

**Making Sexual Selves: A Qualitative Study of  
Lesbian and Gay Youth**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on data collected from nineteen qualitative semi-structured interviews with young lesbians and gay men, this thesis addresses the construction of sexual selves by those young people interviewed for this Ph.D. project. The interviews were conducted between January and December 2008. Participants were aged from sixteen to twenty-one, and all were living in the North-East of England at the time. This project is situated within what is considered to be a moment of social change in respect of the construction of lesbian and gay identities, notably due to the 'normalization' of those identities. This is a period in which the young lesbians and gay men interviewed for this project may be seen as growing up and coming out in. The study itself explores the ways in which the young people interviewed developed a sense of themselves as sexual, asking about the significance of lesbian and gay identities in the construction of those selves. Theoretically, a symbolic interactionist perspective is adopted, this project exploring the 'everyday' processes through which sexual selves were made and maintained. The data collected suggested a number of complex reflexive debates in which the young lesbians and gay men came to understand themselves as sexual. Addressing issues of desire and intimacy, the adoption of sexual identities, negotiations of sameness and difference, and the telling of sexual lives, this thesis discusses the complex, and at times paradoxical, ways in which lesbian and gay sexual selves were made.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### Situating the Research

Kimmel (2007: xv) has asked whether sociology will ‘ever come round to regarding John Gagnon and William Simon among the founders of a new sociology of the self – a sexual self’. In highlighting the significance of Gagnon and Simon and their influential text *Sexual Conduct* (2005, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, original publication date 1973) to the development of a sociology of sexuality, Kimmel (2007: xv) points to Gagnon and Simon’s main contribution – their ‘work on the centrality of sex in the construction of identity, and the significance of the social in the experience of sex’. Theoretically, and as should be evident from the title of this thesis, the notion of the sexual self associated with Gagnon and Simon is central to this project, which is concerned with the construction, or ‘making’, of sexual selves. It explores both the centrality of sexuality to the production of self as well as the primacy of ‘the social’ to the ways in which sexuality is ‘interpreted and constructed’ (Richardson, 1996: 10). This relates to a broader point, in focussing on the significance of ‘the social’, this thesis addresses the ‘everyday’ nature of sexuality, seeing it as bound up in everyday sociality. In doing so, ‘a distinctively sociological approach to sexuality’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 1) is used where this thesis adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective, something laid out in detail in the literature review.

Symbolic interactionism has a significant heritage in the theorizing of sexuality and self. Including the pioneering work of Gagnon and Simon’s, symbolic interactionism has been developed through the works of Plummer (1975, 1981a, 1981b, Jackson (1978), Ponse (1978), and Richardson (1981). Each of these writers sought to ground the study of sexuality within a sociological framework. Despite this heritage, symbolic interactionism’s influence may be seen as having waned in recent years. Approaches to theorizing sexuality have leaned, since the early 1990s, towards more cultural and psychoanalytic perspectives (Jackson, 1999). Butler’s (1990, 1993) and Sedgewick’s (1990) work have been particularly important in this respect. A recent move however towards a ‘material’ analysis of

gender and sexuality may signal a return to a sociological approach to theorizing sexuality (Jackson, 2001; Hennessy, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006). Jackson's (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, with Scott, 2010a, 2010b) recent work, for example, is an attempt to provide a sociological account of sexuality (and gender), one informed by symbolic interactionism. For Jackson and Scott (2010b: 1-2), this is something motivated by a desire to:

‘...address aspects of sexuality largely sidelined by queer theory – the everyday gendered doing of sexuality in interaction – thus enabling us to locate sexuality within wider patterns of sociality.’

These are issues Jackson and Scott (2010b) consider to have been neglected in the turn away from sociologically grounded accounts of sexuality. It is at this intellectual juncture that this project is situated, with sexuality being understood as constructed within interaction. Throughout this thesis too, notably chapters four and five, the significance of gender to the understanding of sexuality is emphasised.

Substantively, this project's main concern is the significance of lesbian and gay identities, particularly as they are understood by young people today. The main query underpinning this research asks what 'being', or identifying as, lesbian or gay means to young people. What work do those particular categories do for those young people who identify with them? What significance do they have in coming to 'better' understand themselves, as well as in 'giving an account'<sup>1</sup> of themselves? There are a number of reasons for asking these questions, not least a continued concern with the experiences and lives of those young people who come out as lesbian or gay, and the continued incidents of discrimination and homophobia visited upon them (DfES, 2004; Stonewall, 2007). Whilst this concern with discrimination may serve as a legitimate rationale for ensuring that the voices of young lesbian and gay people continue to be heard, this research is not only motivated by that. This project was also carried out in a period that has seen a number policy transformations concerning sexuality and gender, policies enacted by successive Labour governments (Storr, 2001; Stychin, 2003; Carabine

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<sup>1</sup> I paraphrase Butler (2005) here, although the theoretical framework offered differs.

and Munro, 2004; Epstein *et al.*, 2004; Weeks, 2004). These policy changes are too numerous to list here, as such a list has been given in Appendix A. Many of these policy developments are considered to have had major implications for the sexual and intimate lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the UK (Waites, 2003; Taylor, 2005; Shipman and Smart, 2007).

Whilst this project makes no claim to suggest any causal relationship between legislative change and the construction of young people's sexual selves; that these changes have occurred constitutes an important basis for this research. Further, the general picture seems to suggest that the lives and subjectivities of lesbian and gay youth remain under-researched (Miceli, 2002: 199). Where research has been done, that research has often been premised on concerns around the risks faced by lesbian and gay youth as a group (discrimination, homophobia, drug use, homelessness, risky sexual behaviour, social isolation, suicide ideation) (Cull *et al.*, 2006), and has often been more concerned with the impacts of stigmatization on psychological, physical, social, economic and educational wellbeing and how these may be alleviated (Miceli, 2002: 200). Issues of subjectivity, it has been argued, are often sidelined as a result of this focus on risk, and thus rarely interrogated or theorized (Talburt, 2004; Talburt *et al.*, 2004; Rasmussen, 2006; Driver, 2008). This is seen to be a paradoxical omission in work on the negotiation of sexual health where issues of sexual desire are often left out (Dean, 2000; Rofes, 2002; Halperin, 2007). (Although the concern here is often with gay men's desire.) This research is an attempt to address issues of subjectivity, as a significant aspect of the construction of sexual selves (Plante, 2007: 32).

One premise that underpins this research is that the construction of sexual selves, as Kimmel (2007: xv) points out, is inextricably linked with the social. Sexuality, as much as any other aspect of human behaviour, may be seen as 'subject to sociocultural molding' (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 198), as 'the product of human action and history' (Vance, 1989: 13). How sexual selves are constructed, within the specific context described above, is both the primary focus of this thesis and the reason it has been carried out. Before going on to the main body of the thesis, the rest of this chapter delineates the primary objectives of the research. The following section addresses the initial inspiration behind the research, as well as

its development from the original research proposal to the project it has become. This is followed by a brief section in which the research questions are laid out. Finally, before moving on to the literature review in chapter two, a description of the structure of the thesis is given along with a brief outline of each chapter.

### **Developing the Research: Policy Context and Initial Ideas**

The initial idea behind the research was concerned with the policy rhetoric being adopted by New Labour at the time in which the initial funding bid for the project was being developed, particularly as that rhetoric related to issues of sexuality and secondary schooling. At that point the main focus had been on the discourses of ‘diversity’, ‘equality’ and ‘inclusion’ which had characterized New Labour’s rhetoric generally (Stylin, 2003; Johnson and Steinberg, 2004), as well as their approach to youth and education policy. The interest at that moment had been in how New Labour’s emphasis on diversity and equality may have shaped experiences of secondary education, particularly in light of the repeal of section 28<sup>2</sup> (Ellis and High, 2004). The motivation behind the research, at that point, had been to consider whether experiences of secondary education were being transformed by such discourses. The consequences of such a rhetoric of ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’, and ‘equality’ on the formation of lesbian and gay sexual selves being largely implicit within this. These discourses were evidenced in the government’s 2005 *Youth Matters* green paper as well as within then recent documents associated with the ‘Healthy Schools’ programme (dealing with the emotional health and wellbeing of young people), which had, in part, sought to address problems of homophobic bullying (DfES, 2004). This was part of the then Labour government’s strategy to improve the life chances of all young people, initiated by the 2003 *Every Child Matters* green paper produced as a result of the enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Section 28 was an amendment to the Local Government Act 1986 preventing local authorities from ‘intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’, thus preventing maintained ‘schools from teaching ‘the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’’ (Local Government Act, 1986, cited in Clarke *et al.*, 2010: 268)

<sup>3</sup> Climbié, an eight year old West African girl, was abused and murdered by her guardians in London in the year 2000. The subsequent enquiry into her death, and the failure of children’s services from preventing that engendered a ‘radically new approach to improving the wellbeing of

This was considered to be an interesting context in which to explore the experiences of schooling of young lesbian and gay people, particularly with regards to homophobic bullying, which is thought to have remained prevalent, or become more common, at that time (Stonewall, 2007). This is also how the research question that has guided the research was initially developed. This initial interest had led me to ask what, in this context, it meant to identify as lesbian or gay. How was this particular policy programme shaping the school lives of young lesbian and gay people, and the meanings attributed to sexual identities? This was the case where the initial plan had been to explore the relationship between discourses of diversity, equality and inclusion and the construction of lesbian and gay identities in secondary schools (perhaps far easier said than done).

The focus of the research project eventually developed from this primary concern with policy towards a more general focus on self and identity. The project had moved in this direction for a number of reasons. Firstly, trying to ‘connect’ or establish linkages between policy developments and the construction of sexual identities was not really feasible as a research project. In addition to this, the focus on experiences of secondary schooling was gradually shifted away from where it was felt that the project had become less concerned with experiences of schooling and more to do with the construction of sexual identities within a particular policy context. This shift was also motivated by practical and ethical concerns about doing school based research on lesbian and gay youth, including issues of access and visibility, something Valentine *et al.* (2005) considers problematic when doing research on lesbian and gay youth in school settings. The decision to shift from a focus on policy meant that the focus on schooling was less of a concern, since the specifics of school policy were no longer being addressed. As such, the focus of the project had developed into a more general question about self, sexuality and youth, the three key concepts which this project addresses. Thus the project had become the project it is now, one concerned with the ‘making’ of sexual selves in youth. As a result of this, the interconnections between youth and

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children from birth...by making organisations that provide services to children work better together.’ (The Guardian, 2009)

sexuality, and the significance of sexual identities to lesbian and gay young people had become central to the research. Of course, whilst the policy context was made less of an explicit focus within the research, this is not to suggest it is unimportant. Rather, it is acknowledged, as made clear above, that the research has been carried within a specific policy context. This is a context that has been shaped through the extension of a range of sexual and intimate citizenship rights to LGBT people (Richardson, 2000, 2004, 2005; Plummer, 2003a); rights both ‘necessitated’ and enabled by wider transformations in people’s sexual lives (Weeks, 2007: xii).

### **Research Questions**

Despite these gradual shifts in focus, the key areas at the heart of this research have stayed the same, these being self, sexuality and youth. More specifically, this project focuses on gay and lesbian youth, and the ‘making’ of sexual selves. These are all important components of the projects main research question. This question, borrowed in part from Martin’s (1996) *Femininity Played Straight*, is:

*What is the significance of ‘being’, or identifying as, lesbian or gay for young lesbian and gay people?*

A number of more pointed questions were devised in order to explore this question further. These are as follows:

- 1) *What, for young people, prompts the adoption of the categories ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ in claiming a sense of ‘self’ as sexual?*
- 2) *In the articulating a sense of ‘self’ as sexual, what significance is attributed to the categories ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’? What meanings are attributed to those categories?*
- 3) *How does identifying as lesbian or gay inform/shape young people’s relationships with significant others along boundaries of sameness and difference? How is ‘self’ structured through relationships with others?*
- 4) *How does identifying as lesbian or gay shape the ways in which young people understand/frame their lives, both as they have lived them and as they intend to live them?*

While there is some overlap between these questions, the four questions laid out above are roughly addressed in different chapters of this thesis (although, again with some overlap). The first question is addressed in chapter four, the first data chapter of this thesis. This chapter engages with the adoption of sexual identities and the construction of selves as sexual. The second question is also addressed in chapter four where it addresses the sexual aspects attached to the categories ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’. Question two is responded to further in chapter five, the second data chapter, which deals with the non-sexual, gendered meanings attached to lesbian and gay identities, both by the individuals in question, and the meanings perceived to be ascribed by others. Question three is addressed in this same chapter where it explores the relational aspects of identity, and the ‘doing’ of self in relation to others. Question three also pertains to chapter four, the first data chapter, where the emergence of the sexual self is seen to occur in interaction. Chapter six, the third data chapter, engages directly with the final question where it explores the stories told about living sexual lives. Chapter six explores the sexual stories told through which the young people interviewed made sense of themselves and their lives as sexual.

### **Thesis Structure and Chapter Outlines**

Before these questions are responded to in the data chapters, a description of the theoretical approach is given in chapter two, the literature review. Chapter three addresses the methodological approach taken in carrying out the research. This following section gives a brief summary of each chapter, beginning with chapter two, the literature review:

*Chapter Two:* The literature review discusses the relevant body of literature in which this research project is situated. The first part of the literature review lays out a brief history of the social construction of sexuality, emphasising the significance of social constructionism for the project. Following that is a more detailed discussion of symbolic interactionism, in which the works of several key interactionist writers are discussed. A final section of the literature review addresses literature that explores the contexts in which young people’s lives are lived, and how those shape young people’s sexual subjectivities and patterns of aging. This section includes a specific focus on normative heterosexuality as

shaping the ways in which ‘normal’ lesbian and gay identities are constructed (Seidman, 2005), where the logics of normative heterosexuality is taken as a significant aspect of the lives of young people (Valentine *et al.*, 2003).

*Chapter Three:* The methodology chapter discusses the methods adopted for this research. Underlying epistemological considerations, and the use of semi-structured interviews, are discussed in relation to the theoretical approach laid out in the literature review. Power relations inherent in the doing of qualitative research are also addressed in order to situate myself, as the researcher, within the research process. Following this initial discussion, a detailed description of the research design is given, including accounts of the development of the interview guide, the sampling procedure used, access and recruitment, and the ‘doing’ of the interviews. Following that a description of the analysis and a discussion of ethics are given.

*Chapter Four:* The first of the three data chapters is the chapter from which this thesis derives its title: *Making Sexual Selves*. It is given this title where it deals with issues of ‘becoming’, exploring the construction of sexual subjectivities in adolescence and the adoption of lesbian and gay identities. As such it serves as a central focus for the thesis as a whole which engages with the broader construction of sexual selves. The chapter is separated into three parts, the first dealing with the gendering of desire in social interaction, the second the embodiment of desire, and the third the adoption of lesbian and gay categories. Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) notions of interpersonal and intrapsychic scripting guide the analysis of the data. The chapter as a whole aims to respond to queries regarding the adoption of sexual categories (Plummer, 1981a; Richardson, 1984), framing the adoption of sexual identities in terms of desire. Notions of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ (Weinberg, 1978; Plummer, 1981c; Richardson, 1984) are addressed in seeing the constructions of sexual selves in terms of both ‘being’ and ‘doing’ and their relation to each other.

*Chapter Five:* The second data chapter, chapter five, addresses the significance of sexual identities, asking what meanings are given to those identities. In doing so, it addresses the relationship between the adoption of sexual identities and the construction of ‘self’. This connects to the previous chapter, as well as to the

broader research question, where it draws out further the importance (or not) of sexuality to the making of self. The chapter is separated into two parts, the first explores the construction of self, and the relationship sexuality had to self understandings. The second addresses the articulation of sexual identities, looking at ways in which constructions of self as sexual were expressed in the disclosure of identity. Notions of sameness and difference are discussed across the chapter, where the significance attached to sexual identities shaped, and was shaped by, understandings of sameness and difference informed by a homosexual/heterosexual binary. These understandings of sameness and difference are situated later on in the chapter within the context of a ‘politics of normalization’ (Seidman, 2001, 2005; Richardson, 2004, 2005).

*Chapter Six:* Responding to the final research question, the third data chapter builds on the previous one where it further addresses the significance of sexuality in the narrating of sexual lives. Using Plummer’s (1995) notion of the sexual story, it looks at the way in which the construction of sexual selves informed the way in which the young lesbians and gay men interviewed for the project talked about both sexual origins and their ‘imagined’ intimate futures (Henderson *et al.*, 2007). In doing so, two types of sexual stories are examined, firstly scientific stories of aetiology, and secondly stories of adulthood, each of which are informed by the adoption of lesbian and gay identities. In so doing, this chapter explores the ‘maintenance’ (Richardson and Hart, 1981) of lesbian and gay identities through the telling of sexual stories.

*Chapter Seven:* By way of concluding the thesis, chapter seven provides a summary of the three data chapters discussed prior to that. The main themes of those chapters are drawn out, with their contributions to a wider literature on symbolic interactionism and the social construction of sexuality being emphasised. A subsequent discussion of the theme of sameness and difference is provided as way of unifying the data provided throughout the analysis. Following that, the thesis is concluded by offering an account of what is considered to be its main contribution, as well as what are thought to be a number of limitations. Having introduced the research and what shall be discussed in the thesis, the main body of the thesis will now be presented. The following chapter situates this research

within a wider body of literature, providing a review of the relevant theories used throughout.

## Chapter 2 – Theorizing Sexual Selves

### Introduction

The theoretical framework adopted in this project is symbolic interactionism. Whilst it is recognised that there are other ways of theorizing sexuality and self (as well as subjectivity) – for example sociological approaches offered by Giddens (1991, 1993) and Bourdieu (2001), narrative frameworks (Ricoeur, 1995), as well as psychoanalytic (Dean, 2000) and postmodern/queer ones (Butler, 1990, 2004a, 2005; Halperin, 2007) – symbolic interactionism is used as this project attends to the ‘embeddedness’ of sexuality in ‘everyday’ social interaction (Plummer, 2002b). Goffman’s (1990a [1959], 1990b [1963]) approach to theorizing self is also discussed as it is informed by symbolic interactionism (Manning, 1992: 18). The notion of the ‘everyday’ is fundamental to this project since it understands sexuality as ‘embedded in the daily practices and strategies of everyday life’ (Plummer, 1995: 15). There is an empirical point to this, interactionism’s focus on an ‘obdurate empirical world’ (Plummer, 2003b: 520) provides a way of examining sexuality as it is understood and practised by individuals in their everyday social lives and interactions.

This is something echoed by Jackson (2001: 287) who has argued in favour of symbolic interactionism as a method for understanding the material conditions of people’s everyday lives. These conditions, it is argued, are believed to shape sexual identities (Richardson, 1996: 9). Symbolic interactionism has been offered as a sociological alternative to poststructuralist and queer theories of sexuality which are thought to have ‘eclipsed’ sociological accounts (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 1). This project may be understood as located in a shift ‘back’ to feminist concerns with the ‘material’ (McLaughlin, 2006). This is deemed to be important where queer theory, whilst being beneficial to feminist theories of materiality (Hennessy, 2006), is felt to be ‘removed from the ordinary everyday lived experiences of sexuality that most people encounter across the world in their daily lives’ (Plummer, 2003b: 521). Poststructuralist and queer theories however continue to raise important questions about contemporary understandings of

sexual subjectivities and the experience of those as part of their material everyday lives (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2006). The experience of sexuality is thus a matter for empirical investigation, and is the central focus of the research.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: the first section deals with a history of development of social constructionist theories of sexuality; this is provided as a means to embed this project in a wider body of work on sexuality. Following that a brief delineation of the intersections between the key concepts (self, identity and sexuality) used in the research is given. This is followed by a detailed section on symbolic interactionism and its value in theorizing sexual selfhood, identity and embodiment. Interactionism is addressed through discussions of works by key symbolic interactionists, including that of Goffman (1990a [1959], 1990b [1963]), who is used to elaborate further on the ‘sociality’ of the sexual self (Jackson and Scott, 2010b). Before concluding, the final section of this chapter seeks to contextualize the lives of the young people interviewed for this research.

### **Background: Essentialism and the Social Construction of Sexuality**

In looking at the construction of sexuality, I want to explore the issue of essentialism in theories of homosexuality (Richardson, 1984). Essentialism has been described as an attempt ‘to explain the properties of a complex whole by reference to a supposed inner truth or essence’ (Weeks, 2003: 7). With regards to sexuality, this perspective assumes that ‘there exist, and probably always have existed, two groups of people: those who are homosexual and those who are not’ (Richardson, 1984: 79). This view sees homosexuality as ‘a core and enduring aspect of being of a group of individuals’ (Richardson, 1984: 79). This essentialism was deeply embedded in medical models of sexuality with medical professionals, and many others, seeing homosexuality as a ‘condition’, describing it in terms of perversion, gender inversion and deviance (McIntosh, 1968; Weeks, 1977; Foucault, 1990 [1978]). These medical models were also primarily concerned with ascertaining the aetiology of homosexuality, as opposed to the social conditions of ‘homosexuals’ (Masters and Johnson, 1979). Although much of this concern primarily addressed homosexuality in men, there were attempts to delineate female homosexuality by these same professions (Gagnon and Simon, 2005). This construction of homosexuality as pathological was also seen as set

against normative discourses of monogamous, reproductive heterosexuality as the most natural form of human sexuality (Rubin, 1984).

The social constructionist critique that emerged in the late sixties and seventies sought to challenge this view of homosexuality as an essence and sexuality as a natural function of the body. The constructionist debate argued instead that the notion of sexuality as a fixed essence was a modern idea. Whilst the behaviours implicit in sexual categories are present throughout history, it was suggested that the notion that individuals had a unified sexual being, and as a result could be understood in terms of categories such as homosexual and heterosexual, was a product of transformations in Western disciplinary discourse and practice (Foucault, 1990 [1978]). Pivotal to this critique was a distinction between homosexuality as an identity or role ('being') and homosexual behaviours or acts ('doing') (Weinberg, 1978; Plummer, 1981c; Richardson, 1984). Constructionists thus argued that 'the homosexual', as a form of being, emerged out of eighteenth and nineteenth century sexologists' classification systems. The 'homosexual', rather than being a type of person, or being, was a socially produced category applied to those who 'did' certain homosexual acts. As Plummer (1995: 93, emphasis in original) succinctly puts it, '*In the past, the possibility to choose to possess a gay identity simply did not exist.*' Mary McIntosh's (1968) *The Homosexual Role* is considered groundbreaking in this respect as it addressed the historical production of 'the homosexual' as a type of person.

In order to challenge this essentialism and pathologizing, and the emotional consequences of being defined as 'sick' (Gagnon and Simon, 2005), sociologists and historians saw that it was important to demonstrate that 'homosexuality' was a product of historical developments and not an innate 'aberration'. Social constructionists sought to provide an alternative history of the emergence of 'homosexual' identities, although writers differ 'as to precisely when the idea of the homosexual person emerged' (Richardson, 1984: 79). This was, as Weeks (2005: 186) states, done to 'validate' lesbian and gay experience, not deny it. What was being challenged was both the construction of a category used to denote a type of person (the 'homosexual') in medical and legal discourse, and the negative meanings and assumptions of universality attached to those categories

(Halperin, 1998; Weeks, 2005). Given the focus of this thesis it is not necessary to go into the specificities of these histories (see instead McIntosh, 1968; Weeks, 1977; Foucault, 1990 [1978]). Instead they are identified so as to emphasise the significance of the constructionist critique for this project and the way it conceptualizes sexuality.

What writers such as Gagnon and Simon (2005) and others were doing was denaturalising all forms of sexuality, not only homosexuality, although, whilst Gagnon and Simon did address it, heterosexuality received little attention from others until the eighties (Rich, 1981; Vance, 1989). The objective, as Gagnon and Simon (2005: 198) state, was to show that 'human sexuality – however closely it appears to be tied to biological processes – is subject to sociocultural molding to a degree surpassed by few other forms of human behaviour.' Sexuality, Vance (1989: 13) suggests, was 'in our thinking...fluid and changeable, the product of human action and history rather than the invariant result of the body, biology or an innate sex drive'. This critique was significant in developing both a sociology of sexuality and the sociological enquiry into homosexuality (Simon and Gagnon, 1967; Plummer, 1981b;), although this development may have been secondary to the more immediate concern to validate lesbian and gay identities (Weeks, 2005: 189). In this, constructionism also questioned the division between society and the body, denying that sexuality was 'a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check' (Foucault, 1990 [1978]: 105). Social constructionist theories of the body are discussed in detail further below.

Conceptual tools were generated through which to question the naturalness and universality of sexual categories. For example, McIntosh (1968), pre-empting Sedgwick (1990), questioned the division of people into a binary homo/hetero division, drawing on Kinsey's research (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948, 1953) to show the prevalence of individual sexual histories that were neither exclusively heterosexual nor exclusively homosexual. McIntosh's notion of the 'homosexual role', in seeing 'homosexual' as a culturally imposed label, shifted homosexuality away from being a bodily 'condition' to a form of social control. Another example, Gagnon and Simon's (2005: 13) 'sexual scripts', highlighted the ways in which sexual behaviours, rather than being 'spontaneous', were dependent on 'the

proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behaviour'. Plummer's (1975) symbolic interactionist approach 'explored...the labelling and interactional processes through which identities were shaped and organised' (Weeks, 2005: 189). Foucault's (1990 [1978]) focus on language and the deployment of sexuality through regulatory discourses and biopower highlighted the distinctiveness of 'modern techniques of social and sexual regulation' (Halperin, 1998: 99). (See Weeks, 2005 for more on the contributions of social constructionists to theorizing sexuality.)

Whilst each approach is not without its critics (see Weeks, 1981 for a critique of the various approaches), they helped to demonstrate the complexity and social character of sexuality (Brickell, 2006). The multifaceted character of sexuality is illustrated in Jackson's (2006a: 45) view of social constructionism as 'multi-layered', having things to say about sexuality at different levels, ranging from normative heterosexuality as a social structure to the ways 'we experience desires and emotions and make sense of ourselves as embodied gendered and sexual beings.' As a result social constructionism made room for analyses that were not limited to a focus on the ways in which sexuality was perceived to be 'biologically driven' (Kimmel, 2007: vii). It opened up spaces to explore the multiple, intersecting ways in which sexualities are created and shaped in society (Weeks, 2005: 188). Foucault (1990 [1978]: 105-106) has thus suggested that sexuality should be understood as:

'...a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.'

Sexuality, rather than being the 'invariant result of the body' (Vance, 1989: 13), is understood as a product of the 'intricate and multiple ways in which our emotions, desires and relationships are shaped by the society we live in' (Cartledge and Ryan, 1983, cited in Weeks, 2003: 17). Society, rather than controlling sexuality, is productive of it (Foucault, 1990 [1978]). In exploring the construction and adoption of sexual categories, social constructionists have sought to call into question those very categories by destabilising the assumption that those

categories correspond to an unquestionable internal truth. This is an intellectual tradition later built upon by queer theory, a diverse body of work that has sought to challenge the fixity and rigidity of all gender and sexual classifications, as well as to critique the notion of identity *per se* (Fuss, 1989, 1991; Butler, 1990, 1993; and Sedgwick, 1990).

This brief introduction to social constructionism has been provided to position this project in a number of ways; firstly, in order to contextualize this project within a wider sociological history of the study of sexuality. Secondly it is to provide a degree of clarity as to the way in which ‘sexuality’ is conceived of as a social construct in this research. It has also been provided in order to recognise the socio-historical specificity of notions of sexuality, sexual categorisation and sexual identities, particularly those of lesbian and gay which are central to this research, and the necessity to not take those as natural or given. One final reason is to make sense of the notion of sexuality as ‘socially constructed’, and what that means for thinking through the way in which the young people taking part in this project talked about sexuality. In the following section the specific theoretical approach adopted in this project is discussed.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Symbolic interactionism itself has had a significant impact on theorizing the social construction of sexuality. Plummer and Gagnon and Simon were all influenced by interactionist perspectives, taking social interaction as central to their understandings of sexuality. The following discussion elaborates on symbolic interactionism as a theoretical model. This begins with a brief introduction to its conceptual underpinnings, moving onto a more detailed discussion of the relationship between symbolic interactionism and the theorizing of sexuality. Key interactionist writers are addressed throughout the discussion, including Plummer (1975, 1995), Gagnon and Simon (2005), Goffman (1990a [1959], 1990b [1963]), and the recent feminist writings of Jackson (1999, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; with Scott, 2010a, 2010b). Their works are used to raise questions about sexual identity that are relevant to the data. Initially a number of related concepts used throughout this thesis are delineated in order to provide conceptual clarity, these being notions of self, identity and sexuality.

### *1) Conceptual Clarifications: Sexual Selves, Subjectivities and Identities*

For brevity the term ‘sexual self’ has been adopted and is used throughout this literature review. This is also done where the main focus of this thesis is on lesbian and gay identities and the ways in which those are central to informing a sense of self. As stated at the beginning of this thesis, sexual selfhood is a notion attributed to Gagnon and Simon (Kimmel, 2007), and refers to the centrality of sexuality to the modern self; where ‘in modernity, sexuality becomes increasingly regarded as a distinct and highly significant social domain within which individuals may anchor themselves’ (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 192). The phrase ‘sexual self’ is used in an inclusive manner in this review. It refers to notions of ‘sexual selfhood’, subjectivity and identity. Some terms are used interchangeably; self and subjectivity for example (see below). Sexuality, sexual identity and lesbian and gay, are used interchangeably also, even though sexuality does not exclusively refer to sexual identity. Where sexuality is understood in terms other than identity, for example when talking about heterosexuality as a practice, or an institution, this is made clear (Jackson, 1996; Richardson, 1996). The relationship between sexual selves and sexual identities is more complex. Jackson and Scott (2010a: 123) see self and subjectivity, as equivalent terms, as referring ‘broadly to our subjective sense of ourselves...embedded in everyday sociality’. This is echoed in Plante’s (2007: 33) definition of sexual subjectivity as ‘a person’s sense of herself as a sexual being’. Sexual identity, on the other hand, is seen as ‘a more specific and less inclusive term...narrowly conceived as our sense of who we are...translated into labels’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 122), labels which we use to make sense of who we are to ourselves and others.

The difference between self and identity has been understood through a metaphor of interwoven threads (Seidman, 2002; Jackson, 2007). For Seidman (2002: 9), this metaphor is used to suggest a sense of the irreducibility of the individual to a single thread, or identity. The metaphor adopted in this thesis, particularly in chapter five where notions of selfhood as ‘complex’ are discussed, is Jackson’s (2007: 7) view of self as a ‘complex, many stranded cord’. This Jackson (2007: 7) sees as:

‘...running through our lives, but one which does not necessarily stay the same since the threads that comprise it can be frayed or strengthened and are continually being spliced or woven in with other threads, remade over time.’

The metaphor might usefully be applied to attempts to understand the way in which people adopt identity labels in making sense of themselves in multiple, shifting and contingent ways. Self is considered to be a more expansive notion than identity, ‘encompassing all the different, contradictory and fractured ways in which we inhabit the social world’ (Lawler, 2008: 149). Self includes the many desires, practices and pleasures which may get classed as sexual, as well as aspects of life that may not be classed as sexual. These different components, in Jackson’s (2007) metaphor, may be classed as threads, all of which are interwoven, and constantly shifting and changing. Identity may be understood in terms of the way in which various intersecting threads are understood as amounting to something meaningful about the self, which are then labelled as an identity through socially and historically available sexual categories. Where sexual selves are discussed there is a focus on self-reflection and understanding (this is particularly the case with chapter four) (Jenkins, 2008: 49). Sexual identity is used to refer to the interviewees’ identities as lesbian or gay, the enactment of those identities and the meanings attributed to them (the phrase sexual identity is used more in chapter five and six).

The distinction between self and identity might be taken as an internal-external dialectic with self being our subjective understanding of who we are (internal) and identity being the socially constructed label through which we, as persons are understood (external) (Jenkins 2008). This parallels Woodward’s (2004: 18) understanding of identity as ‘the interface between the personal...and the social’. Although this is only a way of framing the distinction, self and identity may be considered to be at once inside and outside, where self and identity are socially embedded, and part of the same process of self-construction (Jackson, 2007: 5). It is thus important to emphasise the mutuality and simultaneity of these terms. Jenkins (2008: 49) defines self as ‘an individual’s reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity, constituted *vis-à-vis* others in terms of similarity and difference’. This provides a useful account of the relationship between self and

identity, and the processes of reflection mentioned. Similarity and difference are central to Jenkins' (2008: 17) definition of identity, which I will return to later.

## 2) *Sexual Selves and Symbolic Interactionism*

The term 'self' is perhaps a more significant one than 'identity' for symbolic interactionism where early interactionists such as Mead (1967 [1934]), Cooley (1962 [1909], 1964 [1902]) and Blumer (1998 [1969]) were interested in theorizing the constitutive relationship between self and society (Denzin, 1992: 4). Symbolic interactionism, as Blumer (1998 [1969]: 79) defines it, attends to 'interaction as it takes place between human beings...mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions'. This is echoed by Plummer (2002: 21) who sees symbolic interactionism as focusing on the ways social worlds are 'interpreted and given sense through a dense web of negotiable symbols which are themselves historically produced'. Self is constituted as part of this process of sense making. Self is seen as coming into being in the ongoing process of self-reflection by the individual in society, manifested within these social worlds and webs of meaning (Mead, 1967 [1934]). Self is taken here as a relational process, bound up in the available forms of social knowledge through which people render themselves intelligible to themselves and others. As Jenkins (2008: 40) puts it 'selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed...in the ongoing interaction during which individuals define and redefine themselves and others, throughout their lives.' This is an understanding of selfhood that Jenkins derives from Cooley (1962 [1909], 1964 [1902]) and Mead (1967 [1934]).

Mead's understanding of self is particularly significant for this project as it is methodologically concerned with the 'reflexive' construction of self. The young lesbian and gay people interviewed were being asked in the interview to 'reflect' on their understandings of themselves as part of the interview process (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Reflexivity was at the heart of Mead's construction of the self as a process (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 125), fundamental to understanding the relationship between the 'I' and the 'me':

'The 'I' reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the 'me' and we react to it as an 'I'...The 'I' is the response of the organism to others: the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself (sic) assumes' (Mead, 1934, cited in Jenkins, 2008: 62)

In this theorization of self, the 'I' is 'mobilized in a dialogic, ongoing interplay with the 'me' (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 125). The 'me' is our understanding of self produced in interaction with others, and within a context of the perceptions and views of others. The 'I' is a 'response' to that 'social' self-understanding. Self is therefore made sense of as part of a fluid, ongoing process in which 'external' definitions of ourselves are reflected on in terms of our own self-understanding. This again being an internal-external dialectic (Jenkins, 2008). As a result, self is seen as always socially and temporally embedded, as opposed to existing 'within' the person, or being 'pre-social' (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 125).

This construction of self underpins a key theoretical assumption that is central to this research, and the data analysis presented in this thesis. This assumption is that sexuality is something that is symbolic and made sense of. It is, as such, interpreted, coming into being through a process of interpretation and reflection. This is contrasted to the understanding of sexuality as an essence discussed earlier in the literature review, and is derived from symbolic interactionism which has a firm heritage in the theorizing the social construction of sexuality (Plummer, 1975, 1995; Gagnon and Simon, 2005). In these accounts sexuality is seen as part of the self as opposed to separate from it, coming into being through a process of sexual self-understanding and meaning making (Cass, 1985; Troiden, 1985). Below I discuss Gagnon and Simon's (2005) notions of sexual scripting in relation to adolescence. This is area of their work that is described specifically in order to raise questions about the ways young people 'become' sexual (something explored in chapter four), and the ways sexuality is bound up in a process of sexual meaning making and self understanding in adolescence.

Of course symbolic interactionism has been argued to have its weaknesses. Weeks (1981: 95), for example, has argued that symbolic interactionism is unable to account for social change, stating that interactionism:

‘...is unable to theorize why...there are, at various times, shifts in the location of the sexual taboos...Both in theory and in practice it has ignored the historical location of sexual taboos. Interactionism therefore stops precisely at the point where theorization seems essential: at the point of historical determination and ideological structuring in the creation of subjectivity.’

I take Weeks to mean that although symbolic interactionism can ably describe the processes by which self emerges and is understood, it cannot, on its own, theorise the historical developments which made those understandings possible in the first place, and thus the way self is subject to those transformations. His reference to ‘taboo’ is a suggestion that symbolic interactionism cannot account for why certain sexual practices have become taboo, how these have operated to create certain persons as stigmatised, and what historical transformations have effected those changes. Symbolic interactionism, in its focus on everyday interactions, it is suggested, cannot explore wider social transformations which make subjectivities possible.

However, this criticism has been addressed, with others arguing that symbolic interactionism indeed does account for change. Brickell (2006: 429) argues, for example, that symbolic interactionism, in its attentiveness to the everyday, draws attention to the way in which ‘sexual beliefs circulating in a society are negotiated and modified at the individual level’. Brickell (2006: 429) states that the notion that people ‘merely take on prepackaged forms of sexuality that emerge over time’ is too simplistic a view of sexual subjectivities. This, as Brickell (2006: 429) suggests, is evidence that symbolic interactionism does not see sexuality as having ‘a tidy history’, but is one that is liable to change and changes as a result of everyday life and social interaction. Further, Week’s (1981: 95) charge that symbolic interactionism cannot account for the ideological structuring of subjectivity seems misplaced. Both Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) sexual script theory and Plummer’s (1995) notion of the sexual story address the way in which available cultural and historical accounts of sexuality are interpreted and woven into the ways in which individuals make sense of themselves as sexual. Plummer (1995), for example, sees this as being done through the telling of sexual stories which are used to give a sense of intelligibility to self and identity. Plummer

(1995: 35) also takes into account the ‘historical moment at which a story enters public discourse’, something which takes place precisely at ‘the point of historical determination and ideological structuring in the creation of subjectivity’ (Weeks, 1981: 95).

