at this point in my life? It goes back to [needing] to take a break and just feeling burnt out on these things, especially when one of the groups I'd have to fight with is the gay community.

Because the "middle ground," as several interviewees refer to it, is not generally accepted as a viable identity in mainstream American culture, Paul feels that the community is still in the stage of getting homosexual couples acknowledged as equals. Therefore, he spends his political energy where he feels it will have the most immediate political impact, while serving as a stepping stone to getting less stagnant sexual identities acknowledged. Furthermore he brings up the issue that bisexuals must struggle for

acceptance in both the homosexual and heterosexual communities, which exposes the difficulties associated with the binary nature of categorization.

The terms that seem to carry the most political weight are those that have been reclaimed or re-appropriated by the LGBTQ community. Terms like “queer” and “dyke” fall into this category as they have extremely negative connotations for the majority, yet some of those who the terms are intended to oppress have united under it. Jenny celebrates this recent phenomenon.

That’s the great thing about where at least the *younger* queer community is headed. We *have* reclaimed a lot of terms. We’re queer—we’re proud of that. We’re dykes—we’re proud of that... I think that it really is difficult for some of the older generations in the LGBT community to really come to grips with that terminology... [“Queer”] has some sort of political connotation... The reclamation of the term makes it more powerful. And I think it’s partly because saying “Hey, I’m queer” throws some people off and makes them defensive... My parents hate it when I say it though. They think it’s a bad word.

By re-appropriating the term, the younger generations have turned the tables on bigots who use the word in a derogatory manner. “Queer” can be understood in a variety of ways, but all of my participants except for Paul and Beta (which shows the significance of the generation gap) gave a definition similar to Heather’s which is that it is a powerful term that refers to anything that is “not the heterosexual normative—not white, not male, not Protestant, not heterosexual.” Because Mad Dog attended college in her forties, she was able to share this powerful reclaiming of the term “queer”.

Something really did change my identity at school. I switched from “lesbian” to “queer”. I mean “lesbian” was just what people from the ‘70s said. And then all of a sudden I was like, ‘Hell yeah! I’m queer!’ I felt very comfortable, so that was a very positive transition for me. It felt really powerful, and it felt like a

much more politically strong statement than “lesbian”. And although “lesbian” in the ‘70s was [more political], “queer” is better now... And that’s why I embraced the term “queer”.

The word “womyn” is another example of a term that has been reclaimed by an oppressed population. Some womyn feel that “women” is a term that has been imposed upon females by males and carries with it a secondary status to men. Jenny elaborates:

For some of the people who I’ll call feminists, [“womyn”] has a really important meaning—we’re not from men [so] our name does not have to be spelled the same. You know, I don’t really care at all, but I think that’s always powerful when a group decides to reclaim something or to change something because they don’t like where it came from or what it was. It’s something that we’ve done for ourselves.

Again, the most powerful political labels are words that have been re-appropriated by people who have been ostracized by the mainstream.

Other labels such as “faggot” and “fluid” are used solely for purposes of social organizing. Walter shares that he is familiar with “fag” or “faggot” being used in social settings, but is still uneasy with its use even among other queer people.

I don’t like [“faggot”]—still too much bitterness from my childhood... Eventually, maybe we’ll be able to use that term, but I don’t know. It’s not like “queer” because “queer” had a fundamental meaning about difference way back in the day. “Faggot” has pretty much always meant faggot. And so I don’t see any reason that we need to replicate that word. I buy into ‘queer,’ I really do. But I do hear people use [faggot] as a social organizing principle. Not necessarily political like the Faggots-R-Us are coming to politically organize, but, you know, in social spaces, you’ll hear people talk about “Us faggots are gettin’ together”.

Paul does not feel as strongly as Walter about the term “faggot” but still does not use it freely on his own.

Somebody calling me a fag who is my best friend—okay, whatever—as opposed to a very conservative person who is meant to be insulting, you know I’m going to react to those things differently. To the extent that they are empowering, [that they’re] being used to try to describe someone’s place in life, then there’s value to them.