The theorization of sexuality and self offered by symbolic interactionism is consequently seen to be a useful one for this project. An interactionist perspective, as Plummer (1975: 29) states, ‘takes as one of its fundamental concerns the problematic and socially constructed nature of sexual meanings’. For Plummer (1975: 58), symbolic interactionism is also valuable where it enables sexuality to be understood as part of a relational/reflexive process of self-labelling. In this sense sexuality is rendered knowable through the adoption of identity labels by the individual. For Plummer (1981a: 67) this raises questions of how people ‘become’ sexual, if sexuality is not taken as an internal state but as a socially mediated process. He therefore asks, what ‘prompts the adoption of [a] category for some people and not others?’ This is a notable concern for Plummer (1981a) in that he sees sexual categories as social constructs, as opposed to emerging from the person. Richardson (1984: 83) has made sense of this problem by seeing sexuality in terms of as ‘a state of personal identification’, as opposed to an essence. This is an alternative definition of the expression ‘being’. From Richardson’s (1984: 83) symbolic interactionist perspective, a ‘homosexual identity is the result of the social and personal categorization of sexual feelings and experiences as indicative of being a certain type of person’. This raises certain questions which may be asked of the data, and is again addressed in chapter four, what processes of self-reflection and self-interpretation entail the adoption of a lesbian or gay identity?

This relationship between ‘societal categorisation’ on the one hand and self-identification on the other has been central to theorizing the social construction of sexuality ‘since the mid-1970s’ (Weeks, 2000: 61):

‘On the one hand, we need to understand the classifying and categorizing processes which have shaped our concepts of homosexuality...On the other hand, we must also understand the level of individual and collective reception of, and battle with, these classifications and categorizations’ (Weeks, 2000: 61)

This piece of research is located in the latter half of this formulation of the social construction of sexuality. Addressing the constructed nature of sexual categories, as was discussed earlier in this literature review, enables one to ask what prompts the adoption of sexual categories beyond assuming that they are reflections of an inner truth. From a sociological perspective, this is preferable to adopting an orientation model which assumes ‘that sexual self-awareness inevitably emerges through a process of maturation’ (Richardson, 1984: 84). A focus instead on sexual self-labelling is what Plummer (1981a: 69) refers to as the ‘identity construct model’, a model that recognizes ‘the cognitive processes by which members of a society interpret their sexual selves by scanning their past lives...and connecting to these ‘accounts’ available in their contemporary worlds’. The young men and women taking part in this project identified as lesbian and gay; the term ‘homosexual’ was used sparingly. Categories of lesbian and gay are no less constructed however, with ‘gay’ emerging in the 1960s and 1970s as a positive marker of identity to challenge pathologizing medical discourses of ‘the homosexual’ (Weeks, 2003: 80).

Questioning the adoption of sexual categories has particular resonance for the age group discussed in this work. The focus on sixteen to twenty-one year olds may be considered within expanded notions of adolescence, as a period falling between adulthood and childhood (Irvine, 1994: 14), ‘youth’ or ‘young adulthood’ may be taken as an equivalent term to this (Jones, 2009: 59). The following discussion considers the construction of sexual selves in relation to this period, although a fuller account of ‘adolescence’ and constructionist theories of adolescence from the sociologies of youth and childhood will not be looked into as that is not the primary concern of this thesis. See instead James and Prout (1997) and James and James (2004) for more on the social construction of adolescence and childhood.

Adolescence is often seen as a crucial period in the formation of sexual identities and the working out of self and desire (Irvine, 1994; Tolman, 1994, 2002; Simon, 1996; Holland *et al.*, 2004; Gagnon and Simon, 2005), and is central to understandings of youth in terms of psychological, physiological and emotional development (France, 2007: 27). In social constructionist thinking, adolescence, as a social construct (Raymond, 1994), is an empirically interesting period for

understanding the ways that society recognises young people as sexual (Irvine, 1994). Gagnon and Simon (2005: 33), for example, see adolescence as significant for understanding the ‘scripting’ of young people’s sexual identities, through which they learn to ‘be’ sexual, and act as sexual. Several stage models of homosexual identity formation developed in the 1980s accord adolescence particular importance as offering insights into the adoption of a lesbian or gay identity (e.g. Cass, 1985; Troiden, 1989). See Kaufman and Johnson (2004) and Eliason and Schope (2007) for detailed discussions and critiques of stage models as a particular period in the theorization of the development of homosexual identities.

This project deals with the social construction of sexuality through addressing the processes by which young people come to consider themselves to be sexual and how lesbian and gay sexuality, in particular is understood and made sense of. The previous discussion is useful because it raises questions about how people become sexual, and what prompts the adoption of sexual categories, questions which are responded to in chapter four. The focus on adolescence and the construction of lesbian and gay sexual subjectivities is particularly important given a relative paucity of sociological data on the topic, particularly within the context of social change identified in this project. This absence of data has been observed previously by Raymond (1994) and more recently Miceli (2002). Further, where work has been done on lesbian and gay youth, the vast majority tends to be from a psychological perspective, focusing either on developmental issues (Miceli, 2002: 202) or on the risks lesbian and gay youth are faced with and the means by which those risks may be negated or ameliorated (e.g. Rivers and D’Augelli, 2001).

This has been argued to close down the subject positions that lesbian and gay youth are able to take up (Talburt, 2004). It is thought that such approaches deny the ‘agency’ of lesbian and gay youth in constructing their own identities, imposing instead an homogenous image of lesbian and gay youth as ‘at risk’ (Rasmussen, 2006). Those who have sought to address this, and it is agreed here that they should, have largely come from queer theoretical approaches (Talburt *et al.*, 2004; Driver, 2008). As such there is little work done on the construction of lesbian and gay identities, and the negotiated, agentic way in which that

construction is achieved, from a symbolic interactionist perspective. This is something addressed in this project. The following section thus addresses adolescence further, focusing initially on interactionist theories of adolescence and the ‘scripting’ of sexuality (Gagnon and Simon, 2005), moving on to discuss Plummer’s (1995) concept of the ‘sexual story’. The subsequent section addresses further issues of lesbian and gay sexuality, youth and agency.

### *3) Patterning Sexual Selves: Sexual Scripts and Sexual Stories*

Whilst Plummer (2003b: 524) sees symbolic interactionism as having ‘always properly highlighted the fluidity, emergence and processual aspects of social life’, he also sees its ability to theorize the ways that selves become ‘routinized, lodged, committed and stabilized’ (Plummer, 2003b: 525) as a key strength. This ‘maintenance’ is something Richardson (2004: 400) sees as having ‘received far less attention’ in recent accounts of sexuality. For Plummer (2003b: 525), ‘process and pattern commingle’, whilst the previous section emphasised the emergent nature of sexuality and self in interaction, this section focuses on the ways in which those ‘emergents’ become patterned (Plummer, 2002). Indeed, Richardson’s and Plummer’s enquiries as to what compels the adoption of labels may be understood as addressing not only a process of ‘becoming’ but also a stabilizing where identity may be seen to give a sense of fixity (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 122). Adopting a sexual category as one’s own might be a way of anchoring the ‘precarious everyday flux of life’ (Plummer, 2003b: 525). Adolescence is significant from this perspective as writers such as Gagnon and Simon (2005) sought to identify both the emergence of the sexual self as well as the ‘scripting’ of that self (Kimmel, 2007: xii) within that period. In this section, the patterning of sexual identities are explored, through a focus on both Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) notion of the sexual script (see also Simon, 1996), and Plummer’s (1995: 40) ‘sexual stories’, which, as symbolic interactions, are understood, in part, as ‘provid[ing] continuity and order over the flux of the present.’

Gagnon and Simon (2005: 14) refer to three levels of scripting: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripting and intrapsychic scripting. ‘Cultural scenarios’ are seen to

be the ‘larger frameworks and roles through which sex is experienced’ (Kimmel, 2007: xii), this refers to the social contexts in which individuals are embedded, as well as the sexual roles, meanings and symbols available within those contexts through which individuals may understand themselves, others and certain practices and behaviours as sexual. Kimmel (2007: xii) goes on to interpret the notions of interpersonal and intrapsychic scripting as such:

‘...‘interpersonal scripts’...represent the routine patterns of social interaction that guide behaviours in specific settings; and the ‘intrapsychic scripts’...suggest that social action is always conducted with an ongoing internal dialogue about internalized cultural expectations.’

This understanding of the intrapsychic as referring to an ‘internal dialogue’ (Kimmel, 2007: xii) echoes Mead’s (1967 [1934]: 177) description of the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ as an internal dialogue which self is manifested through and thus locates sexuality at the level of internal experience. The intrapsychic, Gagnon and Simon (2005: 14) state, deals with ‘the motivational elements that produce arousal or at least a commitment to the activity.’ Interpersonal scripting is an acknowledgment of the ways in which sexuality has its origins in interaction, it ‘allows two or more actors to participate in a complex act involving mutual dependence’ (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 14). It also points to the ways in which sexuality is ‘done’ in interaction. In the following description of interpersonal scripting, Gagnon and Simon (2005: 14) echo Butler’s (1990) notion of the performative as a ‘stylized repetition of acts’:

‘At the level of convention is that large class of gestures, both verbal and nonverbal, that are mutually accessible. Routinized language, the sequence of petting behaviours among adolescents and adults, the conventional styles establishing sexual willingness are all parts of culturally shared, external routines. These are the strategies involved in the ‘doing’ of sex, concrete and continuous elements of what a culture agrees is sexual.’ They are assembled, learned over time, reflecting...general patterns of stages of development.’

These different levels of scripting also parallel Jenkins (2008) internal-external dialectic mentioned earlier. Gagnon and Simon suggest that sexuality is fully social, embedded in everyday interaction and understood in terms of wider social meanings and patterns of behaviour, rather than coming solely from within. This

rejection of sexuality as wholly internal is notable in their rejection of the ‘sex drive’ (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 8). The recognition of ‘internal experience’ through the notion of intrapsychic scripting highlights the ways Gagnon and Simon (2005: 15) saw social interactions and cultural conventions as enabling the ‘making of meaningful interior states...in providing the ordering of bodily activities that will release these internal biological states’.

The relationship between the three levels points to the ways in which understandings of the self as sexual, the scripting of sexual behaviour and commitment to sexual acts are made possible through the negotiation of sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 13). The metaphor of the ‘script’ points to the acts, actors, contexts, motivations, as well as improvisations which make sexual encounters possible. ‘Without the proper elements of a script’, Gagnon and Simon state (2005: 13), ‘nothing sexual is likely to happen.’ Although this is not to suggest a lack of agency on behalf of the individual, as Plummer (2005: xiv) states in his introduction to the second edition of sexual conduct, agency is central. He states that:

‘...the scripting of sexual life [is] dramatic, performed, improvised, created through all the arts and skills of symbolic interpretation and presentation: It was certainly not to be followed blindly, according to some pre-given script’ (Plummer, 2005: xiv)

Simon (1996), continuing the debate that was begun in *Sexual Conduct*, later elaborated on the concept of the ‘intrapsychic’ in understanding adolescence as an important moment in ‘the fashioning of intrapsychic scripts’ (Simon, 1996: 71). Returning to the notion of the sexual self established previously, Simon (1996: 55) sees adolescence as symbolic of a ‘desire for meaning’. His discussion of the scripting of sexual fantasy through adolescent masturbation is telling:

*‘The physical act of masturbation may be less a desire for an object or an act than a quest for the construction of a self, however provisional, that is appropriate to such desires’* (Simon, 1996: 87, emphasis in original).

Masturbation works as an analogy for the processes by which young people construct themselves and their bodies as sexual with regards to their social worlds,

interactions, and embodied desires and pleasures. Plummer (1975: 58) also took masturbation as indicative of the ways in which young men's mental images and fantasies are labelled as sexual, being significant components of the processes through which young men self-labelled as homosexual. This echoes feminist accounts of the 'orgasm' as social (Vance, 1990; Jackson and Scott, 2010a), there is a further discussion of the body in these examples, which is addressed later. One aspect of this scripting may be a notion of 'confusion'. Processes of intrapsychic scripting, rather than being readily apparent, straightforward or 'linear', are, it is argued, more complex, cyclical, and negotiated (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 313). This is highlighted by previous research into the construction of lesbian and gay sexual identities, which demonstrate a lack of surety in claiming a sexual identity (Troiden, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1989; Valentine *et al.*, 2003). This also fits into a wider construction of adolescence as a 'turbulent' period, echoed in notions of 'storm and stress' (France, 2007: 26).

Gender underpins Gagnon and Simon's (2005: 22) approach to theorizing sexuality where the gendering of the person is considered to occur prior to their sexualizing in adolescence. They see gendering as occurring early on in childhood, this process being seen to structure gender relations through the inculcation of 'appropriate' gender behaviours or roles, with young boys and girls rehearsing and assimilating 'the meanings and postures of masculinity and femininity...in many nonsexual ways' (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 31). Gender is understood to structure later adolescent sexuality, where the construction of the person as gendered informs the ways in which desires, behaviours and interactions are scripted. Young people, in coming to understand themselves as sexual as they grow up, 'piece together the jigsaw of sexual knowledge' (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 115), bringing that sexual knowledge together 'with their sense of gender' (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 115), as well as a sense of other people as gendered. Due to this gendering, which is seen to be intimately tied to the construction of the person, Gagnon (1987: 120) rejected notions of desire based on biological sex, saying instead that 'We desire a person's gender, not their sex.' This anticipates Butler's (1990, 1993) later account of the social construction of 'sex' where bodies, from Gagnon's perspective, may be considered to be gendered, and desired for their

gender, not an essential ‘sex’ (this ideas of ‘bodies’ is discussed in more detail below).

This theorization of gender as something learned early in life is developed by Jackson (2006b: 116) who sees gender as ‘one of the first social categories a child learns, the first identity she adopts’. This sense of oneself as gendered is seen by Jackson (2006b: 116) as preceding an ‘awareness of ourselves as sexual’. Gender and sexuality are therefore seen as analytically distinct, although empirically connected (Jackson 2006b: 107), where gender is understood to shape the subsequent construction of sexual subjectivities. Whilst this project does not seek to theorize the relationship between sexuality and gender it is useful to recognize that relationship in understanding sexuality. Given the interactionist perspective utilized in this project, Jackson’s depiction of the relationship between gender and sexuality is adopted in this project. This relationship is laid out in the following quote:

‘Gender...encompasses the division or distinction *between* women and men, female and male, these binary categories themselves and the content of those categories – the characteristics and identities embodied through membership of them. Gender is thus a social division and a cultural distinction... ‘sexuality’...refer[s] to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices, relationships and identities...sexual practices, desires and identities are everywhere embedded within non-sexual social relations...most, if not all, of which are gendered.’ (Jackson, 2006b: 106-7, emphasis in original)

Jackson does not argue here for a deterministic relationship between gender and sexuality, rather she is addressing the ways in which the ‘being’ and ‘doing’ of sexuality is shaped and informed by gendered social relations. Gender is understood in this respect, as a structure, as ‘part of the social order’ (Jackson, 2006a: 41), sexuality, whilst not being determined by gender, is enacted in a world which is thoroughly gendered.

Richardson (2007: 470), in trying to make better sense of the relationship between gender and sexuality as interconnected but not determined by one another, has advanced the shoreline, ‘as a boundary between land and sea’, as a metaphor for their ‘interimplications’. This Richardson sees as illustrating the complex and

shifting relationship between gender and sexuality, a relationship in which one does not overly determine the other, but continues to depict their interconnectedness and the way in which each shapes the other. Gender in this sense, as 'land', is given greater fixity than sexuality, as sea, which is 'more ambivalent; more apt for destabilization and reconfiguration than gender' (Sedgwick, 1990, cited in Richardson, 2007: 470). Further, this metaphor may have implications for understandings of self and subjectivity, and the analogy of the 'complex, many stranded cord' (Jackson, 2007) described above. Richardson (2007: 471) describes the coastline (as 'land' more so than sea?) as having a sense of fixity and predictability, providing a sense of identity, but also as something eroded and transformed over time by the ebbs and flows of the sea. Maybe an alternative analogy for subjectivity, over cords and threads, would be one of streams, currents and tides?

Sexual scripts might be understood as enabling the patterning of sexuality in that they provide a way of doing sexuality. Providing a host of scenarios, roles and meanings through which sexuality is made intelligible and, in some respects, rendered predictable. This is a way of accounting for the way in which the flux of everyday life 'is open to constant stabilizing' (Plummer, 2003b: 525). Whilst this project is concerned with the everyday meaning making through which sexuality is made sense of, it is also concerned with the significance of sexual identities, not only in articulating a sense of self but in making sense of one's life. The focus on everyday interaction in this respect may lose a sense of the way in which sexual identities are given a sense of coherence in the long-term, and not just in the doing of day-to-day interaction. Plummer's (1995: 172) notion of sexual storytelling is useful here, and the following account is quoted at length in order to best make sense of what the telling of a sexual story does:

*Sexual stories lay down routes to a coherent past, mark off boundaries and contrasts in the present, and provide both a channel and a shelter for the future. If they do their work well, sexual stories will give us a sense of our histories – partly of our own life and where we've come from, but no less a sense of a collective past and shared memories...such stories also give a life a sense of present difference – of being marked off from the 'other'. There is unity in the story which harbours a difference...And further sexual stories are maps for action – they look*

into the future, tell us how we are motivated, guide us gently into who we will be. (Emphasis in original)

For Plummer (1995: 20), sexual stories are symbolic interactions where they are narrated and performed in interaction, being told to one another, told to ourselves, told collectively and singularly, and always from particular locations. They are used to make sense of selves and lives to ourselves and others, as well as in making sense of the ways in which identities are done and performed (stories are enacted 'as emotionally charged bodies in action', Plummer states (1995: 21), echoing Butler's (1990) notion of the performative). But whilst sexual stories are hinged on understandings of the past, present and future, those understandings remain contingent. Stories are told and retold, rehearsed but also refashioned; past, presents and futures often reinterpreted upon the retelling of a story (Plummer, 1995: 41). Sexual stories also create community, giving a sense of shared histories, identities, values and politics (Plummer, 1995: 87). Communities also make identities possible through the sharing of stories, and the building of a common history, 'Both the development of a gay personhood and a gay culture proceed incrementally, in tandem and feeding upon each other' (Plummer, 1995: 87). A similar notion of community is discussed later on in the literature review where the idea of a sexual community is described in terms of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), but as one which helps give meaning to identity.

In patterning sexuality, stories are seen to be productive, maintaining a sense of stability across time through the telling of personal and communal histories, as well as maintaining a sense of likeness, through the sharing of a sense of identity and community. They give a shape to everyday lives which may often be seen as constantly changing and shifting (Plummer, 2003b). Stories, like scripts, help give a sense of direction and meaning. For young people these stories may be of particular significance. Being young has been understood by Simon (1996) in terms of the fashioning of sexual scripts, where young people are considered to be at a time of their lives where society expects that they should become sexual. There is an expectation then that personal relationships and desires should be made sense of at a particular point in life, notably during one's teenage years. This is particularly pertinent since the age range of my participants, sixteen to twenty-

one, locates them in a period of transition from childhood to adulthood (Jones, 2009). A transition in which the negotiation and labelling (or not) of sexual identities, desires and behaviours is considered pivotal (Tolman, 2002; Ussher, 2005). The scripting or narrating of life may be one way of negotiating this transition (a notion which is returned to later in the literature review).

This part of the literature review has taken into consideration the ‘patterning’ of sexual identities, something which is central to this research. A number of questions may be asked of these notions of sexual scripting and storytelling presented, as well as the relationship between gender and sexuality discussed. These questions are asked in order to guide the data analysis. For example, how might notions of sexual scripting and sexual storytelling aid in understanding the ways in which young lesbians and gay men ‘become’ sexual? How too might they help us appreciate the maintenance (or not) of sexual identities? Also, how may Gagnon and Simon’s and Jackson’s theorizations of the relationship between gender and sexuality inform the way in which lesbian and gay sexualities are understood in relation to gender? In chapter four the first three questions are addressed in terms of the adoption of sexual identities in young adulthood. Gender is taken up again in chapter five in understanding the relationships between heterosexuality and homosexuality in terms of sameness and difference. Chapter six addresses the telling of sexual stories where it focuses on understandings of the relationship between sexuality and growing up. A final question might address the kinds of stories told in making sense of identities and lives, in a period of rapid social change, what new stories of lesbian and gay identities are being produced? This is a broader question and may be asked of the project as a whole, and is something returned to in the conclusion of the thesis.

#### *4) Doing Identity: The Sociality of Selves*

Previous parts of this literature review have focused primarily on understandings of the sexual self as a form of ‘being’, as, in Richardson’s (1984) terms, ‘a state of personal identification’. This might be understood as, in Woodward’s (2004: 18) terms, the personal dimension of identity, ‘what is going on inside our heads’. This following section is concerned with the ‘doing’ or enactment of sexual

identity. Although this is not to suggest that sexual scripting or storytelling does not involve ‘enactments’, they do (interpersonal scripting, for example, deals with gestures (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 14); sexual storytelling with performance (Plummer, 1995: 21)). This distinction between ‘being’ and ‘doing’ may instead be considered a question of emphasis, rather than a distinct split, in that prior discussions have focused on ‘the ongoing inner process of reflexive self-construction’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 141). The notion of a sexual identity, as doing, is understood in terms of the self’s sociality (Jackson, 2006b) and its social expression (Woodward, 2004: 18) over reflections on that identity.

In discussing the ‘doing’ of identity, a key dimension of identity is explored, namely notions of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’, (Jenkins, 2008; Lawler, 2008). These themes are used to locate the following discussion in understandings of identity as demarcating boundaries of sameness and difference which inform and shape everyday interactions. Following on from that is a brief discussion of Goffman’s (1990a [1959], 1990b [1963]) understanding of identity as a performance. The discussion ends with reference to notions of achieved and ascribed identities (Jenkins, 2008: 172), taking into consideration the ways in which definitions of lesbian and gay identities are not only enacted in social situations, but read by others. This is drawn back to the internal-external components of identity mentioned previously (Jenkins, 2008). A dialectic that is identified as a tension in the claiming of self, and used to raise questions which are carried on through to chapter five of this thesis.

‘Sameness’ and ‘difference’ are central to understanding identity (Jenkins, 2008), where identities delineate both the sharing of common characteristics and the boundaries through which people are distinguished from others (Lawler, 2008). This fits into a sense of belonging or ‘fitting in’ that Woodward (1997: 1) identifies where she states that:

‘....the concept of identity raises fundamental questions about how the individual fits into the community and the social world and how identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations.’

In a social world in which heterosexuality remains the institutionalized expression of sexuality (Seidman, 2009), notions of sameness and difference could be considered to be fundamental to understanding lesbian and gay identities where they shape possibilities for fitting in or not. This might have particular resonance for lesbians and gay men who have historically been denied membership to mainstream society on the basis of their sexuality (Richardson and May, 1999). Young people too, it has been argued, ‘manage tensions between conformity and individuality’ (Valentine, 2000: 258) through markings of sameness and difference, paying heavy prices for being too different, or too anonymous. The interest in sameness and difference here is less to do with the contents of an identity, but in what sameness and difference ‘does’ (identity may be understood as ‘relational’ through these terms (Lawler, 2008: 3)). For example, what are the consequences of being defined as different to/the same as someone? In interactionist terms, how do identities shape interactions between people through the marking of sameness and difference? And, how is difference negotiated where, as Hall (1996: 5) sees it, identities ‘function...*because* of their capacities to exclude’? How, in this respect, is exclusion managed? Sameness and difference are thus taken as raising questions about the self and the enactment of identity. These concepts ask what it means to be different to someone else? What does it mean to be the same as someone else? How do notions of sameness and difference inform the ways in which identity is done? These are questions which are addressed in chapter five of this thesis.

‘Difference’ is sometimes taken as the primary term within this pairing, as is the case in Halls’ (1996: 4) conceptualisation of identity as ‘the product of the marking of difference and exclusion’ (see also Woodward, 1997). Chapter five of this project is concerned, in part, with understanding difference where lesbian and gay identities, as oppositional ones (Lawler, 2008: 3), are seen to constitute both boundaries of difference from heterosexuals. This is pertinent since young lesbian and gay people are recognised as located within a predominantly ‘straight world’ of family, school and work (Valentine, 2005; Thomson, 2009). It is due to being located within a ‘straight world’ that the articulation of a lesbian or gay identity for young people is often seen as a difficult process of identity negotiation (Valentine *et al.*, 2003). Coming out, for young lesbian and gay people, is

considered, potentially, to have negative consequences, such as rejection by friends and family, and subsequently homelessness (Dunne *et al.*, 2002). As Weeks (2005: 192) states, identities ‘cause trouble’ particularly in terms of how people can or cannot ‘fit in’ (Woodward, 1997). This may be notable when considering the ways the construction of boundaries of difference is used to maintain the legitimacy of certain identities at the expense of others (McLaughlin, 2003), for example in the construction of the ‘other’ as pathological, deviant, or devalued.

Appiah (2005: 254) however has addressed the ways in which the emphasis on difference in social science and philosophy has constrained explorations of identity that demonstrate sameness across boundaries. In this emphasis on difference it is argued that too much significance is granted to sexuality in determining how people are understood as different from one another (Appiah, 2005: 110). This he states ties people to their sexualities, and denies them a sense of self beyond that. Discussing a politics of recognition, and the centrality of sexuality to understanding people, Appiah (2005: 110, emphasis in original) argues that:

‘The politics of recognition, if pursued with excessive zeal, can seem to require that one’s skin colour, one’s sexual body, should be politically acknowledged in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And personal, here, does not mean secret or (*per impossible*) wholly unscripted or innocent of social meanings; it means rather, something which is not too tightly scripted, not too resistant to our individual vagaries. Even though my race and my sexuality may be elements of my individuality, someone who demands that I organize my life around these things is not an ally of individuality’

For Appiah (2005), moving beyond a politics of recognition based on collective identities (e.g. gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality) is a necessary means of reinstating the centrality of granting significance to liberal understandings of self as autonomous and individual in social theory (see also Meyers, 2004 for a discussion of the ‘authentic self’). In so doing, though, categories of sameness and difference are called into question and the emphasis is placed on people’s capacity to be individual persons, instead of looking towards separable collective identities (this is echoed in Meyer’s, 2004 understanding of

the ‘intersectional self’). How then might the doing of identity be understood in ways which are not reducible to clear boundaries of difference? Is the relationship between sameness and difference a clear divide or are there different levels of sameness and difference? These are issues that have, recently, been taken up by Yuval-Davis (2010). Further, how might collective identities intersect with a notion of self as individuality? Again, these are questions to be addressed further in chapter five.

A concern with the management and negotiation of difference parallels Goffman’s (1990a [1959]) interest in the everyday techniques that individuals employ to control and sustain other people’s impressions of them. Goffman (1990a [1959]: 26) assumed that individuals, in interaction, had ‘many motives for trying to control the impression’ other people received of social situations and of the individual in question. He saw this as necessary in maintaining the ‘interaction order’, through which social life was kept in check (Lawler, 2008: 110). This is echoed in Goffman’s (1990b [1963]) work *Stigma* in which he tried to make sense of how people with potentially stigmatising attributes ‘concealed’ their stigma, so that they may ‘pass’ as ‘normal’. Goffman (1990b [1963]) thus distinguished between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ social identities and between the ‘discredited’ and the ‘discreditable’ to highlight the discontinuities between appearance and ‘reality’. Through his dramaturgical metaphor, Goffman sought to demonstrate the way that this discontinuity was managed through the ‘performance’ of ‘normal’ identities. Although appearance, for Goffman, is in effect reality, as Lawler (2008: 106, emphasis in original) suggests: ‘Goffman...is arguing that roles, or performances, far from masking the ‘true person’...are what *make us persons*.’

Goffman raises a number of important points with regards to understanding how the ‘doing’ of identity is constructed in terms of the values and expectations of others. Woodward (2004: 14) sees Goffman as concerned with describing the ways in which performances are done with audiences in mind, ‘Speech, acts and gestures all require someone to be watching or listening.’ Lawler (2008: 111) understands this sociality as concerned with the maintenance of the ‘interaction order’ which is ‘built on particular rules of behaviour and performing’. This might be understood in terms of expected ways of ‘doing’ identity. For example, gender

is constituted through the ‘enactment of masculinity and femininity’ defined in terms of ‘gendered norms and gendered arrangements’ (Lawler, 2008: 112). This is not to suggest though that identities are performed blindly depending on cultural expectations, ‘instead we bring our own interpretations and interpretations to these roles’ (Woodward, 2004: 14). The enactment of an identity might be understood best as a tension between externally imposed understandings and individual interpretations.

Such an account of ‘doing’ may be framed in terms of the internal and external definitions of identity identified by Jenkins (2008: 42), ‘what people think about us is no less significant than what we think about ourselves’. This dialectic is captured best in terms of ‘achieved’ and ‘ascribed’ identities, achieved identities being ‘generally, although not necessarily, the outcome of a degree of self-direction’ (Jenkins, 2008: 172). Ascribed identities may be loosely defined as an identity that is ‘assigned’ or given (Linton, 1936: 115), these being actively responded to and engaged with where achieved and ascribed identities are in ongoing dialogue with each other. Jenkins (2008: 47) describes this process in the following way: ‘Your external definition of me is an inexorable part of my internal definition of myself’. However, where Goffman was concerned with ‘the performative manifestations of self-reflexivity’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 141) (the ‘doing’ of self-understanding), this project is more focused on reflexive self-understandings. How identities are performed, and the negotiations involved in determining that in relation to the expectations of others are significant aspects of self. As such, they are key questions which are addressed in the data, notably in chapter five.

This toing and froing between internal and external definitions of identity is identified in research conducted with lesbian and gay youth. The literature on the subjectivities of queer youth identified previously (Talburt, 2004; Talburt *et al.*, 2004; Rasmussen, 2006; Driver, 2008) recognises this process in that they reject the ‘totalizing’ depictions of LGBT youth as ‘at risk’. Driver (2008: 2) for example describes queer youth in the following way:

‘Queer youth are not discursively containable, and they are not reducible to any single dimension of their embodiment, identity, or situation. The complexities of their subjectivities and social lives imbricate class, race, ethnic, geographic, and age relations through which queer youth become meaningful to themselves and others. In this sense, any attempt to understand queer youth must work against totalizing concepts and generalizing depictions, eliciting the partial and layered ways in which queer differences become refracted through the dialogical movements of young people.’

The ‘generalizing depictions’ referred to here are the same depictions as those described by Talburt *et al.* (2004: 1) as those ‘discourses that are intended to ‘protect’ queer youth, create ‘safe’ school cultures, and effectively divide ‘queer youth’ from ‘straight youth’ by constructing them as ‘other’ and in need of special attention. For this group of writers, a ‘common sense’ concern with the ‘oppression and victimization’ (Talburt *et al.*, 2004: 2) of queer youth has the effect of closing down subject positions available to queer youth. The alternative agenda is, as Driver (2008: 2) states, to open up subject positions through recognising the complex, fractured experiences of queer subjectivities. Within these accounts there is an evident tension between an ascribed identity (as ‘at risk’) and an achieved identity (‘partial’, ‘layered’). This could potentially be seen as a means of seeing queer youth as irreducible to one particular construction of lesbian and gay identities (Herdt, 1989)

Additionally, the focus on totalizing accounts echoes understandings of lesbian and gay identities as ‘dominant’ identities (Richardson, 1996: 13). Herdt (1989: 5), for example, states that lesbian and gay youth deal with a number of assumptions upon coming out, most significantly an assumption of homogeneity, ‘the idea that gays and lesbians the *world over* are the same in ‘coming out’ experience, identity, and cultural organization’ (emphasis in original). This is reminiscent of how Goffman (1990 [1963]: 12) conceived of the person with a stigma, where, upon disclosure, ‘He (sic) is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person, to a tainted discounted one.’ The reducibility of people to a singular, negative image of homosexuality could be characterized as a stigmatising one (which, as Goffman (1963) demonstrated, was something to be managed). This is significant where it helps makes sense of the continued dialogue between achieved and ascribed identities, particularly as it has been seen in

reference to lesbian and gay identities. Indeed, there is a degree of continuity in literature on non-heterosexual youth in this regard. In emphasising agency and breaking with universalizing descriptions of queer youth as 'at risk', contemporary theorists echo the ambivalence inherent in lesbian and gay identities recognised by earlier theorists.

This sociality raises questions however. How do young lesbian and gay people understand themselves as the same or different in relation to others? How are expectations around the 'doing' of identity negotiated, and reflected on in making sense of sexual selfhood? In what way are ascribed identities, associated with dominant constructions of lesbian and gay identities negotiated and understood reflexively? These are questions that are responded to primarily in chapter five and, in parts, chapter six of this thesis.

### *5) Theorizing the Body*

Whilst social constructionism divorced sexual categories from the body (Vance, 1989), this was not to suggest that the body did not matter to social constructionists. Indeed the body was central to theories of sexuality reviewed so far. Symbolic interactionists such as Gagnon and Simon and Plummer, for instance, focused on the physiological capacities of the body and the way these capacities are made meaningful through scripting or labelling. The body is also central to Mead's (1967 [1934]: 1-2) interactionism, he states that although 'selves are essentially social products...the physiological mechanism underlying experience...is indispensable'. Foucault's (1990 [1978]: 108) analysis of biopower sought to demonstrate the way in which new forms of sexual regulation were shifting from a focus on 'relations toward a problematic of the 'flesh,'...of the body, sensation, the nature of pleasure'. The body in these accounts, however, is not 'pre-social'; instead the body is either lived and/or (re)made as meaningful in society. These understandings underpin a number of sociological accounts of the socially constructed body (Crossley, 2001; Shilling, 2003; Turner, 2008), as well as philosophical/cultural ones (Butler, 1990, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Gatens, 1996). (See Witz, 2000; Howson, 2005; Woodward, 2008 for feminist reviews of theories of the body).

One advantage of adopting a symbolic interactionist approach, as a form of social constructionism, is its utility in providing a theory of the body as at once both material and social. As Howson (2005: 94) points out, ‘the process of reflection described by Mead is one rooted in bodily action’. Mead’s (1967: 1-2) symbolic interactionism sees the body as providing the physiological potentials for interaction, perception and consciousness. The theory of the body offered is encapsulated in the term embodiment which is concerned with how ‘the bodily bases of people’s actions and interactions are *socially structured* in different ways...moulded by social as well as ‘natural’ processes’ (Woodward, 1997: 65). Along these lines, interactionism’s theory of the body takes into consideration the ways that ‘fleshy, sensate bodies...[are] interpreted, theorized and mediated through the meanings which are culturally available to us’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 140). Despite this Plummer (2003b: 525) considers interactionism to have rendered this material body invisible in more recent theoretical work. One example of this meaning making might be the prior construction of the body as gendered in social scripting theories (Gagnon and Simon, 2005) (echoing sex/gender debates (Butler, 1990)), which then inform understandings of sexuality, desire and sexual practice (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 115). This may echo Fuss’ (1989, cited in Richardson, 1996: 11) suggestion that ‘the natural provides the raw material and determinative starting point for the practices and laws of the social’, what might be considered to be ‘essential’ is part of the ‘construction’.

This approach is significant from feminist, lesbian and gay perspectives where, historically, women (both lesbian and heterosexual) and gay men have been understood primarily in terms of their bodies and biology, with socially constructed meanings being understood as essential and universally true (Hart and Richardson, 1981; Fuss, 1989; Butler, 1990, 1993). Exploring the ways in which bodies are rendered intelligible, and used in ways which make sense, allows for an understanding of embodiment without ‘overwhelming’ this with the body’s ‘corporeality’ (Witz, 2000: 7). The material body is thus social, but granted no space beyond the social. It also works as a response to calls from feminists and gay theorists to attend to the material body where it is considered to be written out

of contemporary theories of gender and sexuality (Witz, 2000; Hennessy, 2006), including symbolic interactionism (Plummer, 2003b).

Attempts to reintegrate the body into social theories of gender and sexuality are also more recently considered necessary where they are met by a resurgent essentialism. Weeks (2005: 188) has described the ‘relative failure’ of social constructionism to ‘capture the battleground’ due to the (re)geneticization of sexual theory (Hamer and Copeland, 1994; LeVay, 1994; DeCecco and Parker, 1995). This is echoed by Plummer (2005: xii) who sees ‘lives and social worlds...more and more...explained through genes, evolutionary psychology, sociobiology and ‘meme’ theory’<sup>4</sup>. Jackson (2005: 15) emphasises the hold evolutionary psychology has ‘gained...in the popular imagination...becoming increasingly politically influential’. Jackson (2005: 16) therefore suggests a reassertion of ‘the political relevance of social constructionist analyses of sexuality and gender’ (see also Terry, 1999; Brookey, 2000; Stein, 2001). The concern being articulated here is primarily one of regulation, where scientific knowledge limits what can be said about bodies and desires. This is something that was addressed by Foucault (1990 [1979]). His attempts to ‘deauthorize those branches of expertise grounded in a scientific or quasi-scientific understanding of [sexuality]’ (Halperin, 1997: 41) was based on a concern with the regulatory effects of disciplines which have historically ‘deauthorized’ women and gay men (Halperin, 1997: 52).

Of course, many lesbians and gay men have adopted essentialist accounts of sexuality readily, claiming the importance and authority of scientific research in demonstrating a biological cause for lesbian and gay sexualities (Brookey, 2000; cf. Hamer and Copeland, 1994; LeVay, 1994; DeCecco and Parker, 1995). In asserting a biological basis for homosexuality, these theories provide a degree of political utility in arguing that lesbians and gay men constitute a distinct minority and are thus deserving of equal protection under the law (Conrad and Markens, 2001; Brookey, 2002; McLaughlin, 2010). They also, as Gagnon (1987: 123) states, provide a degree of reassurance that sexuality is rooted ‘in an unchanging

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<sup>4</sup> See Dawkins (2006) for discussions of genetics and meme theory.

or unchangeable biology or early experience'. This legitimisation is seen as particularly necessary in a world in which heterosexuality is considered dominant (Gagnon, 1987: 123). There are, however, risks attached to claiming science as a defence:

'...the protections offered by purported biological or other irreversible causes of adult desire are surely ephemeral, as any reading of the historical record of the eugenics movement in its savage or benign forms will suggest. Further, a plea for exemption on the basis of an early and irreversible cause will only support a defect theory of same-gender erotic desire, a theory that will ineluctably lead to more violent forms of scientific intervention...The source of freedom in everyday life for gay men and lesbians is continued vigilance and practical political action' (Gagnon, 1987: 123).

Symbolic interactionism provides a theory of the body that is embedded in everyday sociality, being part of people's material worlds. Further, selves cannot be separated from bodies, to do so would imply a mind-body split (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 145). The task of sociology then is to provide empirical accounts of the body which demonstrate the veracity of sociological arguments, and which is able to balance essentialist models of sexuality. The question to be brought forward to the data then is how can sexuality be understood as embodied, and how is that connected to wider social understandings of sexuality and the body? A further question might concern the understandings adopted, which accounts of sexuality are used, and why? And how might social science address them. These questions are taken up in chapter four, and again in chapter six.

### **Inbetweeners: Contextualizing Lesbian and Gay Youth**

Symbolic interactionism takes as central to its theorization not only daily interactions, but the contexts in which those interactions take place. For instance, Gagnon and Simon's (2005) notion of cultural scenarios and Plummer's (1975) focus on societal reactions situated the individual in particular socio-historical moments. Context is elaborated on in this final section of the literature review which seeks to situate contemporary lesbian and gay identities and youth within both a particular socio-historical moment, as well as within a particular time of their lives. Herdt's (1989) suggestion that lesbian and gay young people were 'inbetween' social worlds is used to structure the section which reflects on young

lesbian and gay lives as located between a so-called ‘straight world’ and gay scene (Thomson, 2009: 99) as well as, like most young people, between worlds of childhood and adulthood (Jones, 2009: 2).

### 1) *‘Gay Worlds’/‘Straight Worlds’*

Early accounts of the construction of lesbian and gay identities focused, at times, on coming out in the ‘gay world’, and the meanings attached to identity in those spaces (Dank, 1971). This was the case where coming out as lesbian or gay entailed the entry into a distinct ‘gay world’:

‘Gay time may be spent within gay spaces or inside the self, walled off from the surrounding straight setting...The stigmatization of the gay world ensures that all gay space and time will tend towards secrecy.’ (Warren, 1974: 18)

Underpinning such accounts were notions of secrecy, stigmatization and exclusion whereby the perception of homosexuality as something shameful operated to exclude it from mainstream society. Initial accounts of ‘the homosexual community’, such as that by Leznoff and Westley (1998 [1956]: 5), defined gay social groups as ‘a social context within which the homosexual can find acceptance’. These communities were later characterized by some writers as ghettos (Weinberg and Williams, 1974), being considered distinct zones (in major Western cities) which lesbians or gay men inhabited in places where they were discriminated against by a wider heterosexual society. These spaces were conceived of by symbolic interactionists as spaces in which people could ‘become’ and ‘be’ homosexual (Dank, 1971: 60). Through interaction with other lesbians and gay men in the ‘gay world’, people could learn to identify themselves, and style themselves, as lesbian or gay (Dank, 1971; Ponse, 1978; Troiden, 1988). In these cases, lesbian and gay communities ‘functioned’ as spaces in which people could learn how to be gay, providing a space in which an identity could be developed.

The notion that the ‘gay world’ or community existed as a fixed, identifiable space (as suggested by the term ‘ghetto’ in some usages) was critiqued by a number of theorists (e.g. Levine, 1979; Murray, 1998 [1979]). Murray (1998 [1979]), whilst

recognising the importance of territory in defining community, saw that the ‘gay community’ could not be defined purely in those terms where many who considered themselves part of the community lived outside ‘gay space’ (Plummer (1995: 191) argues a very similar point). This challenging of the notion of a ‘gay community’ opened up possibilities for thinking of lesbian and gay identities and communities in more dynamic terms (Epstein, 1998 [1987]). In these accounts the notion of ‘community’ is seen as an emergent process, bound up in the elaboration of a lesbian or gay identity and the community based actions, institutions, and narratives developed around that. Community could be understood then in terms of the construction of selves, enabling the articulation of identities through sharing the meanings, practices and values that give identity form (Weeks, 2000: 183). The ‘gay community’, in this respect, rather than having an essential reality, is ‘imagined’ (Anderson, 1983) (or, in Week’s (2000: 132) terms, a ‘fiction’). These dynamic constructions of the notion of community, as reproduced in the everyday life of lesbian and gay people, point to the ways in which gay communities work as sites of social belonging without defining them in rigid spatial terms.

Given this construction of lesbian and gay communities as ‘imagined’, one might be inclined to question a distinction between ‘straight spaces’ and ‘lesbian and gay spaces’. This distinction is retained however in order to think through the heterosexualization of social space in general, which often shapes how lesbian and gay people experience their social worlds, including experiences of violence and concerns about safety within them (Moran and Skeggs, 2004). Further, whilst the ‘gay community’ might be all around, so to speak, it is never given (Holmes and Cahill, 2003). Instead, it takes work to access (Thomson, 2009: 103) where what is often *given* is heterosexuality. For young lesbian and gay people this is particularly the case where the contexts in which their lives are lived are often heterosexualized, particularly family and school life (Epstein, 1994; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Valentine *et al.*, 2003, 2005). The marginalisation of lesbian and gay youth within these environments has been seen to occur as a result of homophobia (Kimmel, 1994; Epstein, 1997; Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Nayak and Kehily, 1997; Connell, 2000; Redman, 2000; Hillier and Harrison, 2004) and heterosexism (Adams *et al.*, 2004; Binston and Hart, 2001; Epstein and Johnson, 1994; DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Trotter, 2006).

## 2) *Normative Heterosexuality, Normalization and Sexual Citizenship*

Whilst the division between the ‘straight world’ and ‘gay space’ might be, in some respects, less clear cut than it was once considered, the distinction remains useful in theorizing the ways in which social worlds are shaped by sexuality (Bell and Valentine, 1995). This is particularly the case in illuminating the notion of heteronormativity (Richardson 1996) as an ‘institutionalised...form of [heterosexual] practice and relationships, of family structure, and identity’. Normative heterosexuality is described as a dominant form of heterosexuality that is reproduced in everyday life as part of our everyday interactions (Jackson, 2006b: 114). Whilst the idea of compulsory heterosexuality, as an enforced way ‘doing’ sexuality, has been brought into question (Seidman, 2009), the view remains that heterosexuality continues to be institutionalized in everyday life nonetheless (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 100). The distinction between the ‘straight worlds’ of school and family and the ‘gay world’ of bars, clubs, support groups, websites, and friendship networks etc. remains useful then. It helps in reflecting on the ‘dissonance’ (Thomson, 2009: 99) felt between the heterosexualization of everyday life on the one hand and the greater visibility of lesbian and gay people in more clearly defined spaces (Brown *et al.*, 2007).

This is also particularly useful in thinking through the changes and continuities which young lesbian and gay people are living through. Whilst the ‘tyranny’ (Irvine, 1994: 22) of secrecy early social constructionists documented may have abated, this does not suggest a lessening in the hegemony of an institutionalized heterosexuality, or its violent consequences (Richardson and May, 1999; Moran and Skeggs, 2004). This tension is documented not least in the literature on lesbian and gay youth and homophobia (Griffin, 1997; Flowers and Bouston, 2001; Rivers and Duncan, 2002; Van Wormer and McKinney, 2003). Whilst young people growing up as lesbian or gay in contemporary Western societies may be beneficiaries of what is seen to be a greater visibility of non-heterosexual people in popular culture (Gamson, 2002; Seidman, 2005), as Dunne *et al.* (2002: 111) highlight, ‘they do not usually learn about alternative sexualities in the formal curriculum at school’. Further, that visibility ‘can also serve to inform and provide

powerful weapons for others with which to police gender and sexuality' (Dunne *et al.*, 2002: 111). The consequences of coming out to parents, too, is heavily dependent on the normalization of heterosexuality in adolescence (Valentine *et al.*, 2003).

With regards to the greater 'openness' to non-heterosexual practices and identities in popular culture, Seidman (2002, 2005) has sought to address the changing construction of 'the homosexual' in Western societies from pathologized, polluted and alien to 'normal', and included. This is echoed in some parts of Northern Europe where homosexuality is described as 'disappearing' (Bech, 1997, 1999, 2007). For Seidman (2005), 'normalization' is a significant process in which the status of homosexuality is seen to shift away from one of the outsider. Rather, lesbians and gay men are increasingly 'presented as fully human, as the psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual' (Seidman, 2005: 45). Notable implications of this 'normalization' identified by Seidman are transformations in the meaning of lesbian and gay identities and ways of 'being' lesbian or gay. Seidman (2005: 45) suggests that the notion of 'normality' and the 'normal gay':

'...serves as a narrow social norm. This figure is associated with specific personal and social behaviours. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link love to sex and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride.'

Another consequence of this normalization identified by Seidman (2002) is the shift in the relative importance given to lesbian and gay identities. Prior to this 'normalization' lesbians and gay men were positioned as social outsiders, and as such were 'closeted'. For those lesbian and gay men, sexual identities were often taken as 'core' identities, with lives built around them (Seidman, 2002: 11). However, Seidman (2002: 11) states that '[t]o the extent that the closet has less of a role in shaping gay life, the dynamics of identity change somewhat'. Lesbian and gay identities may increasingly be seen as peripheral identities, where lives are no longer shaped wholly around those identities.

Several writers have sought to document the way in which this 'normalization' of lesbian and gay people, as worthy of civic inclusion (Seidman, 2001), has been

paralleled by a lesbian and gay civil rights based movement actively demanding inclusion based on that supposed ‘normality’ (Richardson, 2004, 2005; Seidman, 2001). This normalization is recognised in the varied theorization of ‘sexual’ and ‘intimate’ citizenship developed during the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium (Evans, 1993; Richardson, 1998, 2000, 2001; Weeks, 1999; Bell and Binnie, 2000; Plummer, 2003a). In terms of the context of young people’s lives in the UK now, these demands have been met through a number of policy changes granting greater rights to lesbian and gay people (see Appendix A). The forms of social change identified as part of this ‘politics of normalization’ (Richardson, 2005) may be seen as significant aspects of the social worlds in which young lesbians and gay men are growing up in, as such it is something to be explored in the literature.

Weeks (2000: 190) has described this burgeoning notion of ‘sexual citizenship’ as ‘point[ing] in two different directions at once’. Here Weeks (2000: 190) talks of sexual communities as representing ‘two distinct political moments...the ‘moment of transgression’, and the ‘moment of citizenship’. This he sees as being both a drive to change and a drive to inclusion, thus ‘[t]o claim full citizenship for dissident sexual minorities is to argue for the transformation of the concept’ (Weeks, 2000: 191). This is perhaps represented by New Labour’s sexual politics which blended pluralism, inclusivity and equality with an entrenched conservatism (Epstein *et al.*, 2004; Stychin, 2003; Weeks, 2004). ‘Normalization’ has not been considered a wholly ‘progressive’ move however, being thought of as conservative and depoliticizing (Richardson, 2004; Seidman, 2009). Whilst the potential for transformation exists abstractly, some writers have seen citizenship claims, as a politics of normalization, as predicated on conservative rights based claims, as opposed to reformulated ones. Richardson (2004: 401), for example, has highlighted that such a politics is coupled with notions of ‘a good citizen, a respectable and responsible citizen’. Claiming normality, and thus citizenship, is predicated on certain ways of being, for instance in terms of gender conventionality, monogamous sexual and intimate practices, and being economically self-sufficient (Seidman, 2002: 133).

Young lesbian and gay people, in the UK now, may be seen as coming of age in a society granting them citizenship rights at the expense of a politics challenging the ‘social institutions and practices that have historically excluded them’ (Richardson, 2005: 515). Seidman (2009: 26) has thus addressed ‘the frustration’ of those who have worked to persuade ‘a populace of the need for such a politics in a political culture that understands change as achieving first-class citizenship status’.

### *3) Youth in Time: Between Adulthood and Childhood*

Weeks (2005: 188) has asserted the need to understand identities, notably gay and lesbian ones, as ‘a sense of history as living in the present, the present as history’. In part this literature review has served to create a sense of lesbian and gay identities as having a social and political history, of which there have been both changes and continuities over a number of years. This sense of history is personal too, Plummer (1995) in his description of the sexual stories people tell in making sense of their lives, demonstrates the power of narrative in making sense of people’s lives as embedded in a wider social history. Young lesbian and gay people may be made sense of as caught in a moment of change, and shifts from the past to the future. But this is true not only of the history of lesbian and gay identities but of their own personal biographies, in terms of their lives and how they unfold as they move into adulthood (Thomson, 2009).

This is best caught by the notion of youth in transition, or ‘youth as transition’ (Jones, 2009: 84). For Jones (2009: 84) the transition to adulthood is ‘the central dynamic in youth...through which it gains its essential nature’. This is echoed by Roberts (2000, cited in MacDonald *et al.*, 2001: 5.7) who states that ‘youth is a life stage, neither the first nor the last, and as such is inherently transitional’ (although the notion of a life stage has been surpassed by that of the ‘life course’ as socially produced (Jones: 2009: 87)). Jones (2009: 84) suggests that aging, for young people, is constructed through ‘the impact of state institutional structures (the apparatus of bureaucratic knowledge) on young people’s ability to define their own lives.’ ‘Transition’ is understood best through the mundane, everyday aspects of young people’s lives, i.e. family, school, and work (Cohen, 1997, cited in Jones,

2009: 84). Indeed this is in keeping with an understanding of age and time as socially constructed, manufactured through the social forces and relations which shape the life course (Jenks, 2005: 6). Youth, in terms of ‘transition’, then is understood as being constructed in relation to, and extending between, childhood and adulthood (France, 2007; Valentine, 2003). These in turn are associated with particular meanings of gender and sexuality, meanings which alter as people get older (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007: 109).

The notions of ‘youth’ and transition have been seen to be a particularly salient concept in what has been described as ‘late modernity’ in which society is undergoing ‘rapid structural and cultural change’ (France, 2007). These are changes that have lead commentators to observe the extension of ‘youth’ into the twenties (Thomson, 2009). The transition from dependence on parents to independence and employment is seen to have been protracted through the dismantling of a youth labour market, the increase in staying on in secondary education after sixteen and the widening of higher education (Henderson *et al.*, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2004, 2006; MacDonald and Marsh, 2001, 2004).

These transformations have prompted challenges to traditional, linear and uniform notions of transition from dependence to independence (Jones, 2009: 90), with some suggesting that young people are increasingly dependent on parents as they get older (Jones *et al.*, 2006; Henderson *et al.*, 2007; Thomson, 2009). Transitions as a result are considered to be complex, rather than simple, with movements being characterized by shifts from dependence to independence and back again, shaped by critical moments which alter ‘the course of [young people’s] lives one way or another (MacDonald *et al.*, 2001: 4.8, see also Thomson *et al.*, 2002). This is particularly the case because, and as Valentine (2003: 49) states, ‘young people are not a universal category. Social differences such as class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. can all play a part in defining the transitions that we make’. It is considered then that there has been a diversification in the processes by which young people move into adulthood, noted in both the increased choice and uncertainty faced by young people looking to become economically and emotionally independent (France, 2007).

This section of the literature review has been provided in order to contextualize the lives of lesbian and gay youth at a number of junctions. This research is situated in the midst of a number of transformations, most notably in terms of the changing construction of lesbian and gay people (Seidman, 2005) and shifts in the compulsoriness of heterosexuality. It has also situated the lives of young lesbian and gay people in a largely heterosexual world, and well has highlighting the own potential transformations in their biographies as they move into adulthood. How these different contexts shape their understandings of sexuality is something to be considered in the following data chapters.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to make sense primarily of the theoretical tradition in which this project is located, namely symbolic interactionism. Its main concern has been to delineate the theoretical perspectives that are adopted in making sense of the data that came out of the fieldwork, as well as in interpreting how the young people interviewed made sense of themselves, their sexuality and their social worlds. This links back to the central research question which addresses the significance of sexuality in making sense of self, as well as the ways in which sexuality too is made sense of. In seeking to address this question, symbolic interactionism is adopted as ‘sense making’ is central to its theorizing. The notion of ‘making sexual selves’ then draws heavily on this tradition. In delineating the theoretical perspective adopted, the literature review has sought to raise a number of questions to be asked of the data. Questions about the construction and patterning of sexual selves, the ‘doing’ of identity, of embodiment, of sameness and difference and tensions between ascribed and achieved identities are addressed in relation to the data and picked up through chapter four to chapter six.

Further, issues of social change have been addressed. Symbolic interactionism as a theory is particularly sensitive to change (Brickell, 2006). It understands people in context, and the ways in which people’s context are in constant flux (Plummer, 2003b). This raises some significant questions about how people respond to change, and the effects of change of the construction of sexual selves. This is perhaps a more general concern though, and some tentative responses may be gleaned from the data. As such, this project moves towards addressing these

issues. Before looking at the data analysis however, the ways in which the research was carried out shall be addressed in the following methodology chapter.

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

### Introduction

Methodologically, this project adopts a qualitative approach consistent with the interactionist perspective laid out in the literature review. As established previously, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical approach that emphasizes ‘face-to-face interaction’ (Delamont, 1976: 13) and the ways in which we ‘attach symbolic meanings to interpersonal relations’ (Silverman, 2005: 98). For this reason, qualitative methods are seen to lie at the heart of symbolic interactionism as a way of ‘doing’ research (Miller and Glassner, 2004: 126). In providing a rationale for the research method used (semi-structured interviews), this chapter initially maps out that particular methods relationship with symbolic interactionism. This is covered in the first section which addresses the epistemological underpinnings to the research. The discussion then moves onto a more practical account of the ‘doing’ of the research. This takes into consideration the early stages of planning and preparation; an account of the sampling and recruitment procedures used; the carrying out of the fieldwork; and finally the analysis of the data. The chapter ends with a discussion of ethical considerations addressed in the course of doing the research.

### Doing Interactionist Research: Questions, Epistemologies and Methods

The focus of this research is on the construction of sexual selves and addresses the significance of ‘being’ lesbian and gay in giving an account of oneself (or, in Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) terms, the centrality of sexuality to understanding self). Embedded in this question are a number of issues, including the meanings attached to lesbian and gay identifications (including both those identifications and disidentifications with those meanings), reasons for identifying as lesbian or gay, and perceptions of others. The research question, from a interactionist perspective, addresses a range of symbolic practices and interactions through which sexual identities are made meaningful (Blumer, 1998 [1969]: 5). Epistemologically, symbolic interactionism may be classed as ‘interpretive’ (Atkinson and Housley, 2003: 121), it takes into consideration the ways in which

social situations are made meaningful (Silverman, 2006: 14). This interpretivism may be taken to suggest a degree of affinity then between symbolic interactionism and qualitative research (as being predicated on ‘interpretive’ epistemology (Bryman, 2001: 12)). Indeed Silverman (2004: 344) highlights qualitative research’s roots in symbolic interactionism. Although Delamont (2003: 83) points out that interactionism was, under Blumer, equally concerned with quantitative data, the affinity with qualitative methods may be understood within this emphasis on interpretation and meaning.

Selecting research methods was based on this mutual affinity between interactionism and qualitative methods. Rapley (2004: 15) has described symbolic interactionism as seeking to open up ‘talk so as to obtain more ‘textured’ and ‘authentic’ accounts’ of social life. Qualitative interviews, along similar lines, have been described as symbolic interactions where they are not concerned with positivistic ‘truths’, but generating ‘the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds’ (Miller and Glassner, 2004: 126). It was for these reasons that semi-structured interviews were selected, as a form of qualitative interview. Narrative approaches to interviewing were not used as my interest lay in the reflexive engagement with social meanings than the actual narratives on offer (Miller and Glassner, 2004: 126) (although, in some approaches, narratives may be taken as symbolic interactions (Plummer, 1995)). This is not to suggest any particular weakness with a narrative approach from this epistemological perspective, only that the choice made at the time was for semi-structured interviews. The choice was also informed by a range of more pragmatic reasons, including the role of questioning and the interviewer. These reasons are addressed below.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted in order to give the young lesbian and gay people interviewed a voice to reflect on their own understandings of their sexual identities. This is particularly significant in what is argued to be a moment of social change in which new stories of identity are being generated and old ones, potentially, brought into question (Richardson, 2004). Semi structured interviews, which offer rich, in-depth, complex and intimate data (Rapley, 2004), were thought to be the best way of engaging with, and inviting, this process of meaning

making (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Interviews were also seen as desirable so as to open up new areas of enquiry (Britten, 1995) since, to date, research available on lesbian and gay youth remains limited (Miceli, 2002).

There were also a number of practical considerations addressed when selecting semi-structured over more loosely structured interview formats. Semi-structured interviews for example were considered beneficial where they offer opportunities to respond to participants and prompt them on particular issues considered relevant or in need of more elaboration (Silverman, 1997). This might be understood in terms of the interactive, interpretive nature of the interview process, itself considered to be a symbolic interaction (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Additionally, semi-structured interviews were thought to offer a degree of comparability through the use of an interview guide, whilst still being flexible and 'open-ended' (Silverman, 2005: 112) enough to enable respondents 'to answer a question in their own terms' (May, 2001: 123). Although despite this degree of flexibility being a desirable aspect of semi-structured interviews it was also considered necessary to avoid the pitfalls of unstructured interviewing, for example, by being too 'under-prescriptive' and not giving the interviewee enough of an idea about what areas the research was concerned with (Silverman, 2006: 125). Using an interview guide (Appendix B) allowed for this degree of structure in order to avoid being under-prescriptive. Also, in some areas of sensitive research, having a structure in place can be useful in opening up the interview (Britten, 1995); particularly if participants are liable to be reticent (there are issues of power imbalances within this however which are discussed later).

Qualitative interviewing does bring its own challenges however, notably a potentially inerasable hierarchical relationship between the research and the researched (Skeggs, 1994: 79) where, as Stanley and Wise (1993: 176) put it, researchers are a 'tangible presence...in what they research and what they write'. Making the researcher's relationship with the researched explicit is a central priority in feminist methodologies as a way of addressing any power imbalance (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 177). Reflecting on this imbalance here, as part of the writing process, will not do anything to 'dissolve' any 'power divisions' (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 177) that existed during the interview interaction, however some

reflexivity in the writing would however situate me as part of the research process for the benefit of the reader. (Whether ‘dissolving’ that difference is achievable (Hollands, 2003: 159), or always necessary (Heath *et al.*, 2009), is a debate that is not going to be entered into here.) The reader may then consider any power imbalances that did exist during the research process, and how that might have shaped the data and analysis eventually produced. Two divisions, beyond my own status as an academic researcher, might be taken as central in this respect, notably gender and age where I, as an older gay man, was working with both young lesbians and young gay men. These may have had particular consequences for this project.

Perhaps one of the most notable difficulties faced in doing the research was in recruiting young lesbians; only five have been interviewed for this project, mainly students. These issues are considered below as part of the discussion on access. Whilst there were specific difficulties in gaining access to young women due to a lack of resources and facilities (McTimoney, 2009), these may have been secondary to my own position as a male researcher (Edmund is a fairly difficult name to ‘degender’). It might be asked whether a woman doing the research would have produced a different outcome. It has been noted that men doing research on women has its difficulties, particularly where the research topic in question ‘is salient to the particular dimension of difference’ (for example, a white researcher doing research on racism with people from ethnic minority groups) (Brooks *et al.*, 2009: 40). In this case a project done by a man interviewing women and exploring gender and sexuality would invariably make gender an issue in terms of the researcher-researched interaction. This shaped both the gendered interaction as well as what may have been appropriate to address within the interview. For example what aspects of sexuality can be addressed comfortably by a man interviewing women (Hollands, 2003: 166)?

Additionally, being an out gay man did not necessarily mean a less imbalanced relationship between me and the male participants, or any kind of unitary ‘sameness’ between us as gay men (Hollands, 2003). Whilst I would try and make clear that I was gay during or prior to the interview, this was perhaps not always overtly clear where some did not take for granted that I may have shared

knowledge with them as a gay man (for example, knowledge about the gay scene). Indeed, as a (seemingly) ‘very straight gay’ (Connell, 1992), how I was perceived by the young men interviewed may have shaped their gendered interaction with me as a man (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001). In being interviewed about their sexual identities, the young men were being asked in the interview to do a form of ‘identity work’ (Allen, 2005). Takes on, and performances of, masculinity and sexuality may have been shaped by that gendered interaction. This is something to be considered within the data analysis.

### **Research Design and Process**

Having addressed the reasons for adopting semi-structured interviews, the discussion now moves on to depict the development of the research design. This proceeds in a chronological fashion (although with some overlap between the stages), moving from the beginnings of the research in 2007 through to the final interviews in December of 2008 and the subsequent data analysis. This section begins with the design of the research guide moving through the sampling procedure, negotiation of access and recruitment of research participants, ending with the ‘doing’ of the semi-structured interviews. Following that the analysis is discussed.

#### *1) Interview Guide and Rehearsal Interviews*

The beginning of the research process involved the development of an interview guide (Appendix B) around which the semi-structured interviews could be developed. The construction of the guide took place incrementally from the beginning of 2007 through to the end of that same year, starting with an initial identification of themes carrying on to a detailed series of data collection questions and probes. The development of the interview guide began with some thought around the key themes central to the original data question, including issues involving gay and lesbian identities, sexual selves and youth. Initially questions were raised about these themes, asking what, in Fielding and Thomas’ (2001: 132) terms, was ‘problematic or interesting about’ them. In asking questions about self and identity, youth and sexuality a number of subthemes were identified regarding sameness and difference, inclusions and exclusions, belonging

and the meanings of sexual identity. These were picked where they represented enduring ways in theorizing self and identity (Jenkins, 2008).

Specific data collection questions were devised so as to translate these subthemes into things which could be asked of potential interviewees. For example, specific questions about where the young people might have felt in or out of place addressed broader questions of belonging; these specific questions in turn opened up space for more pointed questions regarding the disclosure of identity, and reasons for disclosing identity (or not). This was not a linear process of deduction however, rather, developing data collection questions involved a cyclical process of raising possible questions deduced from broader thematic ones, contemplating the wording, meaning and relevance of those questions, and discarding questions which were felt not to be working, in those latter instances starting again with different questions. This process was carried out so as to ensure data collection questions were clear, accessible and unambiguous, to the point, and not leading. Much of this was done as a process of drafting and redrafting informed by feedback from the research supervisors. Finally 'fine-tuned' probes were developed, these being aimed at teasing extra information out of initial responses in order to get the most out of the open-ended question format (Fielding and Thomas, 2001: 132).

Having developed the interview guide, three rehearsal interviews were conducted in order to iron out inadequacies in the interview guide (Bryman, 2001: 155), with gay and lesbian participants in their mid to late twenties recruited through the university interviewed so as to not use up any of the potential research sample. These were rehearsal interviews as opposed to pilots where the interviewees 'performed' as though they were in their late teens, responding to questions as though they were younger. Although artificial, this was necessary so as to try and make sure responses were suitable to the questions asked, and therefore potentially testing those questions more adequately, enabling me to re-evaluate the questions which seemed to be poorly understood. A further benefit of the rehearsal interviews was in the development of probing questions. They allowed a chance to reflect on when to prompt and why, and the best way to deliver a prompting question, including the identification of missed opportunities for prompting on

appraisal of the rehearsal interview transcript. Transcription of the rehearsal interviews also created an opportunity to further evaluate the interview technique as transcripts could be studied for both design and process.

## 2) *Sampling*

Following the early rehearsal interviews and re-evaluation of the interview guide in light of those interviews, the main body of research interviews were planned. The initial plan had been to conduct thirty interviews with gay men and lesbians aged sixteen to twenty-one, split equally between men and women with an even spread of respondents across the age group. The fieldwork was conducted between January and December 2008, with interviews being transcribed as part of a rolling process throughout the year. Interviews were subsequently analysed throughout the first half of 2009, with a preliminary analysis being carried out on the first few interviews. This was done to check whether themes were working, and if other previously unidentified themes were emerging. In this section the approach to sampling is explored, consideration of which began whilst the interview guide was being developed. Given the specific ethical and methodological implications of working with young lesbian and gay people (Valentine *et al.*, 2005), a significant part of the discussion focuses on age. The discussion also addresses what was excluded, as well as included.

The initial plan had been to focus on young gay men and lesbians. Bisexual people were excluded where it was thought that an additional focus on bisexuality would have introduced another dimension to the research. Despite this, and recognising the 'changeable' nature of sexual identifications (Simon and Gagnon, 1986), one young man who identified as gay prior to interviewing later identified as bisexual, one young woman identified 'fluidly' as either lesbian or bisexual. These participants are acknowledged during the data analysis. Transgender people were also excluded from the research sample where they would require a further analysis of gendered and sexual subjectivities. Time constraints proved this would be a difficult task; as such they were not included within the research sample. In terms of gender, the sample was designed to be split evenly between gay men and lesbians in order to explore the gendered processes of self-understanding and

meaning making that this project attends to. In practice, this could not be achieved however due to a number of difficulties in recruiting young lesbians. These difficulties in accessing young lesbians are discussed in the following section, along with difficulties with accessing people in the younger age bracket. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the gender of the participants.

*Table 1: Breakdown of gender and sexuality of participants*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
Male	<i>14 (13 Gay, 1 Bisexual)</i>
Female	<i>5 (4 Lesbian, 1 Bi/Lesbian)</i>
<b>Total number:</b>	<b>19</b>

The age of the sample had originally been aimed towards a lower range of sixteen to nineteen. This was the case because, to begin with, the project was intended to explore educational experience under New Labour. This was motivated by the then recent repeal of section 28 in November 2003 and an increased educational focus on diversity, well-being and good health for all aged up to nineteen, underpinned by the 2003 *Every Child Matters* green paper (the focus on equality and pluralism contained within that underpinning much New Labour rhetoric (Stychin, 2003)). The objective at that point had been to explore the experiences of education of young gay and lesbian people aged up to nineteen (the age up to which young people ‘mattered’ for New Labour). The age range was eventually increased to twenty-one, as a top age limit of nineteen years old would have made achieving a sample size of thirty difficult. Sixteen years of age was taken as the lower age limit, since many local youth groups used sixteen as their bottom age for allowing members. Problems of access would have been faced as people under fifteen were frequently not accounted for within these groups. Further, it was anticipated that there would be a greater reticence on behalf of the younger people to take part where there were likely issues of trust and confidence. Taking these issues into consideration a decision was taken to extend the age range to twenty-one, where it was felt that the older age range were likely to provide more respondents.

Extending the age range occurred alongside gradual transformations in the research question. As the planning stages of the research progressed, the research question shifted from a focus on experiences of schooling to a more general question of self and identity. The interest had moved on to exploring how identity was being shaped by a wider context of social and legal changes. This shift in focus to broader questions about identity and self meant that a stricter age limit was less necessary. The top age range was kept at twenty-one in order to focus on people growing up under these legislative changes; for example, they would have all been eighteen and under when the Civil Partnership Act came into effect. Something which it can be argued has come to represent a largely symbolic moment for many gay and lesbian people within the UK (Shipman and Smart, 2007). As suspected, in the final sample there was a trend towards greater recruitment in the upper age bracket. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the ages of the final sample.

*Table 2: Age breakdown of research participants*

<i>Age of participants (years)</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
16-17	4 (4 gay men)
18-19	7 (2 gay men, 5 lesbians)
20-21	8 (8 gay men)
<b>Total number:</b>	<b>19</b>

The cap at twenty-one was perhaps more symbolic than anything else. The age range could have been extended beyond twenty-one to include a wider definition of ‘youth’, which is not a ‘fixed’ category founded in ‘a notional classification of biological age’ (Valentine *et al.*, 1998: 6) but a contested category defined ‘by sets of institutionalised transitions, whose successful negotiation promise the goal of independence and recognition as a full member of the community’ (Chisholm & du Bois-Reymond, 1993: 259). Twenty-one was used however in order to ‘capture’ a particular moment, of what it was to be growing up, and making transitions into adulthood, as a young gay man or lesbian within a particular historical moment, with ‘youth’ being shaped by institutionalised transitions from school and family to further and higher education, work and financial

independence (Jones, 2009). Whilst the project is not itself a ‘transitions’ study, it locates understandings of sexuality within this time period. Table 3 gives a breakdown of the final sample and their status as either in education or employment, reflecting the different contexts in which the young peoples’ lives were embedded.

*Table 3: Status as employed, unemployed or in education*

<i>Status</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
Secondary Education	3
Further Education	4
Higher Education	8
Employed	3
Unemployed	1
<b><i>Total number:</i></b>	<b><i>19</i></b>

‘Race’ and class, unlike age, gender and sexuality were not included as research variables. Breaking a sample size that was already anticipated to be small down into composite age groups, split by gender and sexuality meant that factoring in an analysis of these other dimensions would place too much strain on the sample, particularly due to the specific racial demographics of the North-East. Attempting to locate these specific groups would also have added further pressure on time and resources. Class does however come through in areas of the analysis in terms of the discussions young people were having, as well as in terms of their own classed positions, notable for example in a small but significant number of publically educated respondents (four in total). Class will be commented on where relevant; however it is not a significant theme in the analysis. Whilst a classed analysis could potentially be achieved with regards to the particular positions of the young respondents, ‘race’ can be highlighted through highlighting the whiteness of all my interviewees. I did not aim to include ‘race’ as a factor where the North-East has a predominantly white population, although in some areas of the North-East there has been seen transformations in the North-East’s ethnic composition (Nayak, 2003: 38). The lack of non-white lesbian and gay young in the sample is indicative of this, discussions of sexuality and ‘whiteness’ not being broached

since ‘whiteness’, like heterosexuality, operates in the background and as such is largely invisible with respect to constructions of self and identity (Frankenberg, 1997).

### *3) Access and Recruitment*

Valentine *et al.* (2005) have argued that accessing young lesbian and gay people is significantly more difficult than accessing heterosexual youth. They argue that whilst research on youth can be successfully aided through schools and the family home, these particular avenues are less amenable to accessing young gay and lesbian people. For instance, they may be unsafe spaces to be recognised as gay, as such young gay and lesbian people are often invisible within them. Secondly, if not unsafe, schools or homes may be at least uncomfortable places to discuss sexuality, thus research taking place in either of these zones may be a challenge to privacy, comfort and confidentiality (Valentine, 1999). This is troubling where Valentine *et al.* (2005) see much social research on youth as relying either heavily or solely on schools and family homes for gaining access. One risk is that in doing so gay and lesbian voices are potentially rendered silent (Epstein, 1994; Epstein and Johnson, 1998). Given this argument, thoughts on gaining access to lesbian and gay youth through schools and homes were put on one side. Instead, alternatives were considered with the approach to access having two parts.

The main method adopted involved approaching local youth groups organised to bring together young lesbian, gay and bisexual people and transgender (LGBT) people. In addition to community youth groups, the LGBT societies of local universities and colleges were approached. These were thought necessary to include because increasing numbers of young people are seen to be entering into further and higher education following ‘compulsory leaving school age’ (Coleman, 2000). The second method was to take advantage of local LGBT community resources, including a community newsletter, online spaces and attending a local pride event in the summer of 2008. Access was considered an ‘on-going’ process, and began towards the start of the second year of my PhD in October 2007 when initial contact with a variety of youth groups was made. Many of which were returned to in waves throughout the process, overlapping with the

fieldwork which ran from January to December 2008. The Pride event took place on the twelfth of July and represented one of the last attempts at gaining access to participants, followed by a final attempt at utilising youth group spaces. Access was drawn to a close in October 2008 when it was felt not many more respondents were coming forward.

- *LGBT Youth Groups and Gatekeepers*

No single LGBT group was used in gaining access; rather a variety of groups operating throughout North-East were approached (an anonymized list of these groups can be seen as part of Appendix C). The reason for focusing on a number of organisations was to ensure a wider return of respondents than would be gained through one organisation. There was also an issue of confidentiality in this; restricting access to one group would risk that group being too easily identified, as well as the people within the group being too easily identified by others. However, one problem that was quickly identified was a lack of groups available for lesbian and bisexual women. This was also identified in a report identifying a lack of resources and support groups available in the North-East for lesbians and bisexual young women at the time (McTimoney, 2009). Many organisations were run solely for young gay and bisexual men with several receiving financial support from local health authorities. This disparity can be seen in Appendix C. By the end of the fieldwork no service providing support specifically for lesbians was accessed. Instead groups with a wider LGBT remit were used, as such the number of lesbians interviewed is limited, perhaps further compounded by my presence as a male researcher (see above discussion on gender and the researcher/researched relationship, page 55). Attempts to deal with this through snowball sampling were made, this is discussed further below.

Another difficulty that arose early on in the research was that of youth groups' contact details being available on the internet but no longer functional, indicating the closure of a number of groups over time. A number of youth groups were advertised as being established, however emails regularly bounced back from unrecognised email addresses and phone numbers were often found to be no longer available. McTimoney (2009) has acknowledged the difficulties faced by

some youth groups that are unable to attract funding to keep on youth workers, thus folding or having to run limited services on little resources. Whilst many local LGBT websites through which details were sourced displayed a number of youth groups running in the area some had seemingly ceased to run prior to me sourcing information on them. This poses a number of issues for the project, particularly with regards to who could be approached and who could not.

Whilst measures were taken to advertise the project widely it is likely that a much narrower group of people could be reached than was hoped for. The data generated and sample reached are likely shaped by these access problems where the difficulties in locating organisations and project workers reduced the number of youth groups that could eventually be accessed. In part these problems were a product of the way in which information on groups was sourced, internet search engines were relied on heavily along with larger online umbrella organisations which hosted information about local groups and events. There may have been more productive ways of identifying support groups; however it is interesting to reflect on how this accessibility may shape young LGBT people's engagement with support groups as well. Particularly as two of the sixteen year old gay men interviewed (coming forward at a local pride event) were unaware of the existence of any local support groups or services (this is a finding that is echoed by McTimoney, 2009).

Problems in gaining access were further compounded by the ways that some of the organisations were funded and governed. Whilst a small number of sizeable and well organised youth groups were being run, most of the larger ones were local council or National Health Service funded (NHS), or employed NHS staff to run the group. At the beginning of the research the decision was made not to apply for NHS ethical approval where it was not thought that the project would need it. This was the case since the research did not have a particular focus on 'health' which would require the use of NHS resources. By the time youth groups were being approached it would have been too late to apply for NHS ethical approval, as that process would be unlikely to have completed before the end of the fieldwork. The presence of a small number of NHS supported groups raised access problems, and a small number of groups approached were eventually left where it transpired that

they would be unable to help due to obligations to NHS ethical guidelines. This relationship between health funding and LGBT organisations may be bound up in an increasing bureaucratization of LGBT identities through state centred health services (Epstein, 2003; Weeks, 2000). This may have implications for further research, particularly where young LGBT people (and young people generally) are framed within discourses of sexual and mental health and emotional well-being (Talburt, 2004).