Paul recognizes that sometimes “fag” is used as a social organizing tool, but obviously context is what is important for him as far as who is using the term and what meaning they intend by it.

Because “fluid” is such a new term and its meaning is not widely understood, even amongst the queer community, it also tends to be a social organizing term or one that is used for self-understanding as described above. Melanie explained that most of the Fluid Sexuality members “just identify as “queer” because...if you say fluid, people think of water or something. They don’t really get it.... I like the term “fluid” better, and I would probably use it more if people got it, you know?” Jenny’s use of “queer” backs up Melanie’s assumption:

For simplicity’s sake, I just identify as “queer”. If I’m in the LGBT world, it’s really easy because everyone understands it. And I think [“bisexual”] is easier ‘cause it’s the one that I can just sort of throw out and not really have to explain it. When I’m like “Hey, I’m *fluuuuuuidd*” then they’re like “O oh, what does that mean?” And I don’t really wanna go into it.”

If a label does not relay the information, then it is worthless in social interaction.

Therefore, fluid is really used as a way to come to terms with identifying outside of binary categories for self-understanding.

Analysis: My Contributions to the Field of Social Science

My case study sheds light on previous social science literature by grounding it in the experiences of real people’s everyday lives. I chose to compare and contrast my work

with that of other theorists' at the end of my study rather than using their work to guide my own because I wanted to produce original research that avoided some of the pitfalls of previous academic analyses of gender and sexuality. One of these pitfalls I avoided was Kinsey and Klein's quantification of sexuality. I never referred to gender or sexuality in terms of a spectrum, although several of my participants did. I left it open to their interpretation. In this respect, I attempted to discard this current understanding of gender and sexuality in order to avoid making assumptions and to truly understand the arbitrary nature of our categorization of sexual acts as sexual orientations. I did not use their sexual experiences to decipher their sexual identities. My focus, rather, was the meaning that my participants attributed to these categories, terms, and labels. To Kinsey's credit, however, his goal was to demonstrate the fluidity of sexual activity which was revolutionary for the era in which he was writing. Unfortunately, he experienced the same problem that most of my interviewees did, which is that the general public misunderstood his progressive intentions. His work was used to argue in stagnant terms that ten percent of the population is gay whereas Kinsey argued that ten percent of the people in his study engaged in exclusively homosexual acts.

In terms of the debate between biological essentialism and social constructionism, I do not argue for either side. This would be counterproductive in my criticism of binary thinking. Rather, my field work shows three dimensions of this debate. In terms of essentialist identities, my participants often expressed that they had never fit into either binary box, whether it be male/female or heterosexual/homosexual. In other words, they felt they were "born that way". But on the other hand, they constructed their identities because language to explain their identity did not exist. They took an active role in their

process of identification by formulating a new ideology of gender and sexuality that described their identity more closely. My work extended beyond essentialism and constructionism because several participants mentioned that they viewed their gender expressions and sexual preferences in the same way that they viewed any of their likes or dislikes. For instance, Jenny noted that nobody attempts to research what causes people to be attracted to long hair, thick accents, or defined muscles, so why gender? Conceptualizing sexuality in these terms makes a mockery of the essentialist versus constructionist debate. My case study points out that the public and academics alike may be overanalyzing and oversimplifying gender and sexuality altogether.

Moreover, my research supports current literature on the political aspects of identity through real life examples of how political identities are formed and maintained. The people in my sample all self-identified as activists for queer issues, while some also fought for reproductive rights, the rights of women in prison, and a variety of other causes. As a result of their involvement in the queer community, they had an acute awareness of the importance of fluidity as a counter-hegemonic ideology. Other theorists have noted how terms like “lesbian” or “queer” carry political weight, but my case study explores how marginalized people are motivated to take on that weight.