Contact with youth groups was generally made by phone call, with the exception of the university and college LGBT societies which took greater advantage of email and the internet. This was a useful way of finding out about the different organisations, as well as enabling me to brief the group contact about the research. Having made initial contact, a copy of the project information sheet (Appendix D) including detailed confidentiality and ethical statements would be emailed to the project worker or gatekeeper. Once it was felt that the main contacts (gatekeepers) were confident that they knew enough about the project an opportunity to go round to meet them in person and to talk further about the project would be arranged. This was also an opportunity to hand out promotional material to give to the young people themselves including a poster (Appendix E) and brochure (Appendix E) advertising the research project. These last two items were designed to be accessible and easily read by potential participants, containing basic information about the projects goals and the purpose of the research, with prominent contact details on the brochure. A revised copy of the information sheet designed for the young people would be delivered as well (Appendix D).

Whilst it was suggested that presentations could be made to the groups, these offers were infrequently taken up; although it was felt that they would have been beneficial to the recruitment process (university groups were more amenable to this offer). One particular youth group was returned to later on in the recruitment process to give out more brochures. Although these brochures were revised and aimed at the younger age group of gay men, sixteen to eighteen, when at the time fewer had come forward than the older age bracket (see Appendix E for the revised brochures).

A different approach was used for contacting university and college LGBT societies. Having contacted society board members, a number of university LGBT functions were attended in order to spend time with people. This gave time for personal contact, enabling people to find out more about the project. Whilst this was just a chance for others to meet me, not an opportunity to get people to sign up there and then, it was recommended that if they wanted to take part they should get in contact via email or phone. Society meetings were also attended in order to distribute brochures and information sheets. University society email lists were also taken advantage of in order to send information out to those who had not attended the societies' functions. The use of email here ties into a related discussion below about the importance of the internet in providing access. For the colleges, access was less easily negotiated as there was a greater degree of difficulty in ascertaining the contact details of people running the society. Eventually, however, contact was made with members who were able to pass an email around with the brochure attached around the society's email network. This was a form of snowballing that was particularly useful where attempts were made to get people aware of the project to share information with others. Although more difficult, it was felt to be particularly necessary to pursue access with further education colleges. This was the case where it may have offered a different class and age profile to the universities, since further education colleges are believed to take more students from a working class background than higher education institutions (Leathwood and Hutchings, 2003).

Access to university and college LGBT societies was facilitated through use of the internet where they made greater use of web spaces, particularly social networking sites, in organising group events and keeping people connected (allowing for further snowballing opportunities). These online spaces were made available for advertising the research upon contacting the university/college LGBT societies. These sites provided space for details of the project to be left, including contact details for potential participants to get in touch to request further details, from which point they could be emailed a copy of the same information sheet provided to the youth group workers to pass on to attendees (see Appendix D). Methodologically, engaging with the use of social networking sites by young people was important, as they are seen to be an increasingly useful way for

researchers to engage with the everyday worlds of young people (boyd, 2008; Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Livingstone, 2008) in a time when young people's lives are increasingly mediated through communication and information technologies (Holmes and Russell, 1999). Indeed, a number of the university students who did get in contact first heard of the project through social networking sites, with some participants coming through via social networking sites who were not students of the universities approached (or students at all); this was one form of snowballing taken advantage of in the research. This indicated that these online spaces and networks were being used by more than just the members of the respective university societies (an unintended form of snowballing).

Of course, in using social networking sites, due consideration should be given to the ways in which access to, and use of, the internet is structured along class, 'race' and gender lines (Rice and Katz, 2003) and the potential effect this might have on participation in research advertised via the internet. This account of internet access may be questioned however as recent figures suggest seventy percent of British households now have access to the internet (ONS, 2009). One useful point to draw from the role of the internet here was its value in gaining access to those who were only marginally involved in community activities, sometimes referred to as a 'hard-to-reach' (Cooper, 2006: 928), whose contact with LGBT communities was predominantly facilitated through the internet. The internet is significantly shaping the social networks of LGBT youth in particular (Driver, 2006), and young people in general (Castells *et al.*, 2006: 141-142).

To enable potential participants to get in touch, email details and a mobile phone number dedicated specially to the project were provided on the promotional materials designed for the project (Appendix E). This was beneficial as they provided direct, as well as informal, means through which potential participants could make contact; indeed given the ratio of texts to phone calls it would seem that texts messages were the preferred means of contact alongside emails. These means of communication may have afforded a sense of privacy, where the young people could get in touch without leaving any further details such as their name, if they were just curious, thus granting them a greater degree of agency in the decision making process. Text messaging and emails were also used for arranging

interviews after initial contact. Texts were used to make certain that interviewees were sure where the arranged meeting point was, as well as enabling them to make contact if they could not find me upon turning up. This was particularly useful since I often arranged for interviewees to be met in a neutral space outside the university, these spaces being easier for them to find given that many participants were unfamiliar with Newcastle University's campus.

One disadvantage to using these technologies to arrange interviews however was an increased likelihood of participants dropping out or not turning up. The number of participants who were lost throughout the research process can be seen in appendix F along with those who were interviewed. Additionally, there were difficulties with my approach to recruitment which affected the numbers of participants coming forward. It may be that some had received information about the project, been interested, but then did not make contact (Alderson and Morrow, 2004: 46). Gatekeepers, too, may have been a barrier to young people consenting on their own terms. Masson (1999: 36) suggests that gatekeepers shape 'young people's opportunities to express their views', this being done either through the withholding of information or where they may have been too busy or had forgotten to pass on information. Also, one concern felt during the fieldwork was that requests for research participants had become commonplace. This I was informed of by one LGBT society president, who indicated a degree of 'research fatigue' (Clark, 2008), particularly with undergraduate and Masters students looking for an easily accessible LGBT population for a dissertation project. Although there was far greater ease in accessing university students than those outside, a problem noted in this research, and one which needs to be taken into consideration when drawing any conclusions from the data. This 'fatigue' was also felt on a visit to one non-university youth group settings; several calls for research participants were posted on their premises walls.

A more general point may be drawn from the use of youth groups in the first place, as questions may be raised about who uses them. Miceli (2002: 200), for example, has suggested that studies of lesbian and gay youth have, to date, disproportionately focused on "out", urban, and male youth in need of and receiving support'. In so doing such research has missed out data on 'rural,

‘closeted’, and female youth who are not seeking, or not receiving, support’ (Miceli, 2002: 200). This trend towards researching ‘out’ and ‘urban’ youth might be evidenced in a growing body of literature focused on US school students in straight-gay alliances (Mayberry, 2007; Walling, 2007; Russell *et al.*, 2009; Walls *et al.* 2010) to which there may be added classed and racial dimensions. The focus on out, predominantly male youth, largely concentrated in urban areas may not have escaped this trend, particularly given the lack of facilities for young lesbians and bisexual women already mentioned. Again, this is of primary importance and needs to be taken into consideration when drawing any conclusions from the data. Whilst conclusions may be drawn these are only partial.

Whilst access through LGBT groups were the main means of accessing participants, use was made of a number of other community based resources and events, particularly online resources, community newsletters and a local pride event. The following section explores the use of these other resources.

- *Events & Resources: Northern Pride, The Internet and Regional Newsletter*

Attending a local pride event, *Northern Pride 2008*, was a final attempt at recruiting participants before moving onto the data analysis. This event was used as an opportunity to target those groups underrepresented in the sample, specifically lesbians and gay men aged sixteen to eighteen. The annual gay pride event was held on the twelfth of July 2008, six months into the fieldwork and nine months since having started negotiating access. Up to this point the response rate from lesbians had been very low, with the age of gay men responding located in the upper-age bracket of nineteen and over. This was put down to greater success of gaining participants in further or higher education, typically eighteen years and over (although women remained underrepresented). Response from the local youth groups had also been low, despite two visits to give brochures (both the initial brochure and a modified one aimed at younger men (Appendix E)). The pride event was a chance to balance out the respondents by age and gender. This was particularly important since it operated as a final push towards getting more respondents before ending the fieldwork.

For this event two different versions of the brochure were used, the one aimed at younger men and another aimed at lesbians generally (Appendix E). The pride event was split into two parts, a march in the morning and a picnic following that. The picnic was an event hosted in Newcastle's Leazes Park, where entertainment was put on, as well as stalls from various services promoting themselves to the attendees. Along with some female PhD candidates at Newcastle University, I occupied a stall at the picnic in order to recruit potential research participant. Relating back to the discussion of gender and researcher/researched power imbalances had earlier (page 55), it seems that there was a potential benefit to having women at the desk where they attracted a number of other women, as well as Trans people. This worked well as an opportunity to talk with people directly about the project, as well as for them to agree to receive further information by giving their email addresses. It was also a good opportunity to hand out fliers to people who were thought to be of the right age group.

Aside from facilitating contact with university and college societies via the internet, other online forums were used to recruit young lesbians and gay men outside academic establishments. Two sites were used; one was a local online LGBT community forum that published a monthly downloadable newsletter. The other was a community site operated by a commercial company owning a number of bars and clubs on the Newcastle gay scene. Both were useful ways of targeting a wider lesbian and gay audience beyond the confines of specific institutional or organisational spaces. Of course, whilst the commercial scene run website may have been limited to those with internet access, the monthly newsletter of the community forum was also made available widely through other LGBT run services throughout the North-East. There were differences in how I used these two online spaces. The commercial scene forum was frequently returned to in order to ensure that the call for participants was well placed, as it was an 'active' forum for people to post relevant information of their own, with new posts superseding older ones. The LGBT community forum was used just once later on in the fieldwork stage in attempting to gain access.

Given that the community forum ran a local newsletter through which to post information this was seen as a resource to be used in a more intentional way. This

forum acted as a second round of calls for participants, aimed specifically at young women, who were, up to that point, only marginally represented in the sample – a tactic that had limited success with numbers remaining low even after this, again possibly due to my position as a male researcher. The advert posted was kept relatively casual in tone, whilst still highlighting the significance of the research, hopefully giving it a broad appeal. This advert is attached as part of Appendix E. A final method of recruitment, which did not prove successful, was a particular method of snowballing, with interviews being taken as a chance to increase the participant sample through inviting the participant to tell their friends about the research. This was formalised through offering at the end of each interview a number of participant ‘packs’ to hand out to friends. These included a copy of the research brochure as well as an information sheet. This method however proved not to be too fruitful and no single participants were found as a result of this strategy.

#### *4) Interviews*

Access began in October 2007 and ended in October 2008, with fieldwork beginning during this period. The interviews had started in January 2008 and ended in December 2008. By the end of the fieldwork nineteen interviews had been conducted. The tables in Appendix F document the breakdown of participants by age, gender and the means through which they were recruited. This includes a number of people who agreed to take part but failed to turn up for interview, of which there were several. For example, one young lesbian, on hearing about the research emailed to ask if the interview could be done on the same day. Having said that this would not be possible we arranged a date for the following week, a date on which she said a friend would like to be interviewed as well. Neither of these young women showed up and on emailing to follow up no response was received so they were not pursued any further. This typifies a number of experiences dealt with when trying to arrange interviews. On many occasions people did not show up, replying by text to say they had got caught up and could not make it. Most would reschedule another date, to which some would show up and others would not. This constant rescheduling and cancelling was taken as a typical element of doing research early on. Texting as well added

another dimension whereby individuals would text to cancel or reschedule quite easily, although this was preferable to no prior warning.

Interviews were arranged to take place on university premises. This was an ethical as well as practical decision. Ethically the university campus was selected as a safe space in which to conduct interviews. It was considered to be relatively anonymous, unlike places familiar to the young people, where interviews done in places selected on their own terms may have caused difficulties with respect to confidentiality (Valentine *et al.*, 2005). Interviewing at the university was seen as a way of maintaining the participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally it was selected for my own safety, where I could be in a place that I knew well and was fairly public. These are ethical issues which are considered further below. Other than being a safe, confidential space in which to interview, interviewing on campus was also a practical decision. The university campus was centrally located, serviced by a near-by underground station and close to several landmarks in the city centre. This made it easier to arrange meeting areas where there were a number of recognisable places around the campus from which participants could be guided to university buildings. Further providing space at the university took the onus off the individual to decide where the interview be held. Indeed most of the respondents seemed to prefer being given a place for them to turn up at, and whilst they were offered another option of the premises at a local gay men's group, none took up this option. Finally, the university was useful as it was at once public, with numerous people around, but also private, with rooms offering a quiet space in which to conduct an interview without disturbance.

In conducting the interview, and with regards to power imbalances between myself as a male researcher and the interviewee, there was a concern over how best to conduct the interview, and how that would influence the success of the interview (Fontana and Frey, 2003: 77). What, for example, would be the most comfortable way for me to do the interview? As well as this, what would ensure a better interaction? How could I get the best out of the interview? Here my interest was to ensure that I could gain a degree of trust, as well as establish some sort of rapport, both highlighted by Fontana and Frey (2003: 78) as central to qualitative interviewing. This was thought to be particularly important when broaching and

trying to get an understanding of sensitive topics such as sexuality. One method through which this was achieved was to present myself in a casual manner rather than as a formal researcher (Fontana and Frey, 2003: 77). To some extent this was about trying to diminish any power imbalance or sense of difference. I did not want to position myself as ‘other’ to the interviewees by appearing too ‘professional’ (although whether not being ‘other’ is questionable (Skeggs, 1994: 79)), although this may have affected their confidence in me as a researcher.

Another method was to adopt a degree of ‘reciprocity’ in the interviews (Liamputpong, 2007: 60). This was not so much a ‘big’ gesture of providing something that may have been deemed to benefit them significantly such as directing them to support services (information about which was already provided on the brochure) or providing educational material about sexuality (see Liamputpong, 2007: 60). Instead it was more a case of ‘self-disclosure’, providing personal details about myself as a relatively young gay man as well as my own thoughts and opinions on things (Liamputpong, 2007). Although these were minimised, since where I did not wish to influence the discussion, being saved instead for more informal discussions at the end of each interview where I could engage more reflexively with some of the things they had discussed. During the interview I kept any personal interjections to a minimum. This discussion also provided a useful way to wrap up the interview, providing an opportunity to reflect on what had been said in the interview as well as for the interviewees to say what things they thought were most significant amongst the issues they had addressed. This part tended to happen after the recorder had been switched off and what they said at that point was rarely noted down where that might have seemed inappropriate at the time.

Additionally, whilst it was initially decided not to offer an incentive, after a couple of months a decision to offer an incentive in the form of a £10 HMV voucher was made. This was the case where recruitment rates had been particularly low in the early stage of the fieldwork. An incentive was offered as a way of ‘encouraging participation’ (McDowell, 2001, cited in Heath *et al.*, 2009: 37). The use of incentives is something McDowell (2001) believes to be particularly important in research with young people, particularly in her own work where she was engaging

with young men on low incomes. Heath *et al.* (2009: 37) however have registered concern over how appropriate the use of incentives are, seeing them as potentially an ‘inappropriate bribe’, particularly where research concerns ‘materially disadvantaged’ youth such as in McDowell’s work. Whether or not incentives should be used is an issue that ‘lacks consensus amongst youth researchers’ (Heath *et al.*, 2009: 37). The appropriateness of using an incentive was something taken into consideration early on in the research, when it was decided not to provide one. However, in the context of this research, in which it was felt interest in the research was low, and given the difficulty in recruiting lesbian and gay youth generally (Valentine *et al.*, 2005), it was decided that an incentive would be used in order to improve recruitment. There may be additional concerns over the effect this has on *who* comes forward, and their reasons for doing so, and how this shapes the data provided. This is something to be considered in interpreting the data, although it is thought the data provided throughout all of the interviews was of a high quality.

The main body of each interview was recorded using a digital recorder. This allowed me to focus on the interview interaction and prompt at the right moments instead of copying down what was being said. Recorded files were then stored on a university computer, with pseudonyms used as file names as opposed to real names. Interviews were transcribed as part of a rolling process throughout the fieldwork. Identifying markers were anonymized during that process. The final interview was transcribed by February 2009, although analysis had already begun during this process of transcription, a process which overlapped with the fieldwork.

## **Analysis**

Following the completion of the fieldwork in December 2008 data analysis became the primary focus. This began as part of the transcription process where the transformation of the interview into a written text made categorisation of the data possible (Silverman, 2006: 15). As Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 11) have suggested, analysis is not a specific stage of the research project, but instead a ‘pervasive activity’ throughout it. Interviews were transcribed in full, allowing for the data to be fully appreciated through the process of listening back to the

interview and typing it down. It is for these reasons that a qualitative data analysis programme such as NVivo was not used. Also, given the small sample size, analysis could be conducted gradually throughout the process of transcription, which had begun whilst the fieldwork was still being conducted, thus technical assistance was not really required.

Analysis started as a way of categorising data through the use of ‘codes’ closely associated with the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 26), these codes being generated from the themes embedded within the data. This was the case in that the coding stage was less an analytic procedure and more an organizing one. ‘Interpretation’ was predicated on what was being said in the text, as opposed to what the code implied (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003: 154). Analysis was initiated through the identification of various areas coded based on the content of the passage. For example, using codes such as ‘civil partnerships’ where interviewees were thinking in terms of recent citizenship rights or constructions of intimacy in adulthood, both of which might have been discussed in reference to civil partnerships. Coding provided an opportunity to break down the data into ‘chunks’ via the use of labels, in order to think comparatively across the interviews on a range of subjects. The coding and interlinking of different areas of various interviews helping to build up categories based on ‘common properties’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 27). The production of these categories then assisted in creating a pool of passages from the data addressing a similar issue, this making it possible to look in detail across the data for ‘patterns, themes and regularities as well as contrasts, paradoxes, and irregularities’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 47). It may have been preferable had this been done in the form of a table, one in which the extent of these difference could be documented, including the range of differences as well as the ‘depth’ of detail within each category. However it was decided instead to create a word document with a selection of representative quotes, writing a brief synopsis of what was being observed in each category and the various commonalities and differences which were emerging from those categories.

In constructing categories due consideration was given to the multiple meanings and various issues at play within passages, as well as how the things being

discussed related to broader issues relevant to the research question. This meant that quotes could be understood in multiple ways, enabling them to be put into different categories. Coding, in this respect, was not a ‘mundane process’ but involved ‘establishing and thinking about’ various linkages (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 26). The process of coding was connected to attempts to identify broader themes through asking questions of the data. This is something akin to what Mason (2002: 18) has called a ‘puzzle’, asking ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions of the data and relating those to your own research questions. For example, what were the passages telling me about the way in which sexuality was constructed in terms of transitions into adulthood? Or how is identity constructed within a wider socio-political context? In the case of this project this entailed linking those codes and categories back to a broader question of self and sexuality.

The attempt to think about how the categories related to the broader research question about self and sexuality was useful in generating wider themes through which disparate categories could be linked. Again, this echoes the sense of coding and categorisation being an interpretive activity as opposed to a mechanical one. An activity aiming to contextualize the data within broader themes, thinking of what it was that the data was saying in relation to the research question (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 26). Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 47) see this process as being part of the shift from ‘coding to interpretation’ within the analysis. This is done by making the data meaningful where the data requires a degree of interpretation by the person doing the analysis. At this point codes and categories could be ‘bunched’ together so as to create wider themes. These larger themes connected to the main research question which addresses the construction of sexual selves. Where I was interested, for example, in the way in which sexuality and intimacy informed constructions of self then I needed to ask how patterns of intimacy shaped accounts of identity. These themes had to fit into a wider analysis of the construction of youth, self and identity. This was done through bringing codes, categories and themes together under wider rubric of identity. So for example in chapter four, bringing together understandings of embodiment and the construction of identity in terms of the body, particularly as something which ‘develops’ sexually in adolescence. In chapter five issues of sameness and

difference are dealt with as well as the construction of identity in terms of belonging. Here sexual selves are seen as embedded within a wider social context.

This analysis was not quite as linear or methodical as this account makes out, however. Rather it was a messier method of re-categorising data, reconceptualising categories and re-grouping themes. Thus categories changed and the wider themes they were bundled together to create were continually revisited and restructured. The analysis also involved an ongoing process of questioning and 'puzzling' (Mason, 2002: 18) the data, regularly returning to the research question to refocus and work out what it was I was interested in finding out from the data. This process of questioning and rethinking continued throughout the coding process through on to the writing up of the data chapters. Certainly analysis did not end at a clearly defined point. Analysis did not constitute a distinct phase of the project which had clear boundaries; rather it developed gradually from transcription through to the final write-up, taking place as the project developed (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 11). This process was ongoing throughout the writing of the thesis, all of which took place with ongoing feedback from the research supervisors (Silverman, 2005: 152).

A final point to make with regard to the data analysis is the use of quotes within the data chapters. I have attempted to grant parity to each interviewee; however were there were more gay men than lesbians, I have intentionally used more quotes from the underrepresented group, as well as to offer a gendered perspective. This is in order that their view points and experiences can be given an appropriate voice rather than granting more space to the young gay men who made up the bulk of the sample. Having discussed the analysis process I will go on to discuss ethical issues which were considered in planning and carrying out the research, looking at how these issues were managed and dealt with.

### **Ethical Considerations**

A number of ethical issues which were confronted whilst considering access and during the interview process have already been considered. These will be reiterated here before going on to a more general discussion of the ethical issues relating to the project. Those already addressed concerned issues of

confidentiality, privacy and anonymity when planning the use of qualitative interviews as the main research method, as well as considering issues of risk and harm towards both the participant and me in doing the interviews. These issues were dealt with in an ethics statement which made up a section of the information sheet submitted to the project workers and the young people (see Appendix D). This ethical statement was written up in light of the British Sociological Association's (BSA, 2002) ethical statement. This statement will not be reproduced here in full, however some of the ethical issues shall be gone through in more detail here

- *Anonymity, Privacy and Confidentiality*

The British Sociological Association (BSA) suggests that 'the anonymity of those who participate in the research process should be respected' and that any personal 'information concerning research participants should be kept confidential' (BSA, 2002: 5). These issues were outlined in the ethical statement which made up part of the information sheet. Due consideration was given in order that both anonymity and confidentiality be maintained throughout the research process and after. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained where no information about the participants was shared with anyone (this is ongoing). Names as well as other relevant identifying data were excluded from transcripts or on any information kept with the recordings. Personal information held on the recordings was kept secure, with recordings kept as anonymous digital files stored on a computer that no one but myself had access to. These recordings were deleted immediately from the digital recorder after they were uploaded on to the hard drive. During transcription, as well as in the compiling of data about respondents, names were replaced with pseudonyms. To ensure a greater degree of anonymity none of the youth group spaces, community resources or websites have been named in this thesis or in any of the appendices. This is particularly necessary for the youth groups where there is a greater potential that participants may be recognised. The young people were made aware during the interviews that all information would be made anonymous and that nothing that they said would be attributed to them in any way.

Whilst confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants, limits to confidentiality were recognised. The BSA (2002: 5) suggests that confidentiality should not be breached ‘unless there are clear and overriding reasons to do otherwise, for example in relation to the abuse of children’. At the beginning of each interview the participants were informed of this requirement, once informed of this need for information regarding harm to others or themselves to be passed on they were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement form to say that they agreed to take part and felt fully informed (see Appendix G). Although it was made clear that whilst information would need to be passed on that it would be discussed with them as to how this would be done. It was also made clear that information would only be passed on through the appropriate people, including the research supervisors and a nominated youth worker at one of the youth groups.

- *Informed Consent.*

The request for the interviewees to sign a confidentiality agreement was also a further opportunity to request consent. The BSA (2002: 3) require sociologists to provide informed consent based on the sociologist explaining ‘in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to the participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking it and financing it’. Participants had already been given such information about the project prior to taking part, thus they were able to give some degree of informed consent at that point. Before starting the interview however, the information sheet was gone through with the interviewee, giving an opportunity to readdress consent face-to-face. Thus the start of the interview was used to ensure that the participant felt they fully understood what the project was about and what it was they were agreeing to in taking part in the project. At this point they were also informed of their right to decline to take part if they so wished based on that discussion. They were also informed that they could end the interview at any point as well as decline to respond to any questions they felt uncomfortable answering. Consent was also gained to record the interviews, as it was felt best to ensure that they were comfortable with being recorded. They were informed that all recordings, transcripts and consent forms would be kept in a

secure place at the university so that there would be no breach of confidentiality or their anonymity.

Another decision made regarding consent was whether or not to gain parental consent, where the project involved people under the age of eighteen, a group defined, by the UK government, as 'children' (DfCSF, 2010: 34). The BSA (2002: 4) states that 'Research involving children requires particular care. The consent of the child should be sought in addition to that of the parent.' This may be taken to imply that research involving those aged sixteen and seventeen would require parental consent. It was however thought that, for this project, gaining parental consent was both unnecessary and undesirable. First it was considered undesirable as, in this instance, gaining parental consent would have breached the confidentiality and rights to privacy of those taking part in the project since they may have been required to come out as gay or lesbian to their parents. Further it was considered unnecessary because it has already been questioned whether gaining parental consent for research with children is necessary (Hill, 2005: 70), since parental consent is based on a belief that children are unable to properly consent to research on their own behalf (Alderson, 2008: 47-48). This disregards the competency of those defined as a 'child'. Instead, Alderson (2008: 93) states that rather than basing consent on age, consent should be understood within the terms of competency (this is based on the Gillick competence principle (Wheeler, 2006)). Here competence and understanding is seen as central to notions of informed consent (see also Masson, 1999). This notion is laid down also in the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

- *Safety and Harm*

Prior to interviewing, time was also taken to address issues of harm where it was made clear that interviewees did not have to discuss issues they felt uncomfortable with. This was in line with the BSA's (2002: 4) recommendation that researchers should 'minimise or alleviate any distress caused to those participating in research.' Ensuring interviewees were aware of their rights, and knew that at any time they could either decline to respond to questions they did not feel comfortable with, or could stop the interview altogether, was a way of attempting

to avoid any distress that could potentially have been caused. This issue of harm was given special consideration given that the project involved working with people who could be considered vulnerable, both as young people as well gay or lesbian (Valentine *et al.*, 2005).

Vulnerable people have been defined by Nyamathi (1998, cited by Liampittong, 2007: 2-3) as the ‘impoverished, disenfranchised, and/or subject to discrimination, intolerance, subordination, and stigma’. Liampittong (2007: 3) sees young people and gay men and lesbians as fitting this description. Thus the research involved a more general respect for issues of harm where it was engaging with sensitive areas of vulnerable people’s personal lives (Liampittong, 2007). In order to minimise distress the wording of questions was taken in to consideration, another reason for adopting semi-structured interviews, making sure that they did not probe too deeply in to areas that might be considered too personal. This was done however within the context of the interview, taking into consideration the young person’s own reticence, as well as what was deemed appropriate. Memories of bullying or violence, for example, were not explored too deeply, where it was felt that those memories may be difficult and did not merit pressing on with in the interview.

Additionally choices around the location of the interview were taken into consideration so as to minimise harm, as well as risk to my own person. In the initial information sheet given to the young people it was stated that interviews would take place at Newcastle University unless they wished it to be elsewhere. In which case it could be negotiated for the interview to take place within the premises of a youth group if they so preferred. These spaces were decided on for a number of reasons. The young person’s home as a space for interviewing was not considered because historically they have been places which have silenced gay and lesbian voices, as well as opening up problems of confidentiality and privacy (Valentine *et al.*, 2005). Further such spaces would have been potentially unsuitable in terms of my own safety where I would have been in an unfamiliar place. Additionally, in a context of heightened ‘public consciousness about risk and child protection’ (Hill, 2005: 73) it was necessary to find a more neutral, public space. Newcastle University was decided on since it offered a space that was familiar to me, easily located within the city as well as having private spaces

whilst not being too remote. In this respect too a full criminal disclosure was carried out prior to the research.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to establish the way in which the research was carried out, addressing the selection of research methods, the research design, data analysis and the ethics involved in the project. This has been done in a broadly linear fashion, starting with the initial considerations around epistemologies and research methods through to the analysis of the data, and ethical issues. In so doing, it is hoped that some clarity has been given on how the research was conducted. This was of course a process that was not without its problems. Establishing the initial research guide was a lengthy process which took a great deal of revision. Access too proved, at times, difficult. The sample hoped for was not achieved, and many of the youth groups proved less fruitful than had been initially expected. This shows in the lower numbers of people coming forward from youth groups (excluding the university and college LGBT societies). These groups could perhaps have been worked with closer in order to encourage more people to take part. This was maybe a failing on my part however where I sought to maintain a distance, both for the privacy of those groups and for my own comfort, not wishing to invade other peoples space too much. This may have been to the detriment of the research, in the case of those groups that could have yielded a younger age group. The analysis too perhaps could have benefited from a more structured approach. Having explored the ‘doing’ of the research, the following chapters explore the data generated. The first explores the ‘making’ of sexual selves, dealing with issues of desire and adolescence.

## Chapter 4 – Making Sexual Selves: ‘Desiring’, ‘Doing’, ‘Being’ and the Adoption of Sexual Identities

### Introduction

Responding to Plummer’s (1981a) query as to how people come to define themselves within sexual categories, this chapter explores the adoption of sexual identities. It does so through understanding sexuality as a state of ‘being’, defined, in Richardson’s (1984: 83) terms, as ‘a state of personal identification’ (this being analytically distinct from ‘doing’,<sup>5</sup> and ‘desiring’). A symbolic interactionist approach is adopted in exploring the construction of sexual selves in adolescence, as well as the ‘maintenance’ or ‘patterning’ of those identities (Plummer, 2003b). This is something that Richardson (2004: 400) perceives as having ‘received far less attention’ in recent accounts of sexuality. Highlighting Fuss’ (1989: 7, emphasis in original) suggestion that ‘essentialism is *essential* to social constructionism’, this chapter argues that an interactionist theory of sexuality wishing to take in the material body would benefit from a focus on the embodied feelings of attraction described by the term ‘sexual orientation’ (Graber and Archibald, 2001; Hershberger, 2001). This argument is a rephrasing of Plummer’s (1981a: 71) call for a synthesis of ‘orientation’ and ‘identity construct’ models of sexuality and mirrors Tolman’s (2002: 25) suggestion that sexual desire (in this study lesbian and gay men’s) is ‘not only a legitimate but a necessary area for study.’ Something Halperin (2007), echoing Fine’s (1988) notion of a ‘missing discourse of desire’, believes has been denied by previous accounts of lesbian and gay life seeking to move away from psychological accounts of lesbian and gay subjectivities.

The initial section of this chapter deals with the ‘gendering of desire’ (Kimmel, 2005). Following Gagnon and Simon’s (2005: 39) understanding of the prior ascription of gender categories as informing the ways that young people later script their sexualities, this part of the chapter addresses the interconnectedness of

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<sup>5</sup> This is distinct from Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity which draws together ‘being’ and ‘doing’. In this respect ‘doing’ homosexual acts does not *per se* make someone lesbian or gay.

sexuality and gender (Richardson, 2007). Gender and sexuality are seen in this section as ‘*inter-related*’ (Jackson, 2005: 25, emphasis in original), the discussion addressing the ways in which understandings of gender ‘bleed into’ accounts of sexuality (Richardson, 2007: 470). This discussion is framed in terms of Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) notion of ‘*interpersonal scripting*’, with sexuality being understood in terms of gendered practices and interactions. This leads into the subsequent section which addresses the ‘*intrapsychic scripting*’ of sexual selves, focussing on the ways in which inner life was made sense of. In this section, the embodiment of sexuality is discussed further. The final section of this chapter addresses the adoption of sexual identities, asking how sexual identities were used to make sense of sexual selves.

### **Gendering Desire**

The relationship between gender and sexuality in the data was clear. Sexuality was understood by almost all of the participants as informed, and moulded in its expression, by gender (Richardson, 2007). This was the case where, echoing notions of a ‘*sexual object choice*’ (Stein, 2001: 64), ‘*desire*’<sup>6</sup> was understood in terms of (gender) ‘*attraction*’, a phrase used by ten of the young gay men and two of the lesbians interviewed. ‘*Attraction*’, alongside terms such as ‘*fancy*’ and ‘*orientation*’, represented a grid of intelligibility by which sexual feelings and practices were made sense of (Richardson, 2007: 465). These terms, and the subjective experiences they denote, have been shown to be integral to the construction of young people’s sexual subjectivities in other studies (Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000; Rofes, 2002; Tolman, 2002; Allen, 2004; Plante, 2007). Their use, however, may be gendered where, historically, such accounts of desire have been shown to be absent from many young women’s understandings of sexuality (Fine, 1988). Allen (2003: 229) has noted in a previous study that young men, more so than young women, use a language of sexual attraction in understanding their sexual subjectivities (although Richardson (2010) provides an alternative analysis of the socially ‘*compelled*’ nature of young men’s sexual

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<sup>6</sup> Desire is not being taken for granted here, it is instead recognised as ‘*sexualised*’ through a language of attraction, desire being made meaningful through a process of scripting (Simon, 1996: 73)

identifications). The following quote taken from Mike's interview demonstrates the use of a language of attraction:

*I think, gay these days has a lot of meanings and maybe it would be better if gay just meant, like you're gay, like being attracted to the same gender.* **Mike, 20**

Before going any further, the first aspect of Mike's statement must be addressed. Mike actively engages with the ways in which lesbian and gay identities have historically been constructed, and the meanings that have been applied to those identities over time. This is taken as central to the 'making' of sexual selves to which this thesis attends. Whilst many of my participants were engaging with the meanings with which they identified, they were also negotiating those meanings they did not identify with in claiming lesbian and gay identities (Lawler, 2008: 2). This may be understood in terms of the symbolic process of self construction that is attended to by symbolic interactionism. Mike's rejection of various meanings may be taken as the development of a particular sexual story though which he makes sense of his sexuality, one which was being told in relation to perceived older stories of lesbian and gay sexuality as meaningful in different ways. This particular process of negotiation, however, is documented further in chapter five as a significant aspect of the construction of sexual selves in non-sexual terms. For now the scripting of desire through notions of gender attraction is the focus of this discussion, this is also something that Mike discusses.

In beginning the construction of their sexual selves, attraction was often taken as pivotal to how the young people interviewed made sense of themselves as sexual. It was also, as stated, typically framed in terms of gendered attraction, attraction being understood as embedded within wider interpersonal gender relations. Jackson's (2006a: 42) understanding of the division between sexuality and gender is recognised here, with sexuality being understood as 'a sphere or realm of social life' and gender 'a fundamental social division' (See literature review, page 29). The construction of sexuality, as desire and practice, in terms of a social world divided by gender was echoed throughout the data, where gender was prioritised in their understandings of themselves and others. Dan, for example, offers an

account of gendered attraction below in which he discusses the processes by which young people come to label themselves as either gay or bisexual:

**Dan:** *I've known a few straight people who've actually experimented like doing gay things, some have actually turned out to be gay or bisexual, and some have stayed straight.*

**Edmund:** *What is it that you think makes people gay, bisexual?*

**Dan:** *Well, I don't, well there's nothing really that I can say to that but all I can say is some people are attracted to men, women are attracted to women. I don't know how to describe it, well like I just said men can be attracted to men, women can be attracted to women and we can have like opposites as well so, I don't really know how to answer that.*

**Dan, 18**

Dan defines sexuality as the attraction of gendered people to one another; men attracted to men, women attracted to women. His use of the phrase 'opposites' may suggest heterosexuality; bisexuality may be implicit within this perceived matrix of attractions. For Dan, there was a 'taken-for-grantedness' with regards to gender in this construction of sexuality, where sexuality was understood as connected to both the individual's and other people's gender. Attraction in such accounts was akin to 'sexual orientation' models in which a 'person's sexual orientation is in some way indexed to his or her sex-gender and the sex-gender of the people he or she is sexually attracted to' (Stein, 2001: 37) (although, bearing in mind that sex, in this discussion, is understood, theoretically, as gender). The adoption of gay or bisexual identities – heterosexuality appeared not to require the same reflexive process of self-understanding (other research may suggest otherwise (Ussher, 2005)) – was done as an acknowledgment of attraction.

This account may have been a gendered one with the young gay men tending towards more mechanistic models of sexual attraction, often used as shorthand for who they had sex and/or relationships with. The young lesbians provided a more emotive language of comfort and pleasure when talking about sexuality, not talking in quite such generalised terms as attraction to either men or women. These gendered differences are echoed elsewhere (Holland *et al.*, 2004), although Allen (2003, 2007) recognises the reversal of such discourses in places. It may be cautioned, however, that the sample of women is perhaps too small to make any general points about observable 'trends' in the framing of sexual subjectivities, although the motivation here is not to make generalizations but to illustrate the

reflexive processes through which sexual selves were constructed. Nonetheless, one particular point that may be made is that the lesbians in the sample were claiming a sexual identity as opposed to a wholly politicised one (see Campbell, 1980). The following quotes from Alexandra and Matt illustrate this gendered difference:

*...people will ask you... 'how old are you?' and, you know, 'are you single?' at which point that's my trigger, I'm like 'well you know currently I'm attached, I'm really happy' which means I'm gay 'cos it's actually a woman.* **Alexandra, 19**

*...being gay...it's the laws of attraction kind of thing, and it's nothing more.* **Matt, 17**

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, claims to gender attraction could be seen as reflexive processes of self-understanding, with the young people interviewed coming to construct understanding of themselves through those attractions. Dan, for example, alludes to a form of interpersonal scripting where he talks of experimentation, referring to his young friends who he has known to 'turn out' to be gay or bisexual after experimentation with same/differently gendered people. Experimentation is understood in this respect as a means by which the sexual self could be more fully understood, self-labelling as gay or bisexual being done within a process of scripting different practices. Although the suggestion that it was 'straight' people doing the experimenting indicates the continuation of the heterosexual presumption, this being something that has been seen in other work to pervasively shape young lesbian and gay people's experiences of growing up (Dennis, 2009).

Richardson (1984) has previously questioned the concept of 'desire', asking whether sexual desire is a universal experience. The notion of desire used here so far to conceptualize the young people's discussions of attraction might be called into question. Up until this point it has been addressed in singular terms. It has been suggested however that 'desire', rather than being a singular phenomenon is a 'unifying principle', bringing together 'bodily sensations, feelings, experiences, and actions' (Richardson, 1984: 88). Gagnon and Simon (2005: 4) attempted to provide an account of the ways in which these diverse bodily and social

experiences and actions are encoded with meaning and brought together to ‘create sexual conduct’. A process which might be understood as concerned with how people learn to ‘do’ sexuality in their everyday lives (Jackson, 2007: 4). ‘Attraction’ then might also be taken as a diverse set of experiences, which are made sense of, and scripted, or labelled, as ‘attraction’ or sexuality. Jess, as an example, provides an interesting quote:

*I always remember being attracted to women but I don’t think I really understood it as being attracted to...I was probably about thirteen or fourteen when I was like ‘you know what this is definitely a big part of who I am’, of my sexual orientation.*

**Jess, 19**

This sense that attraction or sexuality was not something that was self-evident, instead being brought about through a degree of refection and meaning-making was echoed by Andy where he sees himself as eventually coming to ‘find’ gay sexuality.

*I’d never really had a turning point, there was never really a thought, I never really thought of myself as heterosexual, I never always felt as homosexual but once I really found gay sexuality it’s always been gay.*

**Andy, 16**

The processes of self-understanding pointed to above may be framed in just these terms, as processes through which sexual selves are scripted. For example, both the experimentation with different genders that Dan mentions and the diverse meanings ascribed to gendered interactions by Jess may be taken as ways of integrating diverse feelings, behaviours and interactions within a coherent ‘unified’ account of a sexual self – desire (as ‘attraction’) granting that unity (Richardson, 1984: 88).

There were other examples in the data of what might be interpreted as the scripting of different pleasures and desires. Many of these might be taken as embodied, with sexuality being constructed in terms of bodily pleasures. In Bryant and Schofield’s (2007) research, they suggest that the body is ‘central’ to understanding the scripting of young women’s sexual subjectivities. This is echoed in the research here. For example, Anna, at two different points in her interview, provided different accounts of kissing, something described by Gagnon

and Simon (2005: 15) as of particular significance in the early scripting of adolescent sexualities. This is echoed in other research with both young heterosexual women and lesbians (Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000; Tolman, 2002). The first of Anna's quotes addresses her reminiscing about kissing a 'girl' (in a discussion of the Katy Perry song, 'I Kissed a Girl'), the second a young male friend from college:

*I absolutely loved that song because when I was first listening to it I was like wow, that's actually what it's like when you do kiss a girl, you remember all the little details of it.*

**Anna, 19**

*I remember vaguely in college, 'cos I do drama, I've had quite a few scenes where I've had to be like coupley with a boy, and there was one time in college where I kissed one of my best friends and it was just horrible, just horrible. I can just remember, no offence, but the smell of boy...I could never go back to being with a boy.*

**Anna, 19**

Anna reflects on two different interactions, both describing the same activity, but constructed differently, one as pleasurable and the other not. These were also both given as accounts of her sexual self, where they were indicative (or not) of claimed personal desires and pleasures, a process of interpretation that was shaped by gender. Kissing a girl for Anna was nice, '*you remember all the little details of it*', she states, whereas kissing a boy was not. Here Anna reflects on the ways in which she remembered these different physical interactions as pleasurable or not, and the significance of gender in framing those acts interactions as pleasurable or not. Much later in the interview, in a quote that is discussed below, Anna described her experiences of how 'right' it felt to be with a woman, as compared to a man, this may be understood as being framed in relation to different physical experiences. Experiences which were sensate and bodily, echoing the scripting of embodied 'feeling' highlighted by Jackson and Scott (2010a: 148).

Anna was not the only one who described sexuality in these terms. Although, admittedly the data on this area from the young lesbians is weaker than it is from the young gay men, this being a potential consequence of the gendered interactions between myself and the interviewees (Hollands, 2003: 166). As such, the young gay men were willing to talk more frankly on issues of desire and sex

than the young women. For instance, Liam below speaks in more explicit terms about having sex:

*...when I was sixteen years old I didn't want to have sex with anyone and I was sixteen year old, yes I performed oral sex to men...but when you're a young age you do not know what you want to be because even during the time of my sixteen, seventeen and eighteen year old in my mind I still thought, 'Well what if I had sex with a woman?'...you could turn around and be eighteen year old and think it's fucking disgusting having sex with a man, you wanna have sex with a woman...I wouldn't go all the way when you're sixteen year old, yeah maybe perform oral sex, experiment with your body but you are way too young to have proper full sex...I was nineteen year old before I had proper anal sex and I was love making.*

**Liam, 20**

In their own research on the construction of young women's heterosexual subjectivities, Bryant and Schofield (2007: 335) discuss how young women learn 'about the possibilities of the erotic body and how to choreograph sexual encounters'. Whilst there were no discussions in the data of how the young lesbian and gay people interviewed 'choreographed' sexual encounters, as in the 'doing' of sex, there were a small number of allusions, particularly among the young men, towards what was defined as pleasurable and what was not, and mostly with regards to *who* sexual things were done with, i.e. men or women. Liam, in the passage above, provided one of the most frank accounts of this reflexive process, through which he stressed the importance of fully understanding what it was that the individual found most enjoyable, as well as being most comfortable with. Indeed he rejected an understanding of sexual desires and pleasures that were readily knowable to the individual; instead pointing to the ways in which young people work out what it is they enjoy doing and what they do not.

This mirrors Bryant and Schofield's exploration of the processes through which interpersonal bodily acts are tried out and scripted as pleasurable (Gagnon and Simon, 2005). Although there may be issues of context in this; Liam's account is premised on an assumption that the individual is 'allowed' to consider various options of sexual pleasure, a potential Tolman (1994) sees as having, in many respects, been denied young women. For Liam, constructing anal sex, for example, as pleasurable, and 'intimate' (Maynard *et al.*, 2009), was not a straightforward process. Rather it might be understood as being invested with

those meanings, as well as constructed in terms of maturity where he considers it to be something one waits until one is old enough to do. Not all acts were invested with the same meanings by Liam, however. Instead different acts were constructed differently in terms of age and risk, oral sex for example is understood as something the individual can safely experiment with whilst they work out who they wanted to have sex with, a man or a woman (this parallels Gagnon and Simon's (2005) discussion of adolescence and masturbation).

In such accounts, 'memories of sexual pleasure' (Nack, 2000: 96) played a significant role in shaping sexual subjectivities. These accounts of sexuality were never 'in the moment', instead being recollections of past behaviours and pleasures. This is consistent with a symbolic interactionist approach that seeks not only to understand the way in everyday interactions are made sense of as an ongoing process, but also the ways in which lives are understood (Plummer, 1995). The accounts offered so far may be understood, in this respect, as 'storied', in that they are built into a wider narrative of the individual's life, which is used to make sense of themselves to others. Memories of embodied sexual pleasure, as Plante (2007) has argued elsewhere, were, for the young people, fundamental to this story telling, with recollections of interpersonal acts as pleasurable being framed in terms of gender, this framing being weaved into the scripting of the young people's lesbian or gay identities. But this 'doing' did not end at kissing or sex, it also, as Liam's talk of 'love making' suggests, involved 'romantic' acts, sexuality being understood not only as who had sex with whom, but who the young people had, or wanted to have, relationships with as well. Nathan below recalls coming to see men not only as sexually desirable but as potential partners:

**Nathan:** ...you know how girls go 'she's really bonny, really pretty' or like girls kiss, I never looked at a lad and thought, 'I wanna suck his cock' or 'I wanna shag 'im.' I would just look and think 'he's quite attractive', but I didn't used to fancy them...

**Edmund:** So what made you change your thinking of men?

**Nathan:** This lesbian moved in with me... she went 'come out on the gay scene'...Anyway the lads were courtin' us and tryin' to get off with us and I'd go 'here man get away I'm not gay'. I would on purpose go and get off with a straight lass in front of them...then I ended up going with a lad. Actually I was mortal...I ended up seeing him...Sitting, fuckin', Valentines day thinkin' 'I'm not buying a card, goin' in for a fuckin' boyfriend card', I thought 'no way! You can

*get lost!' But it was weird 'cos you know when you're dead happy and like, boyfriend! It sounded dead mad in me head...but then it was fine.'* **Nathan, 21**

For those taking part in this project, gender was central to the scripting of sexual selves, particularly in terms of the interpersonal, through the 'doing' of physical sexual acts such as kissing and having sex (which were made meaningful through representations of gendered bodies). Sexual selves were also constructed through forming and maintaining relationships. This was gendered with respect to the people my interviewees formed relationships with, and with whom they wanted to form relationships. For Nathan, this required some degree of symbolic (re)interpretation of the gender of the person that it was possible for him to be in a relationship with, where prior to coming out as gay he had identified as straight and had only slept with and had relationships with women. Nathan had come out later than many of the other participants, or at least what was considered to be 'later' at the age of nineteen. Whilst he did not go into great detail about the process through which he eventually came to identify as gay, this being left out of the story told, he did recognise the thoughts he had about looking on other men both sexually, and as potential partners, and how these were readdressed. Nathan's discussion of reinterpreting his perceptions of other men as attractive, and how tactile interactions are viewed differently between men as compared to between women, mirrors Gagnon and Simon's (2005: 52) description of the way in which homosocial relations between young men and between young women are constructed as erotic or not. The possibilities for reinterpretation are echoed in Nathan's account of buying a Valentines card for his male partner, and coming to be both comfortable and happy in doing so.

This was a story echoed in a small number of account, with other participants recognising the thought processes through which they gradually came to think of themselves as able to have relationships with someone of the same gender. The discussion of relationships added another element in the scripting of sexuality where they were often discussed in terms of longevity, or as ongoing, as part of their 'imagined' or 'invented' adulthoods (Henderson *et al.*, 2007). In interactionist terms the gendering of relationships and intimacy may be understood as part of the 'routinization', or 'patterning' (Plummer, 2003b) of sexual selves.

This was certainly evident in discussions of the future, and one of the most consistent themes throughout the data. Over half of the participants described how they saw their lives when they were older, many discussing that in terms of their being in a relationship with either another man, or another woman. This echoes both research on heterosexual constructions of adulthood, and the ways in which sexuality informs the shapes ‘imagined adulthoods’ may take (Thomson and Holland, 2002; Thomson, 2009) (these are issues discussed further in chapter six). Alexandra, reflecting on this, addresses how the introduction of civil partnerships may have transformed the ways in which adulthood may be constructed:

*...a little girl, when she is five dreams of a wedding, if she's really out there, if she really wants, she can now dream of her civil partnership.* **Alexandra, 19**

As this is an issue addressed in more detail in chapter six, I do not want to discuss this particular issue in depth here. However, it does usefully illuminate the intersections of gender, sexuality and the construction of sexual selves and lives, where it demonstrates the ways in which gender informs potentials for ‘doing’ sexuality. Sexual behaviours, acts as well as intimate relationships, whilst being analytically separable from gender (Richardson, 2007: 463), were discussed by all participants in terms of gender. That gendering being built into the construction of sexual selves, and sexual lives, with all the young people interviewed for this research sought to make sense of their ‘attractions’ or desires, behaviours, and relationship through understandings of themselves as gendered and others as gendered. This scripting of sexuality through notions of gender informed their own understandings of selfhood, shaping what they perceived to be possible to do with their lives.

In contrast to this was another approach to understanding sexuality, one that saw sexuality as distinct from gender. This was a minor approach however, given by two of the young lesbians interviewed (although if it were a gendered account, it could have been more significant if there were more lesbians interviewed). The quote taken from Jess’ interview and given below follows on from the discussion she had had above (page 87) about the significance of gender to her understanding of her ‘sexual orientation’. This she later qualified where she stated that she felt

sexuality was more ‘fluid’ than her discussion of attraction may have suggested. The first part of the quote, given previously on page 87, is provided again to give a sense of the broader discussion. It should be held in mind that this particular account was a contradictory one where the construction of sexuality in terms of gender seemed to be something of a ‘conventional’ take on sexuality, something which Jess resisted but also employed in her own understanding of her sexuality.

*I always remember being attracted to women but I don't think I really understood it as being attracted to...having said that...I think it can be quite fluid and it's more about the individual rather than their gender.* **Jess, 19**

This is a discussion that was also had by Samantha, who, in the following quote, discusses what has just been addressed about the centrality of sexuality to the scripting or ‘storying’ of sexual lives. Whilst defining as a lesbian, Samantha reflects on the ‘unknowability’ of sexual futures, saying that it is possible that she may, eventually, meet a man that she ‘liked’:

*Obviously I would prefer to be with a woman, but in the end I think it all depends on the personality, ‘cos to me I like to know a personality before I know a person...I know that I will always probably say that I am a lesbian but, I mean, it could be ten years, twenty years down the line and I do find a guy that I like. I mean some people do like say ‘I’m a lesbian I will always be a lesbian’ because they’ve fallen in love with like the person for what they are not who they are. For me I think I will always be a lesbian but in the end if I do end up liking a guy then it’s to me it’s no big deal.* **Samantha, 19**

In these two accounts, gender, rather than informing sexuality, was seen as being separable from it. Sexuality was seen as being, as Jess puts it, ‘*more about the individual*’ or the person’s personality. This was a shift away from seeing sexuality through the scripting of gendered (including embodied) ‘attractions’ and interactions, but through seeing people in terms of their personalities – as Samantha puts it, seeing people for ‘*who they are*’ and not ‘*what they are*’ (i.e. their gender). This was, as stated, contradictory, however where both Samantha and Jess were responding to a, seemingly, more pervasive account of sexuality as shaped in terms of gender. Thus Samantha, whilst saying that ‘*it all depends on the personality*’, continued to make investments in a gendered approach to

sexuality, saying '*Obviously I would prefer to be with a woman*', her constructions of her sexual adulthood continuing to be shaped by gender.

This account of sexuality as detached from gender also had implications for the 'labelling' of sexual selves, where the term lesbian, as denoting a same-gender sexuality, was called into question. This is discussed further below. However, before that the process of intrapsychic scripting is looked at, connecting the interpersonal scripting discussed above to what Gagnon and Simon (2005: 15) see as 'the level of internal experience'. This scripting is also understood in terms of the 'embodiment' of sexuality, where the intrapsychic was understood as taking place within an 'emotional', 'sensate', 'feeling' body (Plummer, 2003b; Jackson and Scott, 2010a).

### **Intrapsychic Scripting and the Embodiment of Desire**

Daniluk (1998, cited in Plante, 2007: 32) describes the sexual self as involving 'physical and biological capacities, cognitive and emotional development, and evolving needs and desires.' In this description of the sexual self, the body is central. To be sexual requires the presence of a material body, the physical and biological; it also involves having a body capable of cognition, and to be able to 'feel' emotion (Plummer, 2003b). This echoes both Mead's (1962 [1934]: 173) notion of the self as primarily cognitive, and Cooley's (1998: 156) discussion of 'self-feeling', both of which describe the reflexive and embodied processes through which self is constructed (this embodied reflection being a way of avoiding a mind-body dualism). The above discussion of gender and interpersonal scripting has been partially framed in terms of the construction of an 'erotic body' (or an eroticized gendered body) (Bryant and Schofield, 2007). This section addresses embodiment in terms of a sense of interiority, taking what is described as 'inside' as being something understood as within the body (Steedman, 1994: 20). The body is, in this sense, and as Tolman (2002: 20) puts it, 'the counterpart of the psyche...desire is one form of knowledge, gained through the body: In desiring, I know that I exist'. This embodiment may be seen as contained within Gagnon and Simon's (2005: 15) notion of 'intrapsychic scripting' which focuses on 'meaning...attributed to the interior of the body', something Plante (2007: 32)

has observed as of particular significance in the scripting of young people's sexual selves.

In constructing this sense of sexuality as subjective and embodied, a number of participants talked of sexuality as being 'in their heads', desire being taken as 'embodied' where, whilst experienced on a cognitive level, it was nonetheless located within the body. The following quote from Matt illustrates the relationship between the psychic and the embodied:

*Being gay is like, people make it sound like, I don't know at the end of the day it's just in your head...it's the laws of attraction kind of thing. And it's nothing more.*

**Matt, 17**

The allusion to a sense of inferiority in Matt's quote was typical, evidenced in fourteen interviews, with five interviewees echoing his reference to the head. These statements were ways of positioning desire as subjective, as well as understood as occurring internally where what was described as attraction was constructed as an inner experience. Further, this assertion was often articulated in a way which suggested a degree of constancy and stability in those subjective experiences. Ben, for example, described his sexuality as having 'always' been in his head:

*...it had always been in my head but I just kind of passed it off...even before I came out I had it in my head...I spent my growing up debating it and figuring it out, arguing with myself.*

**Ben, 20**

The initial quotes from Matt and Ben may be read in terms of the processes through which these interviewees reflected on their own personal desires, working out what was going on inside their heads (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 313). The construction of sexual selves, in this respect, is seen as an ongoing process of self-reflection and deliberation. This is particularly evident in Ben's quote where he describes the construction of his sexual subjectivity in a way which reflects a process of 'intrapsychic scripting' as an ongoing 'internal rehearsal' (Simon, 1996: 39). This is indicated in the 'debates' and 'arguments' he had with himself whilst trying to work himself out. This process of 'intrapsychic scripting' may be illustrated further in suggestions that, in claiming a sexual identity, one may

profess (or not) to certain desires or fantasies. William for example describes the significance of fantasy, or sexual thoughts, to claiming a sexual identity:

*...there's very few straight people who will admit to ever having homosexual thoughts about another guy. I mean I have heard some straight people say that they've considered it.* **William, 20**

In such accounts, the fashioning of a sexual self involved reflecting on personal desires, and asking themselves what it was that they considered themselves to find attractive or desirable. This was taken as something knowable within the person. As indicated by Matt, the laws of attraction may be taken as something that was in the person's head, and therefore could be known by the individual. This was, however, not separate from the gendered interactions described above, rather these processes were discussed by a few of participants as interrelated, with what could be seen as the scripting of the intrapsychic being played out relation to gendered interpersonal relations. The following quotes from Anna and Andy could be interpreted as the scripting of the intrapsychic in terms of the interpersonal gender relations which constituted their everyday lives. Sexuality is understood in these quotes as both a being (as an internal sense of personal desire) and a doing (as interpersonal 'acts') (Richardson, 1984). Anna more fully describes the sense of sexuality as 'being in the head', she also echoes Ben's claim to the constancy of this understanding. She connects this, however, to her experiences of being in different relationships, once with a young man, the other with a young woman (mirroring her previous quotes given on page 89).

*It's just the way I am; I can't really help it...I think it's something that can kind of like develop but most of the time I think it's something that's always going round in your head...I've always had it in the back of my mind that I've never been straight...two and a half years ago, that was when I started thinking about not being interested in men...I had a boyfriend for about four months and it just didn't feel right for any of the period of time that I was with him and then I met my ex-girlfriend and everything kind of slipped into place and it just kind of felt a lot more natural to be with her than be with him.* **Anna, 19**

Anna's quote addresses different experiences she had in previous relationships. The first instance describes how she felt with a previous boyfriend, the second with a previous girlfriend. Anna recalls feeling far more 'natural' with her

girlfriend who she first met some months after her boyfriend, who she considered herself as not feeling ‘right’ with. Anna uses the term ‘natural’ to confirm her lesbian sexuality as the ‘right’ one. Her use of natural could be taken in two ways here, as something ‘given’, or beyond ‘human intervention’ (Lawler, 2008: 49) or where it corresponds with meaning something ‘normal’, or not strange, something usual and familiar, suggesting a degree to which she felt at ease with her girlfriend. Whilst Anna is claiming a sense of truth and authenticity about her sexuality (Weeks, 2007: 125), this authenticity might be viewed as a process of scripting by which she came to articulate a coherent and intelligible sense of self (one which not only made sense to others but also one through which she could make sense of herself to herself). Anna sees herself as having always been lesbian, yet she recounts a story of the process by which she initially came to identify as lesbian, incorporating into that reflexivity the complex subjective feelings of comfort, pleasure, desire as well as unease which were experienced with past partners. Identifying as lesbian was a way of articulating the ‘rightness’ she had felt in those moments.

This subjective ‘truth’ is seen as embodied here where Anna suggests that ‘*it’s something that’s always going round in your head*’. In this respect, Anna echoes Ben’s quote given earlier. Anna’s construction of her sexual subjectivity could be seen as incorporating her body in a number of ways, first as something that enables this process of meaning making, the allusions to the head and the back of her mind could be taken as the cognitive processes through which she made sense of herself (cognition also being central to a symbolic interactionist focus on the way in which individuals interpret themselves (O’Brien, 2005: 50). Her discussion of ‘feeling’ could be taken at another level of embodiment where comfort could be understood as a more ‘affective’ account of self and sexuality (Cooley, 1998), relying not only on a conscious sense making, but the interpretation of how she considered herself to feel in those situations. This is similar to Tolman’s (2002: 20-21) argument for the significance of desire in understanding how adolescent girls construct their sexual selves:

‘To ‘know’ one’s own body means to have knowledge about it and also the ability to feel the feelings in it...Feeling desire in response to another person is a route to knowing, to being, oneself through the process of relationship’.

This approach to understanding ‘feeling’ as embodied, which relies on having a body capable of feeling, could be applied to the more sensate experience of pleasure described in the previous section, as with, for example, Anna’s discussion of kissing (page 89). However in the analysis provided here, this is not taken as read directly from the body, rather the body is interpreted (this is discussed further by Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 146-149). The following quote from Andy elaborates further on this perspective of seeing sexuality as ‘felt’, this being linked by him to a sense of interiority:

*I’m of the opinion that from about the ages nought to twelve no one has a sexuality, not really. People will understand what sexualities are, they’ll understand that some girls go with boys, some boys go with boys and some girls go with girls but they won’t feel that in themselves until they reach, say the age of puberty then they will find who they are attracted to.* **Andy, 16**

Andy’s account could be read as illustrating a number of interactionist themes. Echoing Gagnon and Simon’s (2005: 39) understanding of adolescence as a period in which young people make a ‘commitment to sexuality’, Andy reflects on the complex, reflexive processes through which he sees young people as ‘becoming’ sexual. In doing so, he illuminates notions of interpersonal and intrapsychic scripting through references to gendered interactions (‘*some girls go with boys, some boys go with boys and some girls go with girls*’) and interiority (‘*they won’t feel that in themselves until they reach, say the age of puberty*’). Plante (2007: 47) has argued that central to the construction of sexual selves is ‘the ability to identify one’s own desires’; this taking place at the level of the intrapsychic, and ‘given more definition and nuances in the interpersonal level’. This could be read as suggesting a unidirectional flow from the intrapsychic to the interpersonal. Andy, however, presents a more fluid process, taking in the observation of gendered interaction and the subjective appraisal of personal desires, as well as the interconnected relationship between the two. Here he draws attention to the ‘self reflexive and relational’ condition of sexual selves (Bryan and Schofield, 2007:

334). In this respect though, Plante's assertion still stands, where Andy was in the process of coming to identify and claim his own desires.

This process of intrapsychic scripting is something Gagnon and Simon (2005: 314) consider to be of growing significance in 'an increasingly complex sexual world'; the greater the possibilities for living a sexual life, the greater emphasis on constructing that at an internal level. Thus Simon (1996: 39) describes the intrapsychic as an 'imposed reflexivity' which:

'...transforms the surrounding social world from one in which external events or locations occasion desire into a landscape of potential settings for desire, occasioning a seeking out or creating of the events or locations appropriate to 'desired' desires.'

In the data, this internal reflection was of particular significance where fourteen participants, lesbians and gay men, described the internal, reflexive processes through which sexual selves were given substance and meaning. Andy exemplifies this where he describes attraction as something, whilst being simultaneously lived out and practiced in gendered interaction, that is felt inside the person; something which the individual has to come to know within themselves. This might be taken as part of the 'ordering' or scripting of mental life as well as the situations in which 'desires' might be realized on other occasions (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 15). But this then has implications for those situations which may come to be understood as the 'wrong ones', as situations which do not elicit the same desires. William below, for example describes his attempts, despite 'feeling' himself to be gay, to 'act' bisexual:

*When I was like thirteen, fourteen...I was in this kind of no-mans-land when you think you know you're gay but you think is there any possible way I can change and be straight and in secondary school I did a thing that many gay men do and had a relationship with a girl...But I knew in like, I knew in my head and like every part of myself knew I was gay when I was doing this thing but there was this niggling doubt. I thought 'I could possibly be bisexual, how hard can it be to be bisexual' and I think there was a part where I thought I could maybe kind of convert myself...this confusion, this not knowing what you are it's not an absolutely alien concept to me.*

**William, 20**

In his quote, William describes how he felt when he was at school when he had first come to think of himself as gay. He explained how he had attempted to form a relationship with a girl at a time when he did not want to be gay. William however had felt this to be disingenuous where, by that point, he already considered himself to be gay – *'I knew in my head and like every part of myself knew I was gay'*. In the context of the analysis presented here, William's quote is interesting. He reflects on the processes through which meanings are ascribed to sexual selves, his attempts to 'do' sexuality through forming a relationship with a girl, the reflexive processes through which he understood himself as gay internally (referring to knowing in every part of himself). Finally he addresses a sense of confusion, something evidenced in prior research on the construction of lesbian and gay identities (Savin-Williams, 1989; Valentine *et al.*, 2003), and which may be taken as a product of the 'working out', or scripting, of sexual identities (which should not be taken as a straight forward process). Troiden (1989: 52), for example, saw 'identity confusion' as coming about as adolescent lesbians and gay men 'reflect upon the idea that their feelings, behaviors (sic), or both could be regarded as homosexual.' William however also addresses the significance of bringing together the intrapsychic and the interpersonal, and the effect of how he understood his mental life as shaping the way he should 'do' sexuality.

The mismatch described between how William framed his inner life as 'gay' whilst trying to 'do' bisexuality, echoes Simon's (1996: 39) understanding of the intrapsychic, as a form of reflexivity. William's construction of an inner life in terms of his own reflections on his sexual desires and feelings, as gay, are seen to translate into the 'doing' of his sexuality where, eventually, he found himself preferring to be in relationships with men, as opposed to women. This bisexual identity was something William eventually saw as falling away as he later came to define as gay. This suggests the development of a sense of continuity between the ascription of meaning to inner experiences, personal desires and pleasures, and the way in which sexual lives are lived. In this respect, William's embodied desires (which he recognised in his head and every part of him) were central to his eventual adoption of a gay identity, bisexuality here being an identity *en route*, as opposed to a form of 'being' (this is something which is picked up again later).

These processes through which many of the participants constructed themselves as sexual mirrored the internal rehearsals that Gagnon and Simon (2005) associate with the scripting of mental life. As with Andy and Anna's quotes, participants also frequently associated that scripting with their everyday social contexts and gendered interactions. For example, Andy suggests that young people, in 'forming' a sense of themselves as sexual, will see '*that some girls go with boys, some boys go with boys and some girls go with girls but they won't feel that in themselves until...find who they are attracted to*'. This might be seen as a way of bridging the gendered interpersonal relations described in the first section to understandings of inner life. Anna's discussion of how she felt in her different relationships may be understood in the same way. Jess, as a further example, articulated something similar, stating that she felt '*...much more comfortable in relationships with girls*' (**Jess, 19**).

This bringing together of the intrapsychic and the interpersonal echoes Plante's (2007: 47) assertion that interpersonal relations are scripted in ways that give greater nuance and definition to the intrapsychic. Here, developing relationships and engaging in sexual acts may be seen as ways of reliving memories of past pleasures and comforts (Nack, 2000), giving further shape and form to young people's sexual selves. Such a process may also be understood as implicating the body where sexuality is not only 'done', but involving the body variously through cognitive functions, affective feelings of comfort, or more sensory experiences of pleasure, these enabling the construction of sexual selves (Tolman, 2002: 20). This raises one final question however, one brought up at the beginning of this chapter, which concerns the labelling of sexual selves. The following section of this chapter addresses the ways in which the young people interviewed framed their sexual selves through specific sexual categories, notably as lesbian, gay and/or bisexual.

### **Labelling Sexual Selves**

In discussing the adoption of lesbian and gay subject positions, Plummer (1981a: 67) has suggested that there is:

‘...no absolute ‘fit’ or congruency between doing, thinking or feeling, and there is no necessary fit between any of these and the act of labelling oneself as ‘a homosexual’’

Whilst the divisions between ‘doing, thinking or feeling’ are recognised in this thesis, they are taken as being compounded in that some people, though not necessarily all, bring these different dimensions together in giving an account of themselves as sexual. Labelling too, as the following section addresses, was, for the young people interviewed, a central aspect of the construction of sexual selves, being brought together as part of this process of self-understanding with the acts, thoughts and feelings described above.

### *1) The Significance of Identity*

This section addresses the significance of labels in making sense of sexuality. Each interviewee was asked how important they considered labels such as lesbian and gay to be. The responses to these questions are initially addressed; following that is a more specific discussion about the perceived variability of sexual identifications, including some of the interviewees’ own changing identifications. Bisexuality figures prominently in this discussion where, as stated previously (page 101), it may be described as an identity *en route*. With regards to the question as to how important sexual categories were, the most common response was in terms of their value in identifying people, helping highlight what ‘they are’. The following quotes from Louise, Kevin and Dan illustrate responses given by eleven of the interviewees, three of them lesbians, eight young gay men.

**Edmund:** *Do you think labels such as lesbian and gay are important?*

**Louise:** *In a way it does identify you, like your sexuality.*

**Louise, 19**

**Edmund:** *Do you think that labels such as gay and lesbian are important?*

**Kevin:** *To a degree yes...Not to be seen as like separate from everyone else but yes to be seen as that is your chosen sexuality.*

**Edmund:** *What do you mean by chosen?*

**Kevin:** *Well not really chosen, that is your sexuality if you know what I mean.*

**Kevin, 16**

**Edmund:** *Do you think labels such as lesbian and gay are important?*

**Dan:** Well certainly, yes really, 'cos that tells people what we are rather than, how can I say it. If we didn't have them titles, people would like think that well, say like what could we call it? So I think it's good that we've got them names.

**Dan, 18**

Pre-empting Fuss' (1989) belief that essentialism and constructionism often work together, Epstein (1998 [1987]: 135) suggested that both essentialism and constructionism are 'ingrained in the folk understandings of homosexuality in our society.' Epstein (1998 [1987]: 135) takes 'folk' essentialism as 'consider[ing] sexual identities to be cognitive realizations of genuine, underlying differences'. In the case of constructionism 'homosexual', 'gay' and 'lesbian' are just labels, created by cultures and applied to the self' (Epstein, 1998 [1987]: 135). With regards to the quotes provided above, Epstein's assertion that both essentialist and constructionist approaches underpin how people understand homosexuality may be given some credence. In responding to the question asked, many participants sought to state that, whilst sexual categories such as 'lesbian' or 'gay' were 'labels', 'titles' or 'names' available for people to describe themselves through, they were, however, useful in articulating something the young people interviewed considered themselves to 'be'. As Dan states, '*that tells people what we are*'. In this then there is both an allusion to the constructed nature of sexual categories, but also a sense that those categories enable the telling of a personal 'truth'. This may be taken as both a constructionist position, and an essentialist one. The following quote from Jack mirrors Dan's statement

**Edmund:** Do you think that labels such as gay and lesbian are important?

**Jack:** I think that it is important for people, if they want to label themselves as gay or lesbian, 'cos that is who they are.

**Jack, 21**

This suggestion of an 'essence' mirrors much of what was discussed in the previous section. For instance, the adoption of sexual labels was frequently discussed in relation to processes of intrapsychic scripting discussed above. For example, the process of deliberation described by Ben on page 96, in which he stated that he '*spent my growing up debating it and figuring it out, arguing with myself*', may be seen in terms of the scripting of a sexual self through available labels in terms of which he went on to describe himself as a gay man. Steve provides another example where he talks about 'coming out' as a period in which

people reflect on who they consider themselves to be, '*processing their own thoughts*', and identifying as lesbian or gay as part of that process. These identities were particularly important where people would not be known to be lesbian or gay due to an assumption of heterosexuality:

*...it is all about sexual identity and processing their own thoughts...you know it's not expected that somebody could be gay. It's like you are automatically assumed to be straight unless stated otherwise.*

**Steve, 21**

Self-labelling a lesbian or gay may, from the quotes given above, be distinguished from identifying or being identified as 'straight', where people are initially presumed to be straight. 'Straightness' may not require the same processes of labelling through which people come to identify as lesbian or gay. This self-labelling is possibly pronounced where heterosexuality has been observed to be, in part, 'compelled', notably in peer interaction (Richardson, 2010). A few participants also noted that 'doing' did not necessarily translate into 'being', as 'a state of personal identification' (Richardson, 1984: 83), where they had encountered people who, whilst nominally 'straight', had sexual experiences with people of the same gender. Nathan and Jess, in the following quotes, reflect on their awareness of the sexual behaviours of straight men and women:

*...what's good about the cruising areas, they've got quite straight lads who have got their girlfriends and stuff and they're just, they're horny and they think she's at work so they nip down and end up going with a lad 'cos they want their cock sucked and that.*

**Nathan, 21**

*I have a lot of straight, well friends who identify as straight but they have had sexual experiences with women... I can't think of a single straight friend I have who hasn't at least kissed another girl in a non-gamey way.*

**Jess, 19**

In these quotes heterosexuality is taken for granted, or assumed, but is not called into question by same-sex encounters. This affirms Plummer's (1981a) observation that people may engage in same-sex activities without necessarily identifying as lesbian or gay. It might be argued then that identifying as straight involves a different process to that by which people came to identify as gay; although that is not the focus of this research. Self-labelling as gay however appeared to take in a range of different potentials, engaging the acknowledgment

of personal desires, reflecting on and ordering the ‘doing’ of sexuality, as well as claiming a sense of ‘difference’, where it might be taken as a recognition of oneself as not being straight. Chris below offers this particular understanding of what self-identifying as gay meant for him:

*It defines who I am attracted to and who I want to have relationships with.*

**Chris, 19**

Adopting a gay identity might be taken as a way of framing a sexual self, making that self intelligible to both oneself and to others. To quote Dan again, ‘*that tells people what we are*’. It also might be a way of framing, for lesbian and gay people at least, the ‘doing’ of sexuality, as a way of making a claim to desired, or preferred, gendered sexual and intimate encounters (where those are not taken as given). In terms of ‘being’ or ‘doing’, self-identifying as lesbian or gay might not be taken as one or the other, but as a complex process through which personal desires (‘being’), and sexual acts and interactions (‘doing’) are bound together in terms of the individual’s sense of self, and who they think they are sexually, as an alternative state of ‘being’ (Richardson, 1984). This might be seen in terms of Fuss’ (1989) continuum, with essentialism being inherent in constructionism, and vice versa. The articulation of sexual identities by nearly all respondents shifted from essentialist notions of sexuality as being within them, to an acknowledgement of the social nature of labels, through which people could make themselves known.

## 2) *Shifting Identifications*

This notion of labels as socially constructed may be seen as echoed in further discussions of the problems that were associated with sexual categories, where five participants suggested that labels, whilst being suitable for some, were only more-or-less useful for others. This is evidenced in the following quote from Alexandra:

*I think for some people now a label is really comforting and I think for a young teen it can be really helpful to know that there is a label out there if you are struggling because it can help ease confusion, but some people don’t need it. Some*

*people can think 'actually all that comes out of a label is homophobia, or a difficulty because I don't think I am that label, I'm not sure how well that label fits.' Whereas for others it's a secure place and you can identify in that label quite happily so I really think it depends on who you are and how you want to use it.*

**Alexandra, 19**

Whilst the discussions had in the interviews tended to revolve around lesbian and gay identities, there was an implicit recognition in several interviews that sexuality was less rigidly defined than a division between lesbian/gay and straight. The way in which people could identify sexually was sometimes seen to vary, being more diverse than a distinction between lesbian/gay and straight might suggest. Andy, for example, in discussing people's understandings of sameness and difference, makes an interesting qualification to his statement about 'two sexualities':

*...there should be no differences between the two sexualities, well not two separate, there's lots...*

**Andy, 16**

Whilst some people might find some degree of reassurance in an identity where it allowed them to articulate a sense of themselves as sexual, Alexandra felt that others might find that same label as ill-suited (or has negative implications, such as homophobia). The categories of lesbian and gay, whilst having some value in allowing my participants to make sense of themselves, were not necessarily taken by those same individuals as universally applicable (whilst they may work for some, this did not mean they worked for others). The notion of confusion mentioned in Alexandra's quote was articulated in eight accounts of the processes through which young people come to understand themselves as sexual, and was raised earlier as part of the discussion on the scripting of people's inner lives. It was taken, and has been recognised in other research (Savin-Williams, 1989; Valentine *et al.*, 2003), as a significant aspect of growing up and coming to identify as lesbian or gay (see also, Trolden, 1989). One participant took this idea of confusion further and suggested that increasing numbers of young people were beginning to question their own sexualities. Echoing more recent research by Savin-Williams (2005), Ben reflects on his understanding of how society has changed with regards to the labelling of sexuality, with more people being seen to be open to a range of possibilities, this potentially leading to sexual categories becoming redundant:

*I've seen more and more guys who are gay or bisexual or kind of a bit confused, or kind of open to it, all the categories, there is more and more people these days and obviously I think that, well not obviously, but the expectation of straight people being the norm did come about from the idea you had to be straight to repopulate but with things like adoption and artificial insemination and sperm donors and all that kind of thing, more and more people having kids, and you can only see the numbers going up as it is more acceptable and I can imagine that the labels will at some point become redundant.*

**Ben, 20**

For Ben this change is seen as being connected to changing arrangements in people's sexual lives; technological developments making possible new ways of reproducing, this detachment of reproduction from sexuality having been commented on by Giddens (1993: 27). This is seen by Ben to have affected the ways in which people are able to identify sexually, where heterosexuality is no longer seen to be the 'norm' (echoing debates about how 'compulsory' heterosexuality continues to be (Seidman, 2009; Jackson and Scott, 2010a)).