In terms of language and the production of categories, the use of the term “fluid” marks a significant new shift in gender and sexual ideologies that have yet to be documented until now. My work examines cutting edge resistance to stagnant categorization. Although past theorists have created trajectories which attempt to formulate a model for how people come to identify as gay or bisexual [See Weinberg 1994; Troiden 1979], studies have not focused on the fact that people use a variety of

terms to describe their identity depending on what information they intend to relay and in what context they find themselves in. My work focuses on meaning, not so much on the coming out process unless it impacted the way someone has come to identify.

Furthermore, previous social science literature has yet to document how new terms are created, what purposes they serve, or the difficulty in creating a term which avoids further marginalization while retaining the ability to communicate with people who hold onto mainstream conceptions. “Fluid” is restrictive, as it is still grounded in concrete reality, which shows how language not only restricts understanding, but resistance as well.

Conclusions

Doing field work with the Fluidity group at Southern California College allowed me to answer many of my research questions, although this kind of conceptual understanding is a lifelong process. The concept of fluidity holds incredible significance in the greater scheme of understanding gender and sexuality because it allows people the freedom to live and let live. This is important because the majority of people do not fit the mold of binary boxes, yet most struggle to make it appear as if they do, or continuously question their identity when they do not. Fluid space relieves some of the societal pressure to identify with one of the ends of the Kinsey Scale. Fluidity marks an incremental change in conceptions of gender and sexuality as it can be understood as free of dichotomous thinking (unless one perceives it as the ability to flow back and forth across a spectrum). Most importantly, creating language to describe one’s identity where there was none before gives an empowered voice to marginalized people who are on the fringe of an already oppressed queer community while demonstrating the difficulties binary discourse has caused in the social world.

Due to limitations in time and other resources for this study, it was not possible to collect all the data I originally planned to incorporate in my analysis. Therefore, I have suggestions for future research which can stem off of my own. First, I suggest emphasizing generational differences in the use of labels by studying younger generations' process of reclaiming or politicizing derogatory terms and older generations' resistance to their usage. This kind of cross-generational research would expose linguistic difficulties in reaching common understandings, and could add a new perspective to my arguments regarding the use of terms for understanding in social interaction. For instance, do self-identified "queers" call themselves queer around people of older generations who take serious offense to its use? What impact does that have on the LGBTQ community's ability to form a cohesive political movement?

Second, I suggest interviewing a sample of "mainstreamers" or "people who just aren't in the know," as several of my participants referred to them. My interviewees explained that they only used the concept of fluidity around support group members, intimate friends, and partners because either it was too personal to discuss or because others would not understand it, leading to a forty-five minute clarification session. Interviewing heterosexuals who consider themselves fairly out of touch with the gay community or ignorant of queer issues to test for their understanding of fluidity could shed some light on whether "fluid" has the potential to become a more recognized term that could change the way people conceptualize sexuality and gender identity. This ties in directly with my analysis of "fluid" as a social organizing term.

Lastly, it would be fascinating to conduct a cross-cultural study, comparing the transformation of sexual identity categories used abroad with those used in the United

States. Most likely, it would serve as further evidence of the social constructionist view.

Another goal, though, would be to present cultural differences which provide evidence

for the arbitrary nature of categorization by sexuality and gender.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity / Racial Identity	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity
"Jack"	19	Italian / White	Female for the moment	Queer, Bi
"Melanie"	21	Thai & Chinese	Gender Queer	Bisexual
"Jenny"	21	White	Female, Girl, Womyn	Queer
"Lewis"	22	Caucasian	Male	Gay
"Heather"	23	Don't Know (adopted)	Bigender, Woman with 'Butch' qualities, Womyn, Female	Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Queer
"Walter"	32	White	Male	Bi, Bisexual, Queer
"Beta"	46	Caucasian	Male	Gay Man
"Paul"	47	Mexican American	Bisexual, More masculine than feminine, Physically Male, Very fluid	Did not differentiate between gender & sexuality
"Mad Dog"	48	Mexican American	Woman	Lesbian to Femme Dyke to Queer

*** This chart displays how each of the participants self-identified in the course of the interview and uses their terminology ***

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