All of the quotes given in this section, whilst pointing to the continued usage of sexual labels such as lesbian and gay in making non-heterosexual sexual selves known, seek to question their relevance, or the extent to which they are required in living a sexual life. This might be addressed to an assertion Plummer (1981b) has made previously:

'...the world is simultaneously necessarily contingent upon orderly categories through which we may grasp it and how simultaneously such categories invariably restrict our experiences and serve material forces of domination and control. We cannot live without them but living with them is a horror'

Whilst not wishing to question wholly Plummer's then understanding of sexual labels (and I acknowledge that his understanding has moved on (Plummer, 2003a: 6)), some questions may be raised. Particularly with regards to how far 'we cannot live without them', and the extent to which they do restrict. Plummer's formulation might, now, grant labels too much power in their ability to help make sense of sexual subjectivities. Whilst it would appear from the data that labels such as lesbian and gay did help as part of this sense making, they were not constructed as universally applicable. Second, and as I will now go on to discuss, they were not necessarily wholly restrictive in that a small number of participants

did reflect on possibilities to move through categories. This was particularly evident for those participants (Samantha and Jess) who, rather than framing sexuality in terms of gendered persons, defined sexuality in reference to individual personalities (see page 94). Whilst this was a relatively minor discourse, it did raise questions about the extent to which labels ‘restricted’ the construction of sexual selves, where those selves were seen as either less easily defined, or as changeable, being reconstructed over time. Following Samantha’s discussion about the possibility that she may eventually meet a man she liked, I asked how she would define if she were to meet a man she was attracted to:

**Samantha:** *I know that I will always probably say that I am a lesbian... but in the end if I do end up liking a guy then it's to me it's no big deal.*

**Edmund:** *So if you were to meet a guy you were attracted to, you would still identify as a lesbian?*

**Samantha:** *If that happened I would probably define myself as bi.* **Samantha, 19**

Samantha, whilst defining as lesbian at the time of interviewing had, as previously stated, been reflecting on the possibility that one day she may find a man to whom she was attracted. She then turned, once prompted, to the effect that would have on how she defined herself sexually. Despite stating that she ‘*will always probably say that I am a lesbian*’, Samantha suggested instead that she ‘*would probably define...as bi.*’ A similar sense of variability was articulated by Jess who, given her understanding of sexuality as more ‘fluid’ (her being the only participant to describe sexuality in that way), she could not easily pin down how she defined:

**Edmund:** *And what is your sexuality?*

**Jess:** *Debatable, see I would say bisexual but definitely more like, if I could have a percentage I'd be seventy percent lesbian.* **Jess, 19**

Whilst Samantha saw herself at the time as (and as she describes herself at the beginning of the interview) ‘*Fully lesbian*’, Jess on the other hand described herself on a scale, as ‘*seventy percent lesbian*’. Although these accounts differed in this respect, both described sexuality in similar terms where they felt sexuality was ‘*more about the individual*’ (Jess) or ‘*the person*’ (Samantha), rather than their gender. For Samantha this implied that her sexuality was *potentially* not fixed, whereas Jess defined herself in a way which suggested that her sexuality

was certainly not fixed. The consequences of these different perspectives could, arguably, be understood in interactionist terms as an 'ongoing reflexive process' (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 124) whereby both Samantha and Jess were engaging, within the interview, in a process of self-definition, giving accounts of themselves that made sense to them at the time. The same analysis could, arguably, be made of the other participants too where they no less sought to make sense of themselves as either lesbian or gay. Although, where Jess and Samantha were recognising potential shifts in their sexual identifications, others defined themselves in ways which saw their current sexual identification as ongoing, or more definite. Anna, for instance, saw herself as lesbian '*for a fact*', but acknowledged others may be less sure of themselves:

*...I know I identify as lesbian because I know for a fact that I am in that category of people, but for certain people who are more confused, labels just don't seem to work for them.*

**Anna, 19**

An additional point that may be made about the above discussion, particularly where it has revolved around specific labels, such as lesbian and gay, is the absence of other accounts of sexuality, notably 'pomo', 'pansexual' or 'queer'. These were entirely absent in the data. There may be a number of reasons for this. Firstly, Newcastle lacks an organised 'alternative' or 'queer' gay scene; bars and clubs instead being largely mainstream, commercial enterprises (Casey, 2004). Newcastle's nightlife also has a reputation for being home to normative masculinities and femininities (Hollands, 2002) – few of my participants saw themselves as performing transgressive gender roles, the young men were particularly keen to proclaim themselves to be 'straight-acting' (Clarkson, 2006). The lack of postmodern identities could also be an artefact of the sampling method, which targeted gay and lesbian men specifically as opposed to 'queer', as well as the limitations of a small sample size.

Bisexuality was quite prominent in the discussions had by Jess and Samantha with regards to what I have described as the 'changeability' of their sexual identifications. Bisexuality also held a significant place in other accounts, which whilst not describing sexuality as potentially changeable, documented the transitions through which participants came to identify as either lesbian or gay.

Four participants stated that they identified as bisexual before eventually coming to identify as lesbian or gay. Although one further participant, Dan, whilst defining as gay prior to interviewing, identified as bisexual during the interview, he did however, echoing Jess, say he goes for '*men more than women*'. Of the participants who described themselves as identifying as bisexual before identifying as lesbian or gay, two were women and two were men. For these participants, bisexuality may be seen as an identity *en route*. The following quote from Jack illustrates a number of aspects provided in these accounts:

*I think sometimes it takes people a while to figure out whether they are, 'cos when I was about thirteen, I thought I was bisexual and then I realized I was gay when I turned fifteen...And I got a lot of like stick at school for it...and I got bullied about it and I wasn't that happy so I ended up pretending I was bi.* **Jack, 21**

In these accounts, memory played a significant role in telling of the development of sexual identities (Plummer, 1995). Jack, for example, recounts how he initially 'thought' of himself as bisexual, bisexuality being framed in a similar way by Alexandra who said '*when I was younger I thought I was bisexual*'. Bisexuality in this respect is framed, in hindsight, as somewhat of a mistaken identity. Jack and Alexandra reconfiguring that past bisexuality as something they only 'thought' they were, as opposed to being something they 'actually' were. Over time however they described themselves as 'realizing' they were lesbian/gay. Another aspect of Jack's account is the extent to which his bisexual identification was shaped, not just in terms of what he thought about himself, but how others responded to him coming out as gay. The adoption of bisexuality was often strategic in negotiating other people's perceptions. This was echoed by Anna who stated that she had toyed with the idea of coming out as bisexual due to her own father's homophobia:

*I always had this thing in my mind that if I ever came out as something it would be bisexual because, my dad's quite homophobic.* **Anna, 19**

Coming out as bisexual, in these instances may be seen as bound up in the negotiation of lesbian or gay identities. This is something that has been touched on earlier in the chapter (see page 100). William had explained how he had tried to '*change and be straight*', eventually thinking that he '*could possibly be bisexual*'

at a time when he did not want to ‘be’ gay, particularly where he felt at the time as such:

*...when I was like thirteen, fourteen you think, there was times when I was thinking ‘am I going to die a virgin, will I ever have a sexual relationship with anyone.’*

**William, 20**

These bisexual identifications may be taken as identities *en route* as, at the time of interviewing, they were not considered as giving an account of their sexual selves as they perceived them to be (at that time). Rather they told a story of how they had moved on from identifying as bisexual towards coming out as lesbian or gay as they had got older. Bisexuality at the time was either considered to be something that they had only ‘thought’ they were, or something they had felt it better to identify as where they faced difficulties in adopting a lesbian or gay identification. The reasons for this were either a perceived loss that came with identifying as gay (as in concerns around a loss of a sexual or intimate life), or, as mentioned, other people’s negative attitudes, particularly fellow school pupils or family. This parallels both Valentine *et al.* (2005) and Dunne’s *et al.*’s (2002) findings with regards to the particular challenges faced by lesbian and gay youth). Later identifications as lesbian or gay came after these difficulties had either been resolved, for example William coming to realize he could have a sex life as a gay man, or moving away from homophobic peers or family (as in the case of Jack and Anna). Whilst these identifications were thus seen as something ‘done’ or ‘performed’ for various reasons, they were not taken as something which they *actually* were, i.e. as a form of ‘being’.

This section has sought to address some of the issues that arose in the data with regards to the issue of labelling. Whilst the significance of labels such as lesbian and gay are recognised in framing sexual selves, or in making them intelligible, the data also questioned the applicability of those labels. For many, whilst they found identities such as lesbian or gay suitable in giving an account of themselves as sexual, they saw that for others they were perhaps less so, with there being opportunities for people to engage with those labels critically. Further, the data also suggested the dynamic way in which labels were adopted, where, rather than them being read from the body, they were seen as being used to enable the

articulation of a sexual self. Coming to articulate this may, however, be seen as a process of reflexive engagement, whereby participants sought to understand themselves, labels being adopted as part of that process. Further, where sexuality was seen in terms other than gender, those labels were also engaged with. Sexuality being seen in this respect as changeable where sexuality was not 'fixed' in terms of gender.

## **Conclusion**

Richardson (1984: 85) has previously addressed the possibility, 'theoretically at least', of considering 'homosexual desire, homosexual behaviour, and homosexual identity as separate categories'. Whilst recognising these as separate categories and not necessarily indicative of one another, in considering the adoption of sexual identities, the data presented here has observed the implications that each category has for one another. In asking how one comes to identify as lesbian or gay, this chapter has sought to illustrate the ways in which the scripting of sexual behaviours and desires are done in terms of one another, with sexual interactions being informed by personal desires, and the possibilities of claiming desire being understood through gendered interactions. Gender, as such, is also seen as significant in structuring individual's sexual selves, where individuals understand both themselves and others as gendered. Gender shapes people's own understandings of other people as desirable, also informing sexual interactions as gendered. Sexual identifications, whilst not being seen, as is the case in a sexual orientation model, as 'a cognitive 'realization' of the 'true' sexual nature of the self' (Richardson, 1984: 84), were seen as bound up in embodied feelings of desire. Most of the young people, in coming to understand themselves as sexual, were seen to reflect on what they perceive to be their own desires, relationships and gendered interactions. In doing so, drawing on situations in which they found themselves most comfortable, or which they found most pleasurable.

Desire has been emphasised in this chapter for a specific reason, firstly where Halperin (2007) sees the subjective experiences of lesbian and gay people as having been obscured in academic accounts of 'homosexual identity', this having been a political strategy designed to counter pathologizing accounts of lesbian and gay psychologies. For Halperin (2007: 8), the challenge is to no longer hide

‘queer’ subjectivities, but to provide non-stigmatizing vocabulary through which they may be understood. Whilst developing a new vocabulary is not the aim of this chapter, it has sought to place lesbian and gay subjectivities at the centre of the analysis. Mirroring Tolman’s (2002: 25) suggestion that the desires of young women are both a legitimate and necessary area of study, this chapter has been written so as to reflect the significance of young lesbian and gay people’s desires in the construction of their sexual subjectivities. This is further reflected in what is perceived as the embodiment of those desires. It is argued here that desires are embodied; embodied through the sexual practices in which the participants engaged in, embodied in their understandings of gender, and embodied in their capacities to observe, think and feel. In these respects, the making of sexual selves is understood as being bound up in reflections on this sense of being embodied. Sexual identities are taken as a significant means through which these diverse thoughts, feelings and interactions may be understood and articulated. This notion of significance is taken up in the next chapter, which addresses the meanings given to sexual identities and the significance given to them in the ‘making’ of self.

## **Chapter 5 – The Significance of Sexuality: Lesbian and Gay Identities and the Construction of Self**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter addressed the construction of sexual selves, and the adoption of sexual categories as a means of ‘labelling’ sexual selves. ‘Subjective lives’, however, are not wholly encompassed by sexual identities – ‘there are many aspects of the self that are not reducible to any identity or to the sum total of our identities’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 122). This chapter addresses further the adoption of lesbian and gay identities in the making of sexual selves. It asks what the significance of those identity categories is in making sense of self. Appiah (2005: 66) has argued that, whilst identities ‘shape the ways people conceive of themselves’, individuals, ethically, cannot/should not be reduced to those identities (Appiah, 2005: 110). Acknowledging these understandings of self and identity, this chapter addresses the ways that the categories ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ shaped how the young people interviewed understood themselves, and how the meanings ascribed to those identities were engaged with.

In doing so, this chapter is separated into two parts, which may be roughly framed in terms of the ‘being’ and ‘doing’ of self and identity. The first section addresses the construction of self as ‘complex’ (Jackson, 2007: 7), highlighting the ways that ‘self’ (the person interviewees considered themselves to ‘be’) was frequently constructed as irreducible to sexuality. This section also documents the tension between achieved and ascribed identities (Jenkins, 2008); where, in interaction, sexual identities were at once described as a ‘thread’ and as a ‘core’ (Seidman, 2002). The second section goes on to discuss the articulation of sexual identities in interaction. Taking into consideration the prior discussion of the significance of sexual identities, this section explores the ways in which identities were disclosed looking at the ways in which the construction of sexuality as a ‘personal dimension of the self’ (Appiah, 2005: 110), was translated into performance (Holliday, 1999). Throughout this chapter tensions between understandings of sameness and difference, and the meanings ascribed to both heterosexuality and

lesbian and gay identities, are observed. The chapter is then concluded, addressing the symbolic engagements through which sexual selves are made meaningful.

### **Complex Selves and the Significance of Sexual Identity**

Jackson (2007: 7) has described ‘self’ as like a ‘complex, many-stranded cord’, a metaphor Jackson uses to describe the multifaceted, shifting nature of the self. One that is irreducible to any particular ‘thread’, and one which does not stay the same over time. This self, as Jackson (2007: 7) states, is one that is socially embedded, one that ‘derives from *social* experience’ and interaction. In similar terms, Driver (2008: 12) has described LGBT and queer youth as ‘articulat[ing] themselves in polyvalent ways...suggest[ing] a rich and layered sense of self’. This is echoed throughout the literature on LGBT/queer youth (Herdt, 1989; Plummer, 1989; Talburt, 2004; Talburt *et al.*, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2005; Rasmussen, 2006) which has argued for understandings of LGBT and queer youth as ‘complex, competent people whose lives, experiences, resources, and needs are no more predictable than those of straight youth’ (Talburt, 2004: 120).

#### *1) Claiming Complexity*

Sexual subjectivities are thus, theoretically, seen as complex and contradictory (Plante, 2007: 32), with meanings attributed to sexual identities as changing over time (Eliason and Schope, 2007; Richardson, 2007). Lesbian and gay identities however have also been seen as ‘homogenizing’, with lesbian and gay youth being taken as all alike (Herdt, 1989). This is paralleled in accounts of lesbian and gay identities as historically constructed as ‘totalizing’, ‘essentializing’ and ‘stigmatizing’ identities (Foucault, 1990 [1978]; Goffman, 1990b [1963]; Richardson and May, 1999). Lesbian and gay identities, in this respect, are seen as overshadowing the ‘vast complexity’ of people’s lives (Richardson, 1996: 13). Echoing understandings of self as diverse, polyvalent and multiple, the young people interviewed typically provided an account of self as both ‘complex’ and irreducible to any particular identity, a common trope throughout the data being that sexual identities were not all that they were. These responses were often given to the initial data question, which asked about the ‘centrality’ of sexuality to how

they saw themselves. Kevin and Jess below give accounts of the ways in which self and sexuality were typically described:

**Edmund:** *How central is your sexuality to how you see yourself?*

**Kevin:** *Not completely central.*

**Edmund:** *What do you mean?*

**Kevin:** *Just because I have different interests doesn't change who I am as a person...I don't sit every day and think about me being gay.*

**Kevin, 16**

**Jess:** *It's definitely part of who I am and I wouldn't change that but it's not like central to how I see myself... if I was asked to describe the main three things that I would say about myself, I wouldn't necessarily list that.*

**Edmund:** *So, what would be the main things?*

**Jess:** *I don't know, probably more things about my character rather than, to me my character and my personality don't necessarily reflect the fact that I'm gay or bisexual, whatever, it's more about like, I don't know, who I am. Does that make sense at all?*

**Jess, 19**

Paralleling findings by Savin-Williams (2005), the interviewees frequently described themselves as 'more' than their sexual identities. This often being done, as demonstrated by Jess and Kevin, through allusions to who they considered themselves to be in terms of their personality, who they were as an individual, or through emphasising other interests. This was often stated alongside an assertion that sexuality did not inform everything that they did. This appeared to be a significant theme in the data, characterized by a series of discussions about who saw sexuality as important, in what ways, and what meanings were attached to it. Self was thus constructed in ways where sexuality was not deemed a 'core' identity, but a 'thread' instead (Seidman, 2002: 10). In this chapter, this is understood, in interactionist terms, as a reflexive process through which self was constructed in shifting, variable ways (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 125)

In the data, however, there was a frequent tension between those understandings of sexual identities held by the interviewees and those they perceived other people to attribute to them. Jenkins' (2008: 172) distinction between an achieved and ascribed identity might be applied here in understanding this dialectic. The claiming of self as complex (sexual yet irreducible to sexuality) was on a number of occasions described as in opposition to other people's perception of sexuality as a 'core' identity. The 'other' people mentioned were often heterosexual people,

who the interviewees saw themselves as ‘other’ to. The following quote from Louise illustrates this relational construction of sexuality. It is typical of a number of responses to the initial data question:

*It’s not majorly important to me I don’t think. I think a lot, I think when I tell people they think it’s a big deal, things like that but to me it’s not that great a deal it’s just who I am.* **Louise, 19**

As indicated by Louise, such responses were typically constructed in two parts, self being described as they saw it and as others saw it. This was mirrored in a number of responses, and was not gendered, Andy below echoes Louise:

*...kind of linking in with the first question, is being gay one of the biggest things about your personality, I think it’s what other people see.* **Andy, 16**

A common property of these descriptions of self was the importance (or lack thereof) granted to sexuality in how the participants understood themselves, the previous quotes from Louise and Andy reflecting the descriptions of self given by Kevin and Jess above. It was often felt that, although they constructed themselves in ‘polyvalent ways’ (Driver, 2008: 12) and reducing the significance of sexuality accordingly, the way in which others viewed them attributed more significance to sexuality. It was typically thought that other people saw sexuality as a more significant aspect in understanding them as a people. The interviewees often suggested that there were many other aspects that might be ‘more important’, as Jess had stated, *‘if I was asked to describe the main three things that I would say about myself, I wouldn’t necessarily list that’*. This may be taken as a different way of understanding lesbian and gay identities from past generations, where historically they have been understood in ‘essential’ and ‘totalizing’ ways (Rosenfeld, 1999).

This historical ‘totalizing’ of lesbian and gay identities has been attributed to what Seidman has described as ‘the repressiveness of the closet’ (Seidman, 2002). The transformation of ‘same-sex desires into an object of overdetermined investment and cathexis’ (Seidman, 2004: 256) being an effect of the enforced concealment of lesbian and gay identities. This may be seen as changing where heterosexuality, in

places, has become less ‘compulsory’ (Seidman, 2009). These discussions had by the young lesbians and gay men interviewed for this project paralleled Seidman’s (2002: 10) distinction between ‘core’ and ‘thread’ identities and the relational nature of those definitions. From a historical perspective, they may also be seen as mirroring the shifts, observed by Seidman (2002, 2004), from sexuality being seen as a ‘core’ identity to a ‘thread’ where people are increasingly living sexual lives beyond the closet. There is an issue of ‘normalization’ related to this, an issue that is discussed later on in this chapter.

Whilst this understanding of sexuality as an ‘aspect’ of the self was the dominant approach, a few interviewees did provide different accounts. Samantha, for example, is quoted below, describing herself as ‘fully lesbian’:

**Edmund:** *What is your sexuality?*

**Samantha:** *Fully lesbian...like all my friends are mainly gay and I mean the only straight friends I have got are the friends I made at school...It's just how my lifestyle has ended up. I now live right at the edge of the gay scene in [Northern city]. So I do live and work the gay scene. So it's, all my friends are round there and that is just how it has fallen in to place.*

**Samantha, 19**

Samantha offered a different account of her sexual identity where she considered herself to be ‘fully lesbian’. Unlike many others interviewed, her sexuality was seen to shape a large part of her life. Rather than seeing it as a ‘thread’ which had limited significance, Samantha saw her sexuality as informing a great deal of her life. This was particularly the case where, at the time of interviewing, she had recently moved to the North after leaving boarding school where she had spent much of her teenage years. Samantha took her move as an opportunity to develop a wider social network with other lesbian and gay people. She took a job at a bar on the gay scene and eventually moved in with a young woman she was in a relationship with. Samantha lived a life different from many of the others interviewed where she spent a large part of her time with other lesbian and gay people, fashioning her life largely around her sexuality (Seidman, 2002). Whilst this approach to understanding sexuality is not the one that will be dwelt on in this chapter where it was a fairly atypical response, it does emphasise the importance of context in informing accounts of self. Whilst many participants’ social worlds were, in the main, ‘mixed’ environments (working and learning, living and

socialising with both straight and lesbian/gay people), Samantha lived, worked and socialised on the gay scene, thus spending a considerable amount of her time around other lesbian and gay people.

Many of the others interviewed may be understood as ‘routinizing’ their sexual identities within the contexts in which they were embedded (Seidman *et al.*, 1999). William, for instance, discusses the significance of college and his relationships with other students in shaping his understanding of himself. His emphasis on college and his anticipated move to university acknowledges the temporal nature of these constructions too. In chapter six this is dwelt on further where the notion of youth in ‘transition’ (Jones, 2009) is discussed in terms of the construction of sexual adulthoods:

*I know I've mentioned a lot of college but as a twenty year old student it's a big part of my life and it's where I am basing some of my opinions from, and it's like, I am sure when I go into university I will be 'this is quite different, it isn't the same back as it was in college because people are older' and so I think it's a very individual experience with peoples' experiences and how people respond to them.*

**William, 20**

For Seidman *et al.* (1999: 11), the ‘interpersonal routinization’ of lesbian and gay identities refers to the ‘informal ways individuals integrate homosexuality into their conventional social lives’. Much of the data presented in this chapter may be taken as reflecting this process as the interviewees often engaged in constructing their sexual identities as an ‘aspect’ of their conventional social lives. This was echoed in the claims to sexuality being a ‘part’ of whom they were (mirroring Seidman’s (2004) findings). The following section elaborates on this more where it explores the ‘doing’ of sexual identities. That section exploring the ways in which the disclosure of identity was done in a way that diminished the perceived significance of identity. Coming out, as shall be addressed, was often done in an ‘understated’ way.

Despite claims to complexity, however, one important aspect that came through in the data was about who had the power to define ‘self’. This is implicit in the previous discussion about ascribed identities, where participants acknowledged that, although they understood themselves in different ways, other people would

see sexuality as a more significant aspect in understanding who they were. Jenkins (2008: 47), discussing the dialogue between achieved and ascribed identities has stated that external definitions of self ‘is an inexorable part of my internal definition of myself – even if I only reject or resist it’. This appeared to be true of the self-understandings of several of the young lesbians and gay men I interviewed, where, as an adjunct to this ‘imposed’ significance (as it might be described), were strongly held ‘stereotypes’. These images were bound up in an ongoing construction of self, even where they were rejected, these stereotypes being associated with ‘homogenizing’ and ‘totalizing’ views of lesbian and gay identities (Herdt, 1989), where they were seen to construct a unity within lesbian and gay identities which several interviewees roundly refused.

Mike, for example, discusses the meanings ‘other’ (straight and gay potentially) people attach to lesbian and gay identities. The initial part of this quote has been used previously in chapter four; however it is given again in a fuller form in order to show the wider questioning of sexual identities, and what it meant to ‘belong’ to those categories. This is something that may be taken as fundamental to the negotiation of self and identity discussed in this chapter (Gamson, 1995):

**Mike:** *I think, gay these days has a lot of meanings and maybe it would be better if gay just meant, like you’re gay, like being attracted to the same gender because when you use the word now I think it implies a lot of other things to a lot of people which may be unhelpful.*

**Edmund:** *What kind of things does it imply?*

**Mike:** *Stereotypically gay behaviour, being dramatic, flamboyant...It’s like, when you say someone’s gay you’re suddenly including them in this big group that’s got its own history...and really it’s only one thing that you have in common. You can be gay but never have gone to gay bars or never listen to what people think is gay music or never have any gay friends.*

**Mike, 20**

One significant aspect of this refusal of ascribed identities, often cast as stereotypes, was their gendered nature, although there were differences between the young gay men and lesbians in how this was done. Mike, for instance, engages with specific constructions of gay male identities in terms of camp, describing ‘*Stereotypically gay behaviour, being dramatic, flamboyant*’ as antithetical to how he understood his sexual identity. Camp was often focused on where it was perceived to be ascribed to all gay men, regardless of whether they were camp or

not. This also being considered an undesirable thing where camp was thought to be ‘other’ to their everyday understandings of themselves and their ‘conventional social lives’ (Seidman *et al.*, 1999: 11). Tom, for instance, relates this rejection of camp to the normalizing of gay male identities, the refusal of camp, potentially, being bound up in the construction of ‘normal’, gender conventional gay male selves (Seidman, 2005: 59).

*...someone who is really camp, it's fine if they want to be like that. But the bitchiness, 'cos a lot of them do bitch and you know cause gossip...that kind of stereotype, I don't think there is much need for because it causes offence to people, gives gays a bad image...as if they don't have normal lives.* **Tom, 16**

This emphasis on camp was typical, being echoed by half the young men interviewed, many of whom described camp as portraying a bad image of gay men, several claiming instead a ‘straight acting’ masculinity as more desirable. Straight acting has been described elsewhere as implying a claim to sameness with straight men where it has been seen as premised on a particular way of ‘doing’ heterosexual ‘hegemonic’ masculinity (Clarkson, 2006). There was also an issue of desirability within this with regards to what was considered an ‘attractive’ way of ‘doing’ masculinity. Chris, for example, speaks of his preference for straight acting men:

*...my preference is that straight acting men are more attractive, I think a lot of gay people have that idea in general...to me I am more attracted to straight acting men so it makes a difference to me....I've always been quite pleased with it because I don't think, as I've said, I don't view being stereotypically gay, being some raving queen as attractive.* **Chris, 19**

Whilst there was not a parallel ‘straight acting’ discourse for the young lesbians, there was a questioning of the enactment of lesbian identities in highly scripted ways. This was echoed by four of the young lesbians, each questioning the need to ‘do’ lesbian identity in any particular way. Anna, for example, was typical of the young women interviewed where she sought to question the idea that to ‘be’ lesbian required ‘looking’ lesbian:

**Anna:** *I've got one girl friend who I know...who's canny pissed off because there's been loads of like tomboy pages in Cosmopolitan and stuff like this and*

*they are emphasising boy jeans and like showing girl boxers and stuff and she's got really, really annoyed about it because she's saying everyone's trying to look lesbian and I've kind of just sat back and went well what does it mean to look lesbian?*

**Edmund:** *So, what does that mean?*

**Anna:** *To look lesbian?*

**Edmund:** *Yeah.*

**Anna:** *In the stereotyped way it would be short spiky hair, baggy jeans, boxers hanging out, stuff like that and it's making more of an effort to look gay than actually being gay yourself.*

**Anna, 19**

This rejection of externally given definitions of lesbian identity was mirrored elsewhere. Several of the young lesbians questioned the extent to which the framing and performance of lesbian sexuality in terms of specific gendered 'personae' remained relevant (Rapi and Chowdhry, 1998). Jess, for instance, queried the designation of distinct categories to different ways of 'doing' lesbian identity:

*...what is the difference between like a femme and a lipstick or what's the difference between a grrl spelt G R R L and like a boi spelt B O I. I don't get it, why do we need to have all these little like words for things that you don't really need to define, like it's subsections within subsections within subsections really.*

**Jess, 19**

Gender was central to these rejections of stereotypes, lesbian and gay identities being framed in terms of a 'close reading of gender's relationship to homosexuality' (Richardson, 2007: 468). The close reading of gender and lesbian and gay sexualities was also frequently understood as 'externally' given. In this respect, Anna's quote is typical where, in emphasising the significance of just 'being' lesbian rather than aiming to 'look' lesbian, she sought to detach sexuality from the doing of gender. Thus she questioned any given meaning as to what it took *'to look lesbian'*. This echoes Mike's rejection of camp in order to reduce sexuality to desire. The interviewees' own understandings of sexuality often sought to question these external definitions, in order that they may 'do' sexuality in ways which felt right for them.

In part, this questioning of the external definitions of sexual identity might be understood as a resistance to having to 'do' lesbian sexuality in a particular way, so as to be recognised as lesbian. This raised questions about the extent to which

the participants felt the need to be recognised through clearly defined performances of gender. This question of recognition may be applied generally to this chapter, particularly with regards to the construction of sexuality as a non-essential aspect of self, as a ‘thread’ identity (Seidman, 2002). The notion of ‘complexity’ discussed so far has implications for notions of recognition, and how the young people interviewed wished to be recognised. The following section of this chapter expands on this where it discusses further the way in which the young people interviewed constructed themselves as ‘persons’, as an ‘authentic’ sense of self, this being framed in terms of claims to sameness with straight people.

Before moving on to this issue, the following quote from Samantha reflects on a number of issues discussed so far, particular in terms of the relationship between constructions of self and the gendering of ascribed understandings of lesbian and gay sexualities. This Samantha sees as tied to processes of social change. She sees lesbians as no longer having to ‘do’ gender in a highly scripted way, instead being able to be *‘who they want to be’*, mirroring the discussion of self had in the earlier parts of this section where sexuality is constructed as less definitive of self:

*I think at one point it probably was that all lesbians were butch, we all wore baggy clothes and stuff, and all straight girls wore dresses and things and gay men wore really tight trousers and t-shirts...I think it's now completely changed because people are who they want to be, not putting themselves into a category. They will say 'oh I am a lesbian' but they won't say "cos I'm a lesbian I've got to do this, I've got to dress that way"...I think people are more comfortable with it now...they may label themselves as lesbian but they don't have to dress like guys and stuff.* **Samantha, 19**

The notion of social change described in Samantha’s quote was a common theme, coming up in all the interviews. Sexual identities were typically framed within an understanding of society as having changed with regards to the construction of lesbian and gay identities, including the ways in which identities were done. There was no particular time frame given for this understanding of change, save for a few who mentioned particular decades such as the sixties and seventies. Instead it was an understanding of things as having been different in times gone by. Time in this sense was generally an abstracted version of the recent past, which they constructed themselves as living after. In this respect, the construction of ‘time’

seemed to represent a narrative of identity, or a sexual story, through which they addressed where identities had ‘been’ and where they were ‘going’, the participants situating themselves within this narrative in a moment of change.

This change, as suggested by Samantha, had implications for the way in which lesbians could be recognised as lesbian. Whereas historically Samantha believed that all lesbians ‘*were butch, we all wore baggy clothes and stuff, and all straight girls wore dresses and things*’, she suggested that over time this was something that had changed. Lesbians instead ‘*may label themselves as lesbian but they don’t have to dress like guys and stuff*’. There was no specific reason for this given by Samantha. However she does illuminate a sense of change with regards to the perceived ‘doing’ of identity, and the questions this raises about issues of visibility. This was echoed by Ben with regards to the doing of gay male masculinity, although Ben echoes work on ‘metrosexuality’ (Flood, 2009) in that he sees straight men as becoming more like gay men:

*I think, say like a couple of decades ago, it was easier to tell the difference between gay people and straight people. The lines have definitely been blurred a little more these days. I think a big part of it is that at the time the male cosmetic industry is going through the roof...you’ve got to look after yourself a lot more than they used to, now you’ve got to make sure that you go to the gym and keep in shape, and do your hair, you’ve gotta have the right aftershave and the right look, the right facial hair...I think it was often a gay thing say ten, fifteen years ago to kind of look after yourself and be like a pretty boy but now footballers, actors it’s kind of lead the way.*

**Ben, 20**

Within this notion of change, the ways in which identities were seen as ‘done’ was considered to have changed. Prior to the moment the interviewees saw themselves as living through, identities was frequently perceived to be performed in highly scripted ways, the doing of gender being shaped by the division between heterosexuality and homosexuality. It was thought that this was increasingly no longer the case, with the ways in which lesbian and gay people could ‘do’ gender being opened up, with Ben also indicating shifts in the ways in which straight men ‘do’ gender (Richardson, 2007: 469). Although there is also an implicit suggestion of ‘sameness’ within this, with lesbians/gay men and heterosexual people being considered to be more alike, diminishing what has been described as the ‘threat of gender subversion’ (Chasin, 2000, cited in Richardson, 2004: 401). This threat is

something potentially evidenced in the focus on camp and boyish behaviours by gay men and lesbians respectively. This ‘sameness’ is something picked up in the following section, which shall be discussed in the following section.

## 2) *Recognition and The Importance of Being Persons*

There were specific implications resulting from the description of sexuality as ‘not central’, most notably in terms of the framing of sameness and difference. This is briefly touched on in the initial quote in this chapter from Kevin (page 117), where he states that, although he has ‘*different interests*’, that ‘*doesn’t change who I am as a person*’. This emphasis on how the interviewees saw themselves as ‘persons’, or as ‘just ‘people’’, as Seidman (2002: 12) has observed, is echoed throughout the data. The interviewees typically described who they considered themselves to be as persons, rather than in terms of their sexuality. This sense of ‘personhood’ was defined and shaped by their complex selfhood. These are considered here to be one and the same (Jenkins, 2008: 50). The framing of themselves as persons was a claim to a specific category often described as irreducible to sexuality, and was observed in a large number of interviews along with other categories including categories of the ‘individual’ and the ‘human’ (categories taken here as synonymous).

This understanding of themselves, as complex, had implications for how they saw issues of sameness and difference, and the relationship between self and other (Richardson, 2004: 401). Defining themselves as persons first and foremost implied a different form of sameness and difference, where being persons equated with being the ‘same as’, or ‘no different’, from straight people. This might be understood as questioning an understanding of sameness and difference premised on a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Tom’s quote below illustrates these complex intersections of sameness and difference:

*I think my sexuality doesn’t make me a person, it’s just a fact. So it upsets me when people won’t want to talk to me because I am gay rather than get to know me or see what I am like as a person. I don’t like it when people do that. They judge you on your sexuality rather than who you are as a person and who you are as an individual...I’m an individual but no different because of my sexuality so*

*you can't outcast me as different because of my sexuality so I'd rather be seen, not straight but my own self. Do you understand? I don't think people should separate you for being gay. Like they did in my old school were they outcasted me 'cos I was gay as if it was a disease and nobody would talk to us, stuff like that. Tom, 16*

Perhaps the first thing to note from Tom's account, and this may be applied to the discussion had up to this point, is that the understanding of 'self' provided was not an abstracted reflexivity. Instead, Tom's understanding of self was grounded in his everyday sociality and his experiences of difference, as well as their attendant exclusions (Hall, 1996). Constructions of self may be seen as shaped in relation to significant others, in Tom's case, fellow pupils at the all boys' school he attended. In the quote above Tom reflects on the reaction he received from his peers to him identifying as gay. In doing so Tom highlights the continued salience of the notion of stigma (Goffman, 1990b [1963]). Here, paralleling findings by Nayak and Kehily (1997), Tom describes the young men he went to school with as 'outcasting' him, and treating him as though he were diseased. His sexuality was seen as marking him out as different and something to be separated. Thus, the discussion he was having about self and sexuality related heavily to this context, notably where he may be seen as wanting to 'belong', or 'fit in' with his peers (Woodward, 1997: 1).

His framing of himself as a person irreducible to his sexuality may be seen as pertaining to these understandings of sameness and difference. Claiming to be a 'person', as well as an 'individual' in Tom's case, was typically articulated in terms of sameness. Tom, in stating that his sexuality '*doesn't make me a person, it's just a fact*', distinguishes his sexuality from who he is as a person. Tom's 'de-essentializing' of his sexuality reconfigures boundaries of sameness and difference where, as a 'person', Tom sees himself as being the same as his 'straight' peers. This, however, is not a claim to being 'straight', or wishing to be seen as 'straight', rather he suggests he would rather be seen as '*my own self*'. This was echoed elsewhere, Louise, for example, made a similar point, although she suggested that lesbian and gay identities still operated as a marker of difference:

*Just because I am gay doesn't mean like I'm not the same as a straight person or a religious person or anything like that, we are. Like I might think about things differently, I might, but at the end of the day we are all the same kind of people,*

*we're in the same society, we're just a little bit different in certain things.*

**Louise, 19**

This difference was particularly noticeable when the participants described themselves in interaction with straight 'others'. Being seen to be 'different' was often manifested in how the young people interviewed considered straight people to respond to them as lesbian or gay people. The emphasis on sameness given by Louise and Tom may be described in terms of a 'politics of recognition' (Appiah, 2005: 105); although it raises the question of what they wish to be recognised as. In many respects, what Louise and Tom seemed to call for was recognition of themselves as persons first, and to be accepted for the people they considered themselves to be. Whilst sexuality constituted a 'component' of their complex constructions of self, the demands for recognition as persons were not premised on their lesbian or gay identities, rather they wanted to move beyond them, and be seen for the individual they considered themselves to be. Sexuality might be seen as Appiah (2005: 110) describes it, as a 'personal dimension of the self' but not wholly constitutive of it. Arguing for recognition as 'persons', with complex selves, was a way of arguing for acceptance for who they were, including their sexuality (which was never denied or kept secret by my interviewees).

This may be a politics of recognition that has only recently been made possible. Historically, lesbians and gay men have been denied the chance to define themselves beyond a stigmatized, 'essentialized' and 'totalized' view of sexuality (Richardson and May, 1999) as a 'core' or 'central' aspect of their selves (Seidman, 2002). This 'centrality' is seen by Appiah (1999: 108) as a 'negative centrality', where that centrality is often imposed upon them (echoing the ascribed dimension of identity discussed earlier). Appiah (2005: 110) describes this contemporary politics as demanding a less zealous form of recognition. Allowing instead for a greater sense of individuality free from a tight, ascriptive criteria through which sexuality is readily identifiable. Thus Appiah (2005: 100) states: 'someone who demands that I organize my life around these things is not an ally of individuality'. Indeed, what was often echoed throughout the data was a desire for sexuality to be considered something personal, and for that not to be taken as central to the individuals the interviewees believed themselves to be. This was

particularly the case where, as evidenced in the first part of this chapter, the meanings ascribed to sexual identities were often ‘other’ to how the young people interviewed for this project considered themselves to be as persons or individuals.

In the following quote from Chris these dimensions are thrown into relief as he poses the right to be recognised as an individual and as an ‘*ordinary person*’. This is offset by a perceived expectation that sexuality should be central to who he considered himself to be as a person. Whilst Chris never sought to deny or hide his sexuality, he rejected this expectation that it should wholly constitute who he saw himself to be:

**Edmund:** *How central is [your sexuality] to how you see yourself?*

**Chris:** *It defines who I am attracted to and who I want to have relationships with. I don’t feel that it defines me as an individual. Obviously I identify myself as being gay but I wouldn’t say it was central to who I am as a person...there is a lot more about me than being gay...I don’t view myself as being any different than a straight person other than my sexuality...I mean I don’t think if you asked a straight person ‘does your sexuality define who you are?’ they would probably just regard themselves as being an ‘ordinary person’, if you want to put that in inverted commas, do you know what I mean?*

**Chris, 19**

Chris’ quote echoes a number of themes already mentioned. In this account he describes similar deliberations about self and its complexity discussed previously; one in which sexuality is but a component of the self, a ‘thread’. Sexuality also is constructed as significant in naming his own desires and intimate relationships, these having constituted parts of the analysis in chapter four. He also echoes Louise and Tom in wishing to be seen as an individual, or as a person, not in terms of his sexuality, mirroring too claims to sameness as entwined with this.

With regards to Appiah’s (2005: 110) argument, Chris evidences the claim to sexuality as a personal dimension of the self. He illustrates Appiah’s (2005: 108) point about the way in which lesbian and gay sexuality has often been constructed negatively, as central to the lesbian and gay person’s self. Appiah (2005: 108) argues that lesbian and gay people, historically, have had their sexuality constructed as central to their sense of self, where those identities have ‘not been treated with equal dignity’. This echoes Goffman’s (1990b [1963]) notion of homosexuality as a stigma. Chris’ call to put ‘*ordinary person*’ in inverted commas

may be taken as acknowledging that lesbian and gay people have not always been able to claim a sense of ‘ordinariness’, since that ‘ordinariness’ and lack of significance is associated with heterosexuality. Straight people, or some at least (Rubin, 1984), have historically been able to claim ordinariness unproblematically where they have not had their sexuality made a central aspect of who they are as a person (Richardson and May, 1999). In so doing Chris may be read as making a point about how the category of the ‘person’ (and the ordinary) has historically been heterosexualized, lesbian and gay people having been at risk of being excluded from that category and pathologized (Richardson and May, 1999: 317). From Chris’ account, it would appear that being gay still presents particular anxieties about capacities to control self-definition as an individual (Richardson, 1996: 13).

In order to fully claim a more complex, varied self, and thus to be seen as an individual, as Appiah (2005: 110) suggests, requires a decentring of lesbian and gay sexuality. This, however, is often seen as the privilege of heterosexuality, where, according to Chris, heterosexual people (or normatively heterosexual), have not had to frame themselves, as people, in terms of their sexuality. To bring this back to the initial discussion on sameness, this claim to the complexity of the self (*‘there is a lot more about me than being gay’*) was also a claim to being like straight people. Steve, for example, reflected on this, although interestingly avoiding claiming ‘normality’, his use of the ‘average’ echoing Chris’ sense of ordinariness:

*...we are just as average; I don't like using the word normal. We are just as complex as a straight person.* **Steve, 21**

The claim to sameness was a principle concern in the construction of self for the interviewees, where, typically, they did not see themselves as being too much different (except with regards to their sexuality) from the straight people they shared social space with. Although, this was not always constructed in terms of their immediate surroundings, but sometimes in terms of a wider social context. For example, ‘humanity’ in general, as the case in the following quote from Liam. Additionally, Liam introduces a new trope where he talks of his pride in his

sexuality, echoing many other interviewees as over a half described themselves as being proud of their sexuality:

**Edmund:** *How central is [your sexuality] to how you see yourself?*

**Liam:** *Not essential at all really, it's just, I'm me. I am an out and proud gay man. I'll go out there on the streets and I'll be whatever, I won't prance around and chuck it in people's faces but, I'm just me...I'm a human being, I'm just the same as Tony Blair or the Queen or anybody, I'm another human person that has my sexuality...They could be straight, bisexual, transgender, anything they want to be. It's not a label, you're a person.*

**Liam, 20**

Liam's use of the notion of humanity suggests a claim to belonging to the category of 'human', this paralleling the claims to being 'individuals' or 'persons' discussed above. As he states, '*I'm another human person*'. However, he claims humanity *despite* his sexuality; he's another person who has his sexuality, and although he is out and proud, his sexuality is also '*[n]ot essential at all*'. One could speculate as to whether, had he been a straight, he would have raised the notion of humanity at all, where humanity has been equated with heterosexuality (Meyers, 2004: 20). Although this is with certain qualifications, whilst lesbian and gay people have, historically, been denied humanity, so too have other groups including Australian Aborigines, African slaves, Jews and Gypsy communities (Richardson and May, 1999: 317). A further suggestion may well be that the notion of humanity is classed as well (Lawler, 2009). Liam sees himself as equal to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the British monarch Queen Elizabeth. A tension is thus revealed in Liam's quote between identifying as gay and claiming humanity. He talks at once of being an '*out and proud gay man*' yet also '*just...another human person that has my sexuality*'. This was a typical description where, on the one hand, participants would frame themselves as like straight people, or just another person, and on the other describe themselves as proud of their sexuality.

This might be understood in terms of the distinction between sameness and difference mentioned by Louise on page 128 – '*at the end of the day we are all the same kind of people, we're in the same society, we're just a little bit different in certain things*' – with pride, in Liam's quote, being a recognition of lesbian and gay identities as a marker of difference. Liam's claim to pride may be

acknowledgment that gay and lesbian sexuality has historically been stigmatized (Goffman, 1990b [1963]). It could also be recognition of current forms of stigmatization, the use of pride having been described as the reversal of a stigma (Weeks, 2000: 185). (I am curious as to the extent to which uses of 'pride' harked back to past stigmas or informed by current ones). The emphasis on pride is echoed by Alexandra who suggested that, whilst she was proud of her sexuality, it related more 'fluidly' with her sense of who she was:

**Edmund:** *How central is [your sexuality] to how you see yourself?*

**Alexandra:** *It's definitely a huge factor in part of my identity, it's something I am very aware of and I'm proud of it...but it's not the key thing. It wouldn't be something that I would introduce myself as, like 'I'm Alexandra and I'm gay', it's a side-factor but it's an important one...it's sort of who I am more fluidly, it's just another part of who I am.*

**Alexandra, 19**

Alexandra's claim to pride may be seen as recognition of the way in which she, as a lesbian, is positioned as other to a normative heterosexuality, something which has been historically stigmatizing (Seidman, 2005). The tension in Alexandra's quote is evidenced in the dual construction of sexuality as at once both a 'huge factor' and 'just another part' of who she is. Meyers (2004: 15) has described a distinction between 'intersectional identities', through which people are seen as subjects of 'domination and subordination' (controlled through the subject positions they inhabit, e.g. lesbian, gay, female, black etc.), and 'authentic selves' which are based on a sense of personal autonomy, the latter often being described in terms of individuality or personality. Alexandra's account may be seen as mirroring this distinction where she gives, on one hand, an account of 'who I am', and on the other, an account of the way in which her subjective sense of herself is shaped by her sexuality (as something which demarcates her as different). This may be something that has been evidenced throughout this chapter so far, where others, whilst describing themselves as 'complex', also echo the tension that that was held in, in relation to their sexuality:

**David:** *It doesn't make me who I am...I try not to make my sexuality who I am.*

**Edmund:** *Is there any particular reason for doing that?*

**David:** *Yeah, because I don't want people to see me as the gay guy I want them to see me as David or Dave whatever.*

**David, 20**

Evidenced in Alexandra's quote is recognition of the way that sexual categories and experiences of 'being' lesbian or gay shaped her sense of self. She states that her sexuality is '*definitely a huge factor in part of my identity, it's something I am very aware of and I'm proud of it*'. In this respect she echoes others who claim difference based on sexual identity. On the other hand she constructs herself as being 'more' than her sexuality, she states '*it's sort of who I am more fluidly, it's just another part of who I am*'. These different approaches to understanding self had implications for sameness and difference as Liam, for example, simultaneously constructed himself in terms of difference, shaped by different categories ('*straight, bisexual, transgender, anything*'), and at the same time in terms of sameness ('*I'm another human person that has my sexuality*'). As such, he sees himself as belonging, and wanting to be recognised as belonging, to a particular group, as a gay man, and a wider group, humanity, which did not separate him from straight people. This may be seen as two separate ways of organizing identity, in terms of identity groupings, and one which moves beyond identity (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

One argument may be that, instead of seeing self in terms of one or the other – as either shaped through various intersections, the 'reigning feminist metaphor for complex identities' (Meyers, 2004: 16), or in terms of a sense of individuality – selves may be seen as relational, as an 'ongoing' symbolic reflexive process (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 123). This would include but the various intersections through which people claim identities but would understand self in a more complex, fluid way. For the young lesbians and gay men interviewed, 'being' lesbian or gay was not typically seen in terms of a 'core' or 'essential' identity. Instead it was seen as an aspect of who they were; not always the most significant aspect, but sometimes quite significant. However, even where it was, they frequently maintained that a sense of irreducibility, where self was not so easily defined in terms of identity categories (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 122). However there may be a tension between the two (intersectional identities and authentic identities). Going back to the initial discussion had about ascribed and achieved identities, sexual identities, as Andy had pointed out on page 117, were sometimes seen as more of a concern for other people – '*I think it's what other people see.*' Whilst claiming a complex selfhood might be something the interviewees hoped to

achieve, quite often there was a feeling, as stated, that they would seen, by others, in more reductive terms.

A common concern was not to be seen as ‘the gay one’, a phrase used by several of the young gay men interviewed:

*I don't want to be stereotyped as 'the gay one'. I mean, I hope people don't just see me as a gay person, I hope they put my qualities and just myself as a person before that.* **William, 20**

This relational character of identity is perhaps fundamental to understanding the ways in which self was negotiated, as seen in the data above. The claiming of complex selves, as persons (the two I would suggest are one and the same (Jenkins, 2008: 50)), might be seen as in constant tension with the ascription of sexuality as a central characteristic. This also connects to the homogenizing and totalizing observed where sexuality was imposed as central. These connect broadly to notions of sameness and difference as well, with sexual identities being, in terms of straight and lesbian/gay, markers of difference (although they are also markers of similarity within the categories). Claims to complex selves, on the other hand, were often framed in terms of sameness. Everyone was an individual, and thus no different as a result of that. The complex processes by which the young people interviewed for this project came to understand themselves might be seen in terms of a negotiation between these antinomies. Whilst many claimed that sexuality was not significant, it might be countered that sexuality was, where it shaped the kinds of discussions they had with themselves, as well as their relationships with others. This is apparent in the tensions expressed over ascribed meanings.

However, at the same time, sexuality was not all of who they were, nor were they reducible to any category, where self, as Jackson and Scott (2010a: 122) observe, is ‘not reducible to any identity’. This was felt by my participants to be something important, and something many expressed throughout their interviews. They typically wished to be seen in more complex ways, and foremost, as persons. It may be suggested that to reduce them to sexuality is to deny them that (Richardson and May, 1999). This echoes Drivers’ (2008) point discussed at the

beginning of the chapter. This is a point that has been addressed throughout this section, where it has sought to look at the ‘significance’ of sexual identities. The following section of this chapter continues this discussion. Whereas this section has discussed the reflexive processes by which the interviewees constructed who they felt themselves to ‘be’, the following section asks what the implications of this understanding of sexuality is for the way in which identities are ‘done’. As such it looks more towards the ‘performative manifestations of self-reflexivity’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 141).

### **Talking About Identity: Sexuality and the Politics of Recognition**

The first section of this chapter addressed the significance the young lesbians and gay men interviewed attached to their sexual identities in the construction of self. In this section of the chapter the ‘doing’ of sexual identities is explored. The construction of self as complex, of which sexuality was perceived to be a part, raises questions about the way in which they performed their sexual identities. To use Holliday’s (1999: 487) terms, how was the ‘expression’ of self shaped by the ‘explanations’ of self given above? How was identity externalised as a result of those inward constructions of self? These questions are addressed here because the ‘inner process of reflexive self-construction’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 123) discussed above is related to the performance of those sexual selves, asking, in this instance, how was identity articulated? The first part of this section addresses the disclosure of sexual identities, addressing how sexuality identities were made known to others. The following section addresses what Richardson (2004: 403) sees as the ‘emergence’ of a new story of sexual identity, one of the ‘normal lesbian/gay’.

#### *1) Disclosing Lesbian and Gay Identities*

D’Emilio (1983, cited in Herdt, 1989: 14) once stated that ‘to come out of the ‘closet’ quintessentially expressed the fusion of the personal and the political that the radicalism of the late 1960s exalted’. Herdt (1989: 14) thought this would seem unrecognisable to the young lesbians and gay men of the US in the mid to late eighties, void of radical politics. How would it seem to young lesbian and gay people growing up under New Labour’s political agenda, as well as the

normalising politics of a professionalised gay civil rights movement (Stychin, 2003; Epstein *et al.*, 2004; Weeks, 2004; Richardson, 2004, 2005)? In D'Emilio's (1983, cited in Herdt, 1989: 14) terms, what 'fusion of the personal and the political' awaited them? In this section the articulation of lesbian and gay identities is addressed through exploring acts of disclosure. The way in which identities are said to be disclosed by my participants revealed a great deal about their approach to being recognised as lesbian or gay.

Towards the end of the previous section on page 132, Alexandra made a particular claim where she stated that her sexuality was '*not the key thing. It wouldn't be something that I would introduce myself as, like 'I'm Alexandra and I'm gay'*'. She followed this up by saying this about how she would disclose her identity to others:

*I wouldn't make an effort it's just it very usually comes up, like 'how old are you?' and, you know, 'are you single?' at which point that's my trigger.* **Alexandra, 19**

What was telling about participants responses to being asked about the centrality of their sexual identities was the regularity with which they stated that it was not something that they would introduce themselves as. In this respect, Alexandra's response is typical. Sexuality instead was often seen as something that would come up in conversation, particularly when talking about relationships. This mirrored a finding of Seidman's (2002: 79), who found that for one eighteen year old black lesbian he interviewed, coming out was 'not about making some kind of political statement but about accepting who you are'; this 'acceptance' being about articulating to others something that was considered to be of personal significance. This personal significance having being made sense of in the data discussed in chapter four of this thesis. Here Alexandra declares her sexuality implicitly – '*it's just it very usually comes up... you know, 'are you single?' at which point that's my trigger*'. Rather than come out unprompted, she does so when a good moment comes along in which to drop it in.

Of course this might be something which changes dependent on who she is talking to as, for example, Alexandra's coming out to her parents and school friends was

different, compelled by an expectation that she should explain due to lesbian and gay identities not being ‘assumed’. This is particularly true of schools where many of the participants initially came out (Hillier *et al.*, 1999). The feeling of being ‘compelled’ to tell was reflected on by Mike, who, whilst not seeing his sexuality as where he felt more comfortable with people knowing:

*I think other people knowing I am gay makes me more comfortable, like if you are introduced to a group of new people then you wanna like, I want them to know I am gay but I don't want to be like 'hi I am Mike, I am gay' so I will, I try and slip it in not too long after I have met them.*

**Mike, 20**

This might be understood in terms of the contradictions and tensions the young people interviewed typically felt about their sexual identities. Whilst many saw sexuality as, in Appiah’s (2005: 110) terms, a ‘personal dimension of the self’, it remained an important thing to articulate as it was considered in terms of a personal ‘truth’. It was often seen, as discussed in chapter four, as a way of naming personal desires, as well as giving an indication as to the ways in which they wished to live their lives where intimate relationships were concerned (this is discussed in the following chapter). One consequence of this, as recognised at the beginning of this chapter, was the totalizing effect of this same identity. Although Mike states that he feels he would like to let people know, he did not want to say it in such a way as to imply it was the most significant aspect about him. Thus Mike says ‘*I don't want to be like 'hi I am Mike, I am gay'*’.

This particular phrasing was a common way through which the young people interviewed made this point; nearly half of the participants repeated the same statement as Mike, refusing to introduce themselves in terms of their sexuality. This was the case where it was thought that to introduce oneself in terms of sexuality would be to construct oneself wholly in terms of sexuality, as Ben suggests:

*I don't like to be labelled as a gay person when you introduce yourself. I have been introduced to somebody 'oh hi this is Ben, he's gay' and it's a bit offensive, like there's so many things you can say before you say he's gay and I was like 'no I am Ben, not gay'.*

**Ben, 20**

This may be understood in terms of the internal and external components of self and identity delineated in the literature review, and highlighted throughout this chapter. Whilst participants sought to claim a more ‘authentic’ sense of self, this was intersected by external definitions of sexual identity; these often described as something to be negotiated. Herdt (1989) has previously discussed what he termed an ‘assumption of homogeneity’; in part the frequent allusions to an authentic sense of self in phrases such as ‘*no I am Ben, not gay*’, may be seen as an implicit recognition of this. Ben goes on to explain how he normally would come out, echoing Alexandra and Mike in seeing it as not something one did straight away, but instead waited for the right moment. In this case it was tactical, done at the right time so as to ensure the other person had a chance to get to know them first:

*People used to think they could spot the gays...now they have to get to know you...before figuring out your sexuality...you can have a bunch of normal conversations generally that anyone else would have and by the time they've found out you are gay you've already broke the ice...before they actually judge you as being gay...once they've realised you're a nice person and once they've realised you are gay after that they will treat you a lot better 'cos they've known you before realising, rather than saying 'he's gay'... 'cos I imagine people used to know you were gay before they knew you.*

**Ben, 20**

In the previous section notions of gender transformation were discussed, where a small number of participants described a sense that the boundaries between straight and lesbian/gay people were being blurred. This was particularly the case where lesbian and gay identities were seen as no longer closely tied to particular gender performances (Richardson, 2007). For Ben this was of particular significance since lesbian and gay people were considered no longer visible or able to be read as lesbian or gay from how they looked. Thus Ben states that you can no longer ‘*spot the gays*’, providing a chance for him to have ‘*a bunch of normal conversations*’ with others before coming out to them. This might be understood as the management of expectation, Ben trying to show that he was capable of having a normal conversation with the heterosexual people, notably heterosexual young men, with whom he often spent a lot of time.

Ben’s approach to disclosing his sexuality is shaped by how he perceived others to view him. Arguably, within this act there is an implicit recognition of the

stigmatization and ‘othering’ of lesbian and gay people, which Ben may be seen as resisting. Goffman (1990 [1963]: 12) has described the person with a stigma as ‘reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person, to a tainted discounted one.’ In part, Ben may be seen as suggesting in his account that to be known as gay before meeting someone, allows them to create an opinion before getting to person which might not be quite the same judgements that would be made had people got to know them as a person. This having potential negative consequences, where Ben states *‘once they’ve realised you’re a nice person and once they’ve realised you are gay after that they will treat you a lot better’*. Ben’s experiences may not suggest an outright stigmatization, however it certainly speaks to a particular anxiety that stigmatization is possible. Something articulated frequently as part of the everyday (anticipated) heterosexism the young lesbians and gay men experienced, as they were coming out in a largely heterosexual world (Flowers and Bouston, 2001).

Nack (2000: 118) has described, in interactionist terms, the strategies that women with chronic sexually transmitted diseases use in order to construct an ‘untainted’ sense of self, suggesting that:

‘When the distasteful or spoiled self can be contained to the private sphere (such as the sex life), the I uses stigma management strategies that protect the core self from the spoiled part of the self. To accomplish this, the I authors a peripheral narrative about the deviant aspect of the Me. Disclosures are the telling of this peripheral narrative. This type of narrative is, yet fails to contaminate, the core narrative’.

This ‘impression management’ might be central to the young lesbian and gay people’s construction of their sexual identities as ‘peripheral’, and also, arguably, ‘private’. The interviewees in this project typically sought to downplay the significance of their sexuality. Sometimes this was described in a way, as by Ben, that implied the negotiation of what might be described as a ‘tainted’ identity. Although this is not to imply any form of deviance, in some cases this may just have been a management of difference, however a difference that had, as Ben implies, potential negative consequences. This highlights the continued salience of the notion of stigma already raised, and a sense that lesbian or gay identities

remained potentially discrediting, as observed in other research (Kaufman and Johnson, 2004).

The emphasis on ‘normal’ in Ben’s quote (in reference to the conversations that could be held) echoed the sense of ‘ordinariness’ or ‘averageness’ raised in the first section of this chapter. Seidman (2004: 259) has discussed the interconnections of ‘normalization’ and the ‘routinization’ of lesbian and gay identities in instances when those identities are constructed as a ‘normal’ aspect of lesbian and gay people’s everyday lives, and interwoven as such. This corresponds to a definition of ‘interpersonal routinization’ given by Seidman *et al.* (1999: 11), which they use to refer to the ‘informal ways individuals integrate homosexuality into their conventional social lives’. It may be argued that much of the data presented so far represents what Seidman (2004) sees as the ‘normalization’ and ‘routinization’ of lesbian and gay identities. The interviewees typically constructed their sexual identities as ‘just another’ aspect of who they were, although an important aspect which needed to be articulated. This was often done, however, in a way which did not appear to be making a statement, as Louise argues, she does not want to shout it out:

**Edmund:** *What would stop you from telling someone that you were a lesbian?*  
**Louise:** *Just because if it wasn’t relevant really. I mean if someone asked me if I’ve got a boyfriend or something like that I would say ‘well no, I’m gay, so I ain’t got a boyfriend.’ But like, I don’t think it’s that important to just scream and shout ‘I’m gay, I’m gay, I’m gay’, ‘cos it’s not necessary, it doesn’t make you different so it’s not, I mean a straight person wouldn’t introduce herself as, like, ‘hi I’m Louise, I’m straight’, so why should a gay person go up to someone and say ‘hi, my name’s Louise, I’m gay.’ I don’t think it’s relevant.* **Louise, 19**

Louise highlights a number of paradoxes inherent in the construction of lesbian and gay identities evidenced throughout this chapter, particularly in terms of understandings of sameness and difference. Whilst many participants made claims to sameness, they often did so despite their sexuality. Thus they at once constructed themselves as being the same, where they considered themselves to be equally complex, but different where they were positioned as other to an institutionalised heterosexuality. Heterosexuality continued to be seen as the ‘norm’ (Seidman, 2009; Jackson and Scott, 2010a), even where they considered

themselves to be no different. As such, whilst their lesbian and gay sexuality was often downplayed in the significance attributed to it, it continued to shape their lives whilst they remained positioned as different, this difference requiring explaining. This ‘othering’ might be seen as reasserting the coherence of heterosexuality, as the expected form of sexuality (Richardson, 2004), a paradox might be indicated by Louise’s claim that *‘a straight person wouldn’t introduce herself as, like, ‘hi I’m Louise, I’m straight’*. Although Louise suggests she should not have to explain her sexuality, there is an implicit recognition that she does.

However, Louise does suggest that rather than being universally out (suggesting the continuation of the significance of the ‘closet’ (Seidman, 2004)) she picks and chooses who she comes out to, and only when she considers it to be relevant. In part this might be a resistance to a politics of having to make sexuality ‘public’, instead keeping it as something ‘private’ (Warner, 1999: 164). Louise thus rejects a need to be recognised by all, to be ‘visibly’ out to all she meets. Whilst this was not a dominant theme throughout the interviews, it did link into the kinds of ways that the interviewees described the disclosure of their sexual identities to others. Disclosure was often done in a way that highlighted the personal significance of sexual identity as opposed to the political significance of those identities. This challenge to having to come out was mirrored elsewhere. Nathan, for example, stated that he refused to make a point of coming out to people. In so doing he reflects on the limits of a politics of recognition, echoing Seidman’s (2004) understanding of recognition as not contesting the ‘closet’ or normative status of heterosexuality (see also (Gamson, 2002):

**Edmund:** *So do you think terms like gay and lesbian are important these days?*  
**Nathan:** *Not really, when I go to work, listen, I don’t label meself, I wouldn’t say ‘I’m Nathan, I’m gay’. Like would someone say ‘Hi I’m Nathan, I’m straight’. I don’t think so. So why should I have to say ‘oh I’m gay’. If someone asked us I would openly say ‘oh yeah, uh huh’ but if they don’t think I am, that’s it, I’m not bothered.* **Nathan, 21**

For Nathan, coming out to people as gay allows heterosexuality to be taken-for-granted. Instead of being an act that destabilises an institutionalised heterosexuality, coming out is one that implicitly recognises and reinforces its normative status. Thus Nathan, in a range of circumstances, refuses to ‘come out’,

although he may deny that he was in the closet as he was out to himself and would confirm it to others were they to ask. In doing so Nathan raises questions about normative heterosexuality where he refuses to respond to the heterosexual assumption. He suggests that he, as a gay man, should not be made to make a point of his sexuality as straight people are not required to do so. Nathan therefore appears to refuse a politics of visibility where it does not necessarily translate into a shift in his status as other to his heterosexual peers. This was a minor resistance however and did not speak to a wider critique of heterosexuality. In this case, as with all others, there was no corresponding 'queer' critique of a politics of normalization (Seidman *et al.*, 1999; Seidman, 2001).

## 2) *New Stories and Social Change*

Gamson (1995) has addressed the 'queer dilemma' of identity movements, asking whether identity movements must 'self-destruct'. Underlining his argument is an assertion that identities, whilst creating a sense of unity or community, are also the focus of critique, and the 'impulse to destabilize' (Gamson, 1995: 390). Identity, in this sense, may be understood as at once a process of unification (creating a sense of 'fixed', shared identities) and separation, where what it means to belong to those categories is brought under constant scrutiny. This may be seen as evidenced throughout the data presented in this thesis where sexual identities were adopted to give an account of the self as sexual, in so doing affirming a sense of unity with other lesbians and gay men (Gamson, 1995: 391), whilst being continuously scrutinised and questioned. The young people interviewed for this project, although identifying as lesbian or gay, were also seeking to understand what that meant to them. This included many discussions of what that implied for their potential to belong within a wider heterosexual society; something within which the participants largely considered themselves to be both the same and different.

This had implications for what it meant to belong to a community of lesbian and gay people. Sameness was often asserted 'across the heterosexual/homosexual divide' (Richardson, 2004: 403), as opposed to only within the separate categories. In so doing, sexuality was often reduced in significance to a 'thread' or secondary

aspect of the self, rather than a totalizing identity (Seidman, 2002). Sameness within the categories of lesbian and gay were thus frequently called into question. This is evidenced most notably in the discussion of gender, and how gender is performed. An adjunct of this account of sexuality was a frequent focus on ‘desire’ as opposed to gender performance, which historically has often been associated with lesbian and gay sexuality (Richardson, 2007). This construction of self echoes what Richardson (2004: 403) has described as a ‘new story’ of sexuality, that of the ‘normal’ lesbian and gay person. This normalcy has been both implicit and explicit in much of the data where claims to sameness (with heterosexuals) have sometimes been couched in terms of being ‘ordinary’, ‘average’, or ‘the same’ as everyone else, regardless of sexuality, these accounts often implying a sense of the mundane and everyday. Steve, for example, echoes some dichotomies evidenced throughout the data, namely the desire to be known to be gay, and at the same time to be perceived to be no different in how he lives his life:

**Edmund:** *Do you feel it is important for you that people recognise you as being gay?*

**Steve:** *Yeah I mean I can't emphasise enough that yes it is. I think it is important that I'm very, I'm very mature about that as well...I think it is important that people see me as gay so that they can understand when they look at me living a normal life, I'm a student, I've got my career path lined up, you know I've got my own flat. They can see that, yeah I am gay but I can do just as much as anybody else.*

**Steve, 21**

Richardson (2004: 403) describes this new story of the ‘normal lesbian/gay’ as producing ‘new forms of social cohesion’. It also causes trouble ‘through creating new social, economic and moral divisions: between lesbians and gay men, between heterosexuals and across the heterosexual/homosexual divide’. Steve’s emphasis on the normalcy of his life might be seen as calling up certain aspects of this new story. His focus on his ‘career path’ and his reminder that he is a student with his own flat echoes Seidman’s (2005: 45) description of the ‘normal gay’ as personifying ‘economic individualism’. His emphasis on being mature also echoes the sense of integrity discussed by Seidman (2005: 45), and the extent to which Steve could uphold that integrity through being mature, in so doing demonstrating his capacity to be ‘normal’.

This discussion of the ‘normal’ gay, as well as the distinction between the ‘good gay/bad gay’ has been delineated well enough elsewhere (Seidman, 2001, 2002, 2005; Richardson, 2004, 2005). As such, I do not want to explore the ‘ins and outs’ of a ‘politics of ‘normalization’. Rather, it is interesting to reflect on the ways in which sexual selves are constructed by young lesbians and gay men growing up and coming out within such a politics. This might be taken as one of the main reasons for doing the research. One significant theme running throughout this chapter has been the framing of sexuality as a component of self, and the subsequent diminishing of its significance. Indeed, what might be observed in this chapter is the extent to which this new story of sexuality shaped the young people’s understandings of themselves, as well as their potentials for living their lives as they were becoming adults (a theme carried on in the subsequent chapter). One significant aspect of this, it might be suggested, was this reduction in the significance of sexuality, or lesbian and gay sexuality at least (Seidman, 2002: 12), the extent to which sexuality was seen as a ‘personal dimension of the self’ (Appiah, 2005: 110) having implications for understandings of sameness and difference, and the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

This is significant where the young lesbians and gay men interviewed for this project may be seen as coming out and growing up at a particular historical moment when it appears that this story is becoming increasingly significant (Richardson, 2004; Seidman, 2005). This sense of change was something that the interviewees were aware of. Many saw themselves as living through change, and that this change had implications for the ways in which they understood themselves (sometimes seen as having positive implications). This was most notable when they talked about gender, and how identities could be enacted, as discussed previously. In the following quote, Matt reflects on the continued significance of sexual labels (and consequently lesbian and gay identities as a whole), likening changing attitudes towards lesbian and gay people to black emancipation:

**Edmund:** *Do you think labels such as lesbian and gay are important nowadays?*

**Matt:** *I think it was only important before...because it was looked upon as quite a bad thing. And the more people are less prejudiced...the less important I think it will become. I don't know. It's good and bad. It's good in a way that's, you know...if you saw a black person, a long, long time ago when they were slaves, it would be like 'look at that scum.' Now you don't think anything, they are just normal...and that's important because they've got their freedom...But at the same time you don't want to lose where you come from...So, I think you can have a healthy balance of not making it really unimportant...but keeping a balance of remembering where you've come from and how people before you have got you to where you are and you've got to be grateful for that. At the same time you don't want to be like being gay is everything, 'cos at the end of the day it isn't important.*

**Matt, 17**

Matt's account illustrates an ongoing dialogue that emerged throughout the data, between the claiming of sexual identities and the negotiation of the significance of those identities. This is a dialogue that has been reflected on throughout this chapter. In a similar vein to the discussions had with the young people interviewed for this research, Savin-Williams (2005) has signalled the beginning of a 'post-identity' era, in which lesbian and gay identities are becoming less significant. Savin-Williams, paradoxically, describes the emergence of the 'new gay teenager', or, as he states, 'in many respects the *non-gay* teenager' (Savin-Williams, 2005: 1). Mirroring Bech's (2003, 2007) argument about the 'disappearance of the homosexual', Savin-Williams suggests that this is a generation of young lesbian and gay people 'increasingly redefining, reinterpreting, and renegotiating their sexuality such that possessing a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity is practically meaningless' (Savin-Williams, 2005: 1). This Savin-Williams sees as a group of young people 'simply enjoying the fullness of their lives' (Savin-William, 2005: 6). Although the rejection of lesbian and gay identities is not paralleled in this research, the questioning of those identities was, particularly with regards to giving a 'fuller' account of self, as complex. This was, for the participants in the research, potentially important in order to reject an 'assumption of homogeneity' (Herdt, 1989), the belief that lesbian and gay people are all the same, with no sense of identity beyond their sexuality.

Thus Matt states '*you don't want to be like being gay is everything*', this possibly echoing a number of points raised throughout this chapter. His allusion to slavery and the gradual emancipation of black slaves might be taken in a particular way. Slaves were recognised by others, as Matt states, as 'scum', this reflects the

ascribed construction of identity discussed earlier in the chapter. The granting of freedom is associated, by Matt, with changing attitudes towards black people, where now '*they are just normal*'. This might be implicit in how he understands lesbian and gay identities as having changed; sexuality '*isn't important*' where it does not *have to be* made important. Sexuality, as such, may be seen as important where other people have made it so, where lesbian and gay people have been discriminated against. This echoing the 'negative centrality' described by Appiah (2005: 108):

'One way the stigmatized have responded [to stigmatization] has been to uphold these collective identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as a central and valuable part of who they are.'

Thus Matt states, '*the more people are less prejudiced...the less important I think it will become.*' Whilst Matt is responding to a question about labels, it would seem his response is more concerned with the importance of sexual identities, than the categories used to name them.

However, for Matt prejudice is an important aspect in the construction of a lesbian and gay history, which is consequently a significant aspect of the construction of those very identities (Plummer, 1995: 87). Here he refers obliquely to the past, alluding to past struggles which '*have got you to where you are*'. Again, this is an abstracted past, as opposed to a clear history of the lesbian and gay movement. Lesbian and gay history becoming generalised within a narrative of change, where previously things had been different, most often described in negative terms of prejudice. This is the significance of the past for his present, and the continued significance of a shared sense of identity to his life. This links back to an ongoing reflexive negotiation which many of the young people were engaged in, in trying to assess the significance of their sexual identifications. Matt's account illustrates the temporal aspect of many of those negotiations, where many were engaged in interpreting the past in making sense of their present, and the significance of a wider lesbian and gay history to their understandings of their sexual selves. The question of significance in this respect is not easily answered as it involves many components, including how things were changing, and what they had changed from.

This understanding of discrimination was, however, often thought of as ongoing. Questions of equality tended to be responded to, by all participants, in terms of an ongoing struggle, in making lesbians and gay people equal. This including a frequent recognition of discrimination as commonplace:

*The amount of heckles...abuse that you get from like idiots that are just ignorant against it, a lot of name calling...Like the derogatory names that you get called, there is no need for it because we don't go round calling people it because they are straight. It's just something that you shouldn't have to go through to be yourself. But until it is equal, and we are all normal then I think it's something that you've just got to fight against.* **Anna, 19**

Equality was often understood in terms of normality, as well as the achievement of basic rights such as not being abused in the street. This was considered an end point in its self, however. The achieving of equality and 'normality' was often the desired goal, as opposed to a questioning of the organization of sexuality in society. This is something Seidman (2009: 26) has addressed recently, stating that attempts of those arguing for a more radical reconstruction of understandings of sexuality are 'frustrated' by 'a political culture that understands change as achieving first-class citizenship status'. The understanding of equality that was typically offered by the participants is reflected in Anna's account. The data appeared to suggest that to be considered equal was to be considered the same as, and be treated the same as, heterosexual people. The struggle then, as Anna sees it, may be one over the definition of 'normality', and to be considered 'normal'. This was the direction in which the participants seemed generally to be heading. One aspect of this 'normality', it has been argued, may be the decreased significance of sexual identity, 'becoming an identity thread rather than a core self-definition' (Richardson, 2004: 401). In part, what has been discussed in this chapter may reflect this process of change, with the young people coming to understand themselves in terms of a particular politics of normalization, a politics which has consequences for the way in which sexual identities are framed.

## **Conclusion**

The main research question responded to in this chapter asked after the significance of sexual identities in the construction of self. In reflecting on the

meanings attributed to those identities seen to be adopted in chapter four, this chapter has sought primarily to illuminate the reflexive process by which sexual selves were constructed by the young people interviewed for this project. In addressing the significance of sexuality in the construction of self, it has asked how sexual the young people interviewed saw themselves to be. In part, the main body of data discussed in this chapter was generated through a single question, '*how central is your sexuality to how you see yourself?*' This chapter has reflected on the responses given to this question in which the interviewees sought to actively construct themselves as sexual, and in what way. Whilst not seeking to generalize beyond the data, the responses given echoed a number of trends that have been described elsewhere, particularly with regards to the changing construction of lesbians and gay men (Richardson, 2004; Seidman, 2005). This change being one in which the young lesbians and gay men interviewed were growing up, one that may be seen as significantly shaping the subject positions that the interviewees took up.

The ways they described self as sexual revealed the potentials that they had to construct themselves in multiple, complex ways, self being sexual whilst simultaneously irreducible to sexuality. This had implications for understanding the ways in which the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality were shaped, where sameness was often framed across this 'divide', whilst difference was often emphasised within categories. The relational nature of self was seen to be the source of a number of tensions, however. Particularly with regards to who got to define sexual identities, something seen in this thesis as ongoing in interaction. During the interviews, participants frequently alluded to the ways that their own understandings of their sexual identities conflicted with other people's understandings. The ways in which they constructed themselves was often done then in relation to these external definitions, perhaps compelled as a way of rejecting them. Despite the increasing 'normalization' of lesbian and gay sexualities (Seidman, 2009), these tensions point to the continued presence of heterosexuality as a 'norm' (Jackson and Scott, 2010a), against which the interviewees were positioned.

The question of significance, then, does not suggest any intrinsic truth about sexual selves, as if self were a structure, and not a process, which is as this thesis understands self (Jackson and Scott, 2010). The ongoing dialogue between ascribed and achieved understandings of identity, as well as in the reflexive processes through which self was constructed, meaning that the significance attributed to sexuality was not fixed but an ongoing reflexive dialogue. Of course, the notion of significance is not a singular one. Lesbian and gay identities may be seen as significant in many ways, chapter four for example delineated the particular importance of those same categories in naming personal desires when constructing the self as sexual. This chapter has focused more so on understandings of sameness and difference, and the relational nature of identity, with the young people interviewed being compelled to think of themselves within a wider heterosexual society. The following chapter addresses the significance of sexuality in shaping lives, and in the ways that lives were made sense of. The notion of sexual stories is brought to the fore in the following chapter, where it examines the stories through which the young people's sexual lives were rendered intelligible. The first section explores the construction of a bodily past, looking at the adoption of science in narrating the development of the participants' sexual 'being'. The second addresses the narration of adulthood, taking into account the interviewees' 'imagined adulthoods' or invented adulthoods (Henderson *et al.*, 2007).

## Chapter 6 – Life Stories: Telling Sexual Origins and Intimate Futures

### Introduction

Plummer (1995: 172) has suggested that people ‘tell sexual stories to assemble a sense of self and identity’. Sexual stories, Plummer (1995: 173) states, ‘provide a history...and a motive for the future...where sexual stories weave together past, present and future into an identity.’ In this respect, the telling of sexual stories bring together present sexual identifications with memories of the past, constructions of the past, and ideas and expectations about the future. These stories are also, as Plummer (1995: 20) explains, symbolic interactions, they are part of the ways in which ‘we are able to reflect upon ourselves and others’, stories being told as part of the way in which we makes sense of ourselves, as well as our pasts, presents and futures. This notion of sexual story telling is central to this chapter as it explores stories that get told about sexual lives, stories that give selves and identities a coherent past and a future.

This chapter is concerned with two specific types of story, the first addressing stories of sexual aetiology, which understand sexuality, in developmental terms, as having a history, the second intimate futures. The first picks up a theme which has a long history in the understanding of lesbian and gay identities, primarily that of science and aetiology (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 99). This section addresses the use of scientific, essentialist explanation as a ‘legitimation’ strategy, seeing those as part of the creative worlds in which sexual lives, notably individual sexual histories, are made sense of. Scientific explanations have once again become increasingly prevalent in recent years in shaping understandings of the aetiology of ‘homosexuality’ (Gottschalk, 2003a). This may be understood as a way of framing the past in terms of individual physiological and sexual development. The second section of this chapter explores what Henderson *et al.* (2007: 15) have described as ‘imagined’ or ‘invented’ futures, these being accounts through which young people project themselves into, and actively construct, their adult lives. Whilst Henderson *et al.* (2007) use Giddens’ (1991) ‘reflexive project of the self’

as a conceptual framework in order to understand the narration of the future, this narration is understood in this chapter as a symbolic interaction, as a sexual story.

### **Sexual Origins: Science and the ‘Aetiology’ of Lesbian and Gay Sexuality**

In chapter four, the ways that the young people interviewed constructed their sexual selves were explored. As part of this, the notion of embodiment was raised, where the ‘eroticizing’ of desire, and the ‘doing’ of sexual interaction, was considered to be embodied (Tolman, 2002: 14). In this section, the stories that were told in making sense of this embodied understanding of sexuality are addressed, where that embodied understanding looked to ways that the participants explained *why* they considered themselves to be lesbian or gay. This is something that was most frequently done with recourse to the body. This section looks at how the interviewees ‘pieced together’ (Thomson and Scott, 1991) different essentialist explanations as to what made people lesbian or gay. This process of story telling is seen as part of the symbolic ways the young interviewees made sense of themselves as sexual. The particular stories explored mirror enduring ways of explaining homosexuality as biological or psychological (Richardson, 1981; Stein, 2001), whereby participants framed the development of their sexualities in essentialist terms. The explanations given were primarily scientific highlighting the sustained interest in the epistemic ‘origins’ and ‘causes’ of homosexuality, the authority of those discourses (Terry, 1999), and a continued focus on the body as the ‘source’ of sexual meaning (Vance, 1989).

Social constructionists have long rejected scientific explanations as having little explanatory value and for being pathologizing (McIntosh, 1968; Gagnon and Simon, 2005). This has often motivated social constructionist writers to ‘de-essentialize’ sexuality (Vance, 1989). Although these arguments are recognized, this following section is not written in order to offer a critique of essentialism. This has been discussed well enough elsewhere (Stein, 1994, 2001; Murphy, 1999; Brookey, 2000, 2002; McLaughlin, 2010), and is not the focus of this thesis. What is addressed here are the ways in which the interviewees made sense of identities they considered intuitively to be true, not just ‘make believe’ (Gagnon, 1987: 123), and to a degree embodied. The explanations reached for say a great deal about the ways that gay and lesbian identities are made sense of in contemporary

Western societies (Gottschalk, 2003a). The latter part of this section further considers this discussion, where it addresses the apparent need for the young lesbians and gay men interviewed to have an explanation for their sexual identifications

### *1) Science Fictions as Symbolic Interactions*

Weeks (1999: 46) has described lesbian and gay identities as ‘fictions, individual and collective narratives which we invent to make sense of new circumstances and new possibilities’. Here the issue of ‘scientific’ explanation is seen as bound up in this metaphor of storytelling, being part of the way in which sexual lives are made sense of through the telling of sexual stories. In fifteen of the interviews<sup>7</sup>, interviewees were asked as to why they thought people were lesbian or gay (the question was not turned around on heterosexuality, which remains invisible in the following stories). Responses were diverse; bringing together a range of different explanations from genetic and hormonal accounts, to psychological and sexual learning explanations, through to what Epstein (1998 [1987]: 135) has previously termed ‘folk’ constructionism, this ‘constructionism’ being an assumption that society, not the body, makes someone lesbian or gay. These different accounts, and their blending together, might best be described as a ‘bricolage’. They are discussed here as on a continuum, where responses were not easily separated into different categories, instead being seen as more-or-less essentialist (Fuss, 1989). Several passages from the data used in the following section are intentionally given in a fuller form. This is in order to give a greater sense of the deliberation each participant had over these different approaches.

The following quote from Steve evidences the typical range of understandings addressed, and ways in which they were evaluated and woven together in order to give a story of why people became lesbian or gay:

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<sup>7</sup> The question was added to the interview guide after the first interview with Tom, in the other three the question was not raised as those interviewees placed emphasis on other issues, warranting a more concentrated focus on those areas.

**Edmund:** *What do you think makes people gay?*

**Steve:** *I've thought long and hard about this one and on many occasions in the past. In all honesty, I don't know...It just happens, it could be hormonal; it could be genetic...part of the socialisation process...there could be a Freudian explanation...Some of the top professors worldwide have tried to explain it. I've heard some ludicrous suggestions like 'there is an extra Y chromosome lurking around in there'... 'you've lacked a father figure', 'you're always tied to your mothers' apron strings'...I think it's just something that occurred hormonally at a very young age and I suppose it develops from there. 'Cos if I look back, my first experience with another male was when I was six, with a male of the same age...and that has influenced a lot of the feelings I have of members of the male sex.*

**Steve, 21**

Despite his objections to scientific accounts of lesbian and gay sexuality, Gagnon (1987: 123) has argued that for many lesbians and gay men, social constructionist understandings of sexuality 'often does not meet with the felt experience of the actors'. For Gagnon (1987: 123), the belief that something 'more important must be going on than make-believe' is understandable, particularly where he takes into account the 'cost' of living a lesbian or gay life. This is something that was echoed in the data, suggesting a degree of continuity. Nearly all of the fifteen respondents provided some kind of essentialist, bodily account of sexuality. Sexuality was often understood as emerging over time, frequently from the body. This, also, may be a consequence of a recent resurgence in accounts of homosexual aetiology (Gottschalk, 2003a). Two things are argued here to be going on in these accounts. Firstly, the making sense of the 'embodied' aspects of sexuality is being accounted for, whether that is the embodied pleasures and sexual interactions, or intrapsychic desires and feelings discussed in chapter four. Secondly, there is the weaving together of those interactions and desires into a wider story of a sexual life, of which 'emotional memories of sexual pleasure' (Nack, 2000: 96) are a significant aspect. These were thus symbolic stories of 'becoming'. They offered accounts of how the young lesbians and gay men interviewed for this project thought they had 'become' lesbian or gay. These were also serious endeavours, as Gagnon (1987) had noted. Steve, for example, stated that these were issues he had '*thought long and hard about this one and on many occasions in the past.*'

Steve's account provides a useful introduction to the significance of scientific explanation, in that he illuminates the 'quest' for an understanding of sexuality and desire, as rooted 'in an unchanging or unchangeable biology or early

experience' (Gagnon, 1987: 123). The end of Steve's account, for instance, finishes with what he believes to be his first sexual experience, as well as how he perceives himself to 'feel' for other men. The argument that is developed in this chapter is that the understandings of desire discussed in chapter four is made sense of through the use of science, notably biological and psychological accounts. It could be argued that Steve's comment that '*Some of the top professors worldwide have tried to explain it*' may not be a reference to professors of social science, as he immediately starts talking about chromosomes and hormones, hormonal explanations being his preferred ones. Psychoanalytic accounts are present too, '*there could be a Freudian explanation*'. Steve is typical where the range of explanations brought up were mostly 'essentialist' (Stein, 2001), even though each scientific approach is called into question (which was also typical of several responses). This use of socialization may imply a more 'social' explanation of homosexuality (Epstein, 1998 [1987]), although this only emphasises the 'more-or-less' essentialist nature of these stories.

Steve here echoes a number of stories given by the participants where he talks in terms of genetics, although he rejects the '*extra Y chromosome*' argument. This 'geneticism' is perhaps unsurprising given the recent (re)geneticization of sexual theory (Weeks, 2005) since attempts to 'find' the 'gay gene' (Hamer and Copeland, 1994). Genetics was a notable theme, being frequently mentioned because it carried considerable authority:

*It's something to do with that Y and X chromosomes; you've got more than you should have of one or the other, something like that...its just evolution isn't it.*

**Nathan, 21**

There was a gendered dimension to the stories that were told which will become apparent as this section develops. Initially accounts of sexuality as a product of genes, hormones, and sexual brains are discussed, these weighing heavily on biological explanations. The discussion then shifts to stories emphasising the significance of social environments on the development of lesbian and gay identities. As the discussion progresses, the gendering of accounts should become evident, whilst the young lesbians were heavily concentrated at the more 'social' end of the spectrum, the young gay men accounting for all of the exclusively

genetic or hormonal accounts. These responses, in part, were a direct result of my question, which asked them why they thought people were gay. This was taken as referring exclusively to aetiology, rather than the 'social construction' of sexuality. The young men tended to responses that saw sexuality in more 'fixed' terms, the notion of being 'born that way' being raised in a small number of interviews, although this notion has been evidenced in lesbians accounts of sexual 'becoming' (Gottschalk, 2003a):

*I just see it as the way I was born and you can't really change who you are.*

**Jack, 21**

For these young gay men, sexuality was often considered to be something that had developed at birth, or at an early age. The following quote from Mike, whilst not expressing the same range of possible explanations offered by Steve, mirrors the authority attributed to scientific explanation, particularly those which are focused primarily on the body. Mike leans towards the same emphasis on hormones as Steve:

*I read a book recently about the difference between men and women's brains...I think there's a lot of gay people, in terms of typical masculine or feminine behaviour, are more towards the middle of the spectrum. So if it is just who you are attracted to that would make a bit of a difference...Personally I think being gay is more to do with hormones...sexual behaviour is programmed because it is an evolutionary thing...we've got sex hormones, we've got oestrogen, testosterone which seem to set male and female behaviour...I read in the news recently that it's decided in the womb, like how much hormone are active in the womb determines it in the end and that they've done experiments with rats where they injected them in-utero...if they've done certain hormones male rats would act like female rats, they would build a nest and stuff and could get female rats to act like a male rat, like be aggressive and stuff so I think it's a biological basis.*

**Mike, 20**

Reflecting the authority attached to scientific explanation, Mike references scientific research he has read about in books and newspapers. These he synthesises to create his own explanations. In this story told by Mike, sexuality is seen as hormonal, being set *in-utero*. He draws on the 'biological mechanisms' and hormonal regulations explored by writers such as, for instance, Hamer and Copeland (1994) in their work on the 'gay gene'. Here too, Mike accords experiments on rats a degree of symbolic significance, experiments which have

been used extensively by LeVay (1994) in his research on the ‘sexual brain’, in which he aimed to understand the biological basis of ‘sexual orientation’ in humans. The use of rats is something Stein (2001: 171) suggests is often taken as indicative of an objective scientific method, giving deeper understanding to human behaviours and identities, even where the application of such research is questionable.

There was a gender essentialism in Mike’s account that was shared by a small number of participants. These interviewees understood the development of gay and lesbian sexualities largely in terms of gender transformations (either gendered upbringings or biological changes). This may indicate the prior construction of gender when young people come to claim sexual identities, as discussed in both the literature review and chapter four, where gender is given analytic priority in making sense of sexuality. Mike, for instance, sees hormones as determining typically male and female traits. He extends this gender essentialism to sexuality. Lesbian and gay identities are seen as a product of changes in hormone levels resulting in a shift of lesbian and gay people to ‘the middle’ of the ‘gender spectrum’. Here sexuality is linked to gender in a way which gives gender ‘temporal priority’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 113). Mike sees sexual desire as developing out of a gendered body, with gay and lesbian sexuality being the result of transformations in the biological structures that gender people. In this story, understanding that the body is gendered shapes understandings of the body as sexual, particular in understanding *‘who you are attracted to’*. This mirrors a typical theme addressed in chapter four, where most participants understood desire as attraction to gendered others. As with Steve, Mike emphasises the significance of the body in understanding attraction.

One particular approach to gender was given by Kevin, who provided a different account from the other young men interviewed. Whilst Mike addressed the significance of gender in shaping sexuality, he did not adopt a model of ‘gender inversion’, something that, historically, has been accorded particular significance in the framing of lesbian and gay sexualities (Stein, 1994: 202). Kevin, on the other hand, does, where he describes the role of mothers and fathers in shaping their children’s future sexual identifications. As with many others, he echoes a

similar questioning of possible explanations, drawing initially on the notion of being born that way:

*Either you're just born that way or it's to do with the way that your parents raise you. Like I think that has quite a large impact on it...Like if you have a son and you don't teach him like, you don't do loads of sports with him and stuff or if you have a daughter and you push her into sports and kind of that. I suppose it depends which parent you're kind of closer to and how much of an impact they have on what you do with your life...from my experience and from looking at other people and talking to them and the way they've been brought up, it's the same in most stories...like with lads obviously if they are closer to their mam, or girls if they're closer to their dad then obviously it's a more masculine, a more feminine kind of impact on your life and you're more likely to, 'cos most people see their parents as role models and they'll act like them.*

**Kevin, 16**

Discussing the historical perceptions of lesbians and gay men, Richardson (2007: 467), citing Seidman (2002), has suggested that 'During the 1950s and 60s in the USA and Europe...gender served as the 'master code' of sexuality.' The product of this relationship between gender and sexuality was a view that "doing gender" served as a chief sign of one's sexuality...Thus gender nonconformity was taken as a sign of 'real' homosexuality' (Richardson, 2007: 467). Whilst some have attempted to show that gender-nonconformity is, in some cases, 'connected' to sexual orientation (e.g. Bem, 1996, 2001), the efficacy of the experiments through which linkages are shown has been questioned. This is particularly the case where it is suggested that current identifications shape interpretations of past behaviours (Stein, 2001; Gottschalk, 2003b). There was, however, a slight emphasis on gender non-conformity in the data, although the majority tended not to give such explanations, or alternatively questioned them. Steve, for example, had stated that he had '*heard some ludicrous suggestions... you've lacked a father figure*', '*you're always tied to your mothers' apron strings*'. A link to gendered upbringing is made explicit here by Kevin, who suggests an alternative explanation may be the impact of young people's relationships with their parents on their later sexual identities. He sees (different) masculine and feminine influences as things which shape the young persons non-heterosexual sexual development.

This is a shift from the previous focus on genetics and hormones where Kevin, whilst raising the notion of being 'born that way' articulated by several young gay

men, emphasises instead a gender essentialism which might be taken as having consequences for the subsequent development of sexuality. This story told by Kevin echoes some tropes characteristically told in such accounts, as evidenced in other studies (Gottschalk, 2003b), notably the emphasis on childhood gendered behaviour. Here Kevin mirrors a small number of participants who described the ‘doing’ of gender in terms of sports, with the inference that (non-)sporting masculinities or femininities might be indicative of sexuality, this being the belief that typically lesbians would be active in competitive sport, and gay men would not. This is characteristic of accounts of gender inversion (Stein, 2001: 234), and reflected elsewhere in the data, although, as stated, something that was potentially questioned:

*For...someone more feminine and less stereotypical in their appearance and the way that they present themselves, or even in their hobbies, you know I am sporty and that's a lesbian stereotype as well, I think they find it harder to say that they are gay because people just don't believe them because they, it doesn't tick with stereotypes.*

**Alexandra, 19**

*You know, I am not sporty but a lot of straight men, I mean you get straight men who aren't sporty as well. When I was talking to the nurse at the clinic yesterday and she said her nephew's not sporty and he is gay but she's got a friend who has got a son who is gay but he's a footballer.*

**Tom, 16**

From an interactionist perspective, the account offered by Kevin might be understood in terms of the ways in which sexual selves are made sense of in terms of gender. Gender, as echoed in Mike’s account as well, sometimes being given priority in understandings of sexuality. In Kevin’s story, the way in which masculinities and femininities are practiced and made meaningful is fundamental to how he understands how people eventually become sexual. This is the case where he sees lesbians as being more influenced by their father, and gay men by their mother. Something he perceives to be a common property of the stories told by young lesbians and gay men about the development of their sexual identities – *‘from my experience and from looking at other people and talking to them and the way they've been brought up, it's the same in most stories’*. Here, this might not be taken as indicative of ‘truth’, but as bound up in the ways in which sexual identifications shape, and are shaped, by gender and memories of gendered childhood (Stein, 2001: 240). Although, as shown in the quotes from Tom and

Alexandra, this is not necessarily something accepted wholly, instead being, at times, questioned and reinterpreted.

Whilst several of the young men provided accounts that leaned more firmly to biological explanations, some of the young lesbians described sexuality using what Stein (2001: 126) has called ‘indirect’ models of sexual orientation (although a small number of the gay men did as well). In these accounts, as Stein (2001: 126) sees it, biological factors predispose a person to same-sex attraction. However these need to interact with certain environmental factors for such attractions to be realized. These models contrast with what Stein (2001) calls ‘direct’ models of sexual orientation where genes, hormones and other biological properties directly shape sexuality and its expression. Indirect models are no less essentialist, however, where they see sexuality as, in some way, the product on an inner truth, however one which needs teasing out. Louise’s story is typical of this sort of model:

*I think it's biological but it can be developed through the social world as well. Like you could be born gay but you might just ignore the fact. But if you're in the right social circumstances, what happens to you when you're younger can bring out the gayness in you...the way you look at people sexually. But I also think the people you're around as well, if you are around a lot of gay people you're more likely to bring out the gayness in you. But I don't think you would turn gay if you were completely straight by hanging around gay people...if you've got the potential to be gay, you've got this gene that's in you, but if you're still naïve about gay communities, you're brought up to think it's wrong then you're not likely to come out. But if you've got that opportunity to be around gay people I think you're more likely to develop your sexuality in that area.* **Louise, 19**

As stated, the various stories told might be understood as on a continuum (Fuss, 1989). Stories ranged from the ‘more’ essential accounts of biology, to ones in which social factors shapes people’s sexualities, a form of ‘folk constructionism’ in Epstein’s (1998 [1987]: 135) view. Stein (1992: 330) sees this ‘constructionism’ as no less essentialist, however. One common trope Louise uses is that of the role of genes in shaping sexuality, something echoed in various stories. As such, the body continues to be central to Louise’s understanding of sexuality, where genes ‘predispose to homosexuality in some environments’ (Stein, 2001: 126). However, whereas many of the previous accounts sought to

understand sexuality in terms of the body, Louise also looks towards the significance of the social, echoing Kevin, whose account may be taken as framing the development of sexuality in terms of the gendered interactions. For Louise, the development of lesbian or gay sexualities may be facilitated by exposure to lesbian and gay people or same-sex behaviours. At points she echoes the ‘repressive hypothesis’ (Foucault, 1990 [1978]), where gay or lesbian sexuality may be prohibited through being denied access to a gay community or being brought up to believe homosexuality is wrong.

It might be worth asking at this point the extent to which the particulars of such accounts matter, i.e. whether one model was used in one account, or if another was preferred in another. The point here is not to assess the models that are being used, and how they are used, and the differences between them. These accounts had significant differences between them, but what draws these explanations together is more important for this project. These accounts were a bricolage, drawn together from different strands of scientific enquiry producing several divergent accounts of sexual development. Plummer (1995: 156) has addressed the changing stories of the body, asking whether there are ways of seeing the body as ‘not simply...bounded, ‘there’, ‘in us’ but something which resonates socially?’ It may be suggested that this is what these stories are, for many they were ways of understanding the body and the extent to which the body is sexual. The various stories described here cut across and intersect each other in providing an account of the development of sexuality, to which the body is a ‘central site of concern’ (Plummer, 1995).

The young people interviewed, in coming to make sense of themselves as sexual, drew on a variety of stories all of which were focused on the body. For instance, stories of the ‘mechanics’ (for want of a better word) of the body were given, describing their genetic and hormonal make-up; stories of masculinities, femininities and gendered interactions; stories of childhood, adolescence and family; stories of science and sport; stories of friendship and self-discovery. All of which were woven together, sometimes with a degree of contestation, in order to tell a wider story of the development of the self as sexual. Scientific explanation was granted considerable authority in doing so, indicating the continued priority

accorded to science in the framing of the development, or ‘aetiology’, of lesbian and gay sexualities (Terry, 1999). Of course, whether or not the need for these stories is the same for heterosexual people is questionable (Richardson, 2010).

One significant aspect of these stories, which is highlighted here, is their value in providing accounts of individual sexual pasts, in which the body is seen to have a developmental ‘story’ of its own. In this there is continuity with earlier understandings of lesbian and gay identities (Vance, 1989). Whilst many accounts, such as Mike’s, were abstracted to discussions of bodies and hormones, these were still framed in terms of sexual development, and an understanding of people ‘becoming’ sexual over time, either from birth or into adolescence. Andy, for example, discussed his understanding of the way in which sexuality developed, framing his account in a language of sex drives, orientations and attractions, issues which were discussed previously in chapter four:

*I think people either decide on an orientation once they reach puberty or they’ll be unsure. They’ll have like, have a sex drive and sexual attraction to people but not sure what the orientation is.*

**Andy, 16**

Other stories were less abstract though, being embedded in terms of personal experiences, and ‘lived’ histories. Samantha exemplifies this best, although she offers the same essentialist understanding of genetic predispositions:

*I think it is in your genetics...it’s like cancer, everyone’s got a little bit of it in them but it could take something...to bring it out into the open...I’ve been brought up for the past ten years with only a dad, I’ve been at boarding school and I’ve always ended up being with the guys more than the girls...I get on with all my male cousins so I’ve ended up playing footie with them...but I think if my mum was still about it would be a bit different...So I think it all depends on your genetics and if something brings it out...It all depends on your background, like who you hang around with as well. Obviously I’m not saying ‘I hang around with gay friends, I’m straight, I’m gonna turn gay’, but it all depends in the end what you’re most comfortable with, and if you’re most comfortable with exploring your sexuality, you may find it is or it isn’t for you... but for me I do think it is how I was brought up.*

**Samantha, 19**

Echoing previous stories, Samantha’s quote demonstrates the piecing together of different understandings in giving an account of the development of sexual selves. She reiterates the genetic predispositions and social influences given by Louise,

and like Steve also suggests that for some ‘it just happens’. She describes the importance of reflexivity and self-understanding discussed in chapter four, as well as the role of ‘experimentation’ in scripting sexual desire. Mirroring Kevin, she reflects on her understandings of gender and gendered interactions in shaping the development of sexual selves. As such, the range of explanations offered by Samantha is varied. Samantha also tells a personal story. She describes how she considered herself to have ‘become’ lesbian in terms of her own life experience. The death of her mother was central to this, where, although not dwelt on, she thinks that *‘if my mum was still about it would be a bit different’*. Her perceived gender non-conformity is attributed to the death of her mother, particularly as she has been *‘brought up for the past ten years with only a dad’*. Her upbringing, as she sees it, having had a significant impact on the development of her sexual identity.

Being raised by her father, having close friendships with her male cousins and the young men at her boarding school, as well as her interest in sport were all taken as indicative of a typically masculine upbringing. This had a significant impact on how she understood herself as a lesbian, more so than a discussion of genetics, even where they underlie how she sees the development of lesbian and gay sexualities generally. For Samantha, this appeared to be a way of actively constructing a sexual past, seeing her sexuality in her own personal memories (Plummer, 1995: 40). She also tells her sexual story through her past, shaping her current sexual identification through the way in which she has lived her life. This is as Plummer (1995: 6) sees the telling of sexual stories. They are engaged in the telling of some of the most ‘intimate’ aspects of people’s lives, playing a central role in the shaping of those lives, as well as in conveying them to others. This may be the case for all of the stories discussed here, however, where, in different ways, each participant was seeking to give an account of themselves (and others) as lesbian or gay, and why they considered themselves to be lesbian or gay. These stories were frequently told, again in different ways, in terms of the interviewees understandings of ‘pasts’, both bodily and social. The centrality of scientific and essentialist explanation may be seen as indicating the significance of the body to these stories, where they were often concerned with describing the body, and how it had come to be sexual.

## 2) The Necessity of Explanation?

Gagnon (1987: 123) has cautioned against the reliance on science in giving an account of same-sex desire, stating that 'the protections offered by purported biological or other irreversible causes of adult desire are surely ephemeral'. Although approaches varied, many echoed the use of scientific explanations. Participants often emphasised the significance of biomedical or psychological understandings of sexuality. Several of these, such as Andy's offered previously (page 161), mirrored contemporary understandings of adolescence as a period of sexual development, a period often associated with biomedical and psychological understandings (notably of heterosexuality) (Harris *et al.*, 2000). Yet, whilst this may build on contemporary understandings of adolescent sexuality, there was a indication that the ways in which these stories were told may have differed from heterosexual accounts of sexuality, as something expected or 'compelled' (Richardson, 2010). In the initial quote from Steve (page 153), for instance, he stated that the reasons for him 'becoming' gay were things he had '*thought long and hard about...and on many occasions in the past.*' This was also stated by Samantha, who had said that she had had discussions previously about why she and her girlfriend thought they were lesbians, her girlfriend saying that '*it just happened*':

*Like see I was having this argument with my girlfriend because she's, she's, everyone thinks if you saw her, you'd think she was completely straight and she says for her it just happened.* **Samantha, 19**

Whilst heterosexuality might be framed in terms of biomedical or psychological understandings of sexual development, there is a tendency for these to be framed in terms of a 'normal' turn of events. As Harris *et al.* (2000: 375) state, 'physical changes in puberty are seen to cause movement towards 'sexual maturity', and specifically, heterosexuality'. There was an indication in several quotes however that the 'movement towards' homosexuality was not the 'usual' turn of events, instead, echoing Gagnon (1987) assertion, lesbian and gay identities being in need of further explanation.

The following quote from David explores the complexities of this need for explanation. Although David's views were not articulated widely by my respondents, many not thinking too critically about the necessity of explanation, it provides an interesting insight into the explanations offered. David addresses some anxieties at the heart of this making sense of lesbian and gay sexuality, particularly where issues of choice are concerned. The notion of 'choice' had been invisible in all of the young people's accounts in this study (Gottschalk, 2003a, 2003b):

*It would be nice to have the answers so you can say to people 'well you know it's not my fault, it's, you know, I've got a gene that makes me gay' or 'that week in my life made me gay, the social atmosphere I was in'. But you don't ask someone who is straight 'why are you straight?' and 'why are you not gay?' They don't feel like they need to justify it so I don't feel that I need to justify it to function. I don't choose to be gay which someone actually asked me 'why did you choose to be gay?' And I was like [tongue-in-cheek] 'yes it is a choice you know', I don't think it is important to be able to rationalise it.*

**David, 20**

David demonstrates the complex reasoning behind his justifications for being gay. This desire to have a reason is possibly expressed by others who stated that these issues were things they had thought about previously. The stories described in this chapter might, in some ways, be understood as 'legitimation strategies'. They legitimize forms of, potentially 'stigmatized', sexual conduct through giving a reason for them (Plummer, 1995: 190). These reasons were often located in bodily or social histories. David echoes this where he states – *'It would be nice to have the answers so you can say to people 'well you know it's not my fault, it's, you know, I've got a gene that makes me gay' or 'that week in my life made me gay, the social atmosphere I was in'*. Epstein (1998 [1987]: 135) has described legitimation strategies as 'articulated both on an individual level ('This is who I am, and this is why I am that way') and on a collective level ('This is who we are and this is what we should do').' The stories told by the young people interviewed for this project may be understood as both operating on individual and collective levels. Some, as with Samantha and Steve, were giving accounts of themselves and their lives, and why they thought they were gay. Others, such as Mike, Kevin and Louise, were offering accounts of lesbian and gay sexuality on a collective level, stating why they thought people were lesbian or gay.

Epstein (1987: 11) states that legitimisation strategies also ‘play a mediating function between self-understanding and political programs’. David makes this connection between the personal (a desire for knowledge) and the political (a desire to tell) clear. It would be nice to have an answer, he appears to suggest. It would also be nice to be able to give that to people, so that they could understand. In this respect, these stories might be understood as working on two levels. Firstly, they operate at a personal level of self-knowledge, an ongoing ‘voyage to explore the self’ (Plummer, 1995: 34); and secondly as interactional, being told to others in giving an account of oneself. They are, as Plummer (1995: 20) understands them, symbolic interactions. Additionally, these accounts, in some ways, may need to be comprehensible. In constructing these arguments, my interviewees were not only making sense of themselves for themselves, they were doing so for the benefit of others as well. Scientific explanations may have been adopted because they carry some authority in helping make sense of sexuality (Terry, 1999). This might additionally be due to where adolescent sexuality is typically understood in the West through biomedical or psychological perspectives (Harris *et al.*, 2000; Waites, 2005). Although it has been argued elsewhere that, conversely, ‘biological theories’ of sexual orientation increase sexual prejudice, as well as reifying divisions between homosexual and heterosexual categories (Hegarty, 2010)

However, David recognises a double standard. In making these arguments, he acknowledges, and contests, the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of heterosexuality. He suggests that young heterosexual people may be less inclined to provide such stories of sexual beginnings (Richardson, 2010). As such, he says, *‘you don’t ask someone who is straight ‘why are you straight?’ and ‘why are you not gay?’* Paradoxically, David is bound, as a gay man, to a desire to both have and give an answer, whilst not wanting to give or have one. He recognises the implication of explaining his sexuality is to reinforce the normative position of heterosexuality, with it not being in need of the same explanation. Here David echoes the limits to a politics of recognition described towards the end of chapter five. These accounts, it might be suggested, ‘legitimate homosexuality without contesting the norms and conventions’ of heterosexuality (Seidman, 2004: 266). This feeling of a double

standard is compounded because, like all other participants, he did not see his sexuality as a choice. He instead he saw it as something he ‘was’, something he believed himself to ‘be’. This is made clear when he states in response to a question as to why he chose to be gay, ‘*yes it is a choice you know*’. This he stated in such a way as to suggest that being gay was most certainly anything but a choice, and he did not want people to think that it was.

These stories were symbolically valuable; they provided a way of framing individual biographies, bringing personal sexual histories and understandings of sexual development into current sexual identifications. They also made sense of current identifications through ‘scan[ning] the past life for clues to one’s sexual being’ (Plummer, 1995: 33). In telling these stories, the young interviewees were able to give accounts of their sexual selves and lives, these often being done through understandings of the body, and sexual and bodily development. These may be understood as also providing a degree of continuity, seeing sexual identities as more than in the present, but as having been there in the past, or developed as a result of the past. In this respect, sexual selves were ‘maintained’ (Richardson and Hart, 1981), where they were given a sense as running through individual biographies. Of course, in telling these stories, some tensions may be seen. In the same way as having to disclose a sexual identity (as discussed in chapter five), giving an explanation of sexuality may be seen as reinforcing the normative position of heterosexuality. It may be asked, as David’s quote allows, whether young heterosexual people would need recourse to quite the same stories, or for those stories to need to be told. The following section builds on the idea of ‘maintaining’ sexual selves, looking at the construction of sexual futures. In doing this, identities are seen not only as in the present, rooted in the past, but projected forward into constructions of adulthood.

### **Sexual Futures: Imagining Lesbian and Gay Adulthoods**

Plummer (1995: 173) has described sexual stories as ‘maps for action – they look into the future, tell us how we are motivated, guide us gently into who we will be.’ Along with stories of past lives, and understandings of sameness and difference, stories of the future are woven together in the fashioning of self (Plummer, 1995: 173). The former stories have been addressed throughout this thesis, where it has

been concerned with addressing issues of 'becoming' (both in chapter four and in the previous section of this chapter), as well as understandings of the divisions between heterosexuality and homosexuality (in chapter five). In this following section, this final story is addressed, where it discusses the construction of sexual futures.

This may be considered to be a particularly significant story for the age group addressed here, where participants might be considered to be 'growing up'. In chapter five, a quote from William (page 120) suggested the significance of college to the ways in which he understood how he and others viewed his sexuality. He also took into consideration how that might change once he moved to university. The significance of aging was central to many accounts of sexuality, where several were moving through education, others taking up first jobs. The majority of participants had only just moved out of the family home into a place of their own. The participants aged eighteen and below all remained with their parents. The significance of this change was evident where issues of discrimination and other people's attitudes were concerned, particularly from family and school friends. Kevin and Matt, for instance, describe the significance of getting older in being able to move away from other people's homophobic attitudes. These quotes are offered here as a means of illustrating this sense of change, the issue of homophobia is not one that is addressed in this chapter however where the focus is primarily on the construction of intimacy in adulthood.

*My family's really homophobic...obviously they'll find out eventually. But not for now 'cos I see them all on a daily basis... 'cos all like our house everyday, I see my family every day but I wouldn't, like I would tell them once I'd gotten away from that situation of having to see them everyday.* **Kevin, 16**

*People are completely horrible when they are younger, but they do grow up. Maybe it's cos I am seventeen and I am growing up with these people that are seventeen as well that were horrible to me...I think my generation has started to mature now...like going into higher education, having to pay, having to get a job...it starts to dawn on everyone that you are growing up and you've got things to deal with now.* **Matt, 17**

In the literature review the notion of 'youth transitions' were discussed. In this understanding of youth or adolescence, young people are framed as 'becoming'

adults. Transitions studies have sought to understand the ‘complex’ and ‘fractured’ ways in which different young people move into adulthood (MacDonald *et al.*, 2001). This including understandings of the transition from the family home to homes of their own, and from school to work (Jones, 2009). Although both are complicated and extended by increasing numbers moving into further or higher education (Jones *et al.*, 2004), as well as youth moving back and forth between independent and dependent lives (MacDonald *et al.*, 2001).

One means in which the transition to adulthood has been understood is through the ‘inventing’ or ‘imagining’ of adulthood (Thomson and Holland, 2002; Thomson *et al.*, 2004; Henderson *et al.*, 2007). This approach to understanding adulthood is described by Henderson *et al.* (2007: 20):

‘We are all in the vivid present, attempting to get somewhere, but to an elusive place. Adulthood does not exist, it has to be invented...one of the most powerful tools we have for the creation of identities is the telling of narratives of the self. Explanations of the past and intentions for the future are articulated via these narratives.’

This is an approach that has a number of affinities with Plummer’s notion of the sexual story. Henderson *et al.* (2007), using Giddens’ (1991) notion of the ‘reflexive project of the self’, see the telling of stories as vital to the construction of self. The telling of intimate adulthoods may be understood as a sexual story, where selves are actively constructed in the process of doing so. Selves may be seen as giving ‘a motive for the future’ (Plummer, 1995: 173) through the ‘imagining’ and ‘telling’ of that future.

In this section the imagining of sexual adulthoods are looked at, focussing, in particular, on the construction of ‘intimate’ adult lives (Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Thomson, 2009), something that may be seen as being radically altered by shifts in the construction of intimate and sexual citizenship rights (Richardson, 2000; Plummer, 2003a). The following quote from Tom elaborates on this sense of transition, and the centrality of ‘intimacy’ to how he scripts or tells a story of his ‘adult’ sexual life (McAdams, 1988), something his parents consider him to be too young for:

*They don't think I need a boyfriend now, I am still young, but in my eyes I should be allowed to meet someone or have a boyfriend...I go out on the gay scene a lot even though I am underage...They don't like me going out lots and having too much to drink but I think that is the best way to meet someone...I think sixteen year olds should be able to meet men and have experiences...‘Cos a lot of my straight friends my age, me mam says it's ok for them to have boyfriends and girlfriends...they worry because they're parents, they love us, but safety...like older people, older guys.*

**Tom, 16**

Jones *et al.* (2006: 375) has stated that many young people are not only dependant on parents 'to fund their post-16 education and training, but also to enable them to engage in...other activities associated with their transitions to adulthood, including the development of intimate partnerships.' In the quote above, Tom points to the constraints presented by his parents in the negotiation of his sexual life. These constraints might be framed in terms of 'concern' and 'control' (Jones *et al.*, 2006; Jones, 2009), issues that conflict with Tom's own sense of control over his life and future (Evans, 2002; Thomson *et al.*, 2002). In Tom's account, his parents' concern appears to stand in the way of him being able to imagine a sexual life, where they see him as being too young. Particularly for what they may see as 'adult' world of gay and lesbian bars and clubs (Valentine and Skelton, 2003). Tom, on the other hand, thought it time that he was able to meet other gay men and form relationships.

McAdams (1988: 18, emphasis in original) has suggested that '*identity is a life story*', and that the story told about a life answers the questions '‘Who am I?’ and ‘How do I fit into an adult world?’' The telling of a story of intimacy and sexuality may be seen as one way in which 'belonging' to adulthood is defined in Tom's account. However the power to tell the story is challenged where there are conflicting forces at play. His own ability to begin an adult life, socialising in clubs and having relationships, is positioned against his parents' definition of him as 'too young', and as potentially unsafe. This is at once seen as a denial of him being able to 'grow up' through the telling of a particular story of adulthood (McAdams, 1988: 6), as well as a restriction placed on him in terms of the enactment of a gay identity. This is contrasted with a heterosexual sense of competence or safety. Whereas straight people, particularly young men (Holland

*et al.*, 2004), are considered old enough to have physical relationships (where there are considered to be different issues at play), Tom is bound up by his parents in a protective discourse where he is seen as at risk from ‘predatory’ older men, a discourse frequently applied to daughters (Thomson and Scott, 1991).

Of course, these accounts of adulthood were not only concerned with the imminent future or sense of transition. Sexual selves frequently shaped constructions of the futures where they were projected well into adulthood. The telling of life stories were particularly structured in terms of understandings of intimacy, several respondents were asked a question as to how they thought identifying as lesbian or gay would shape their lives as they got older. This was most frequently answered in terms of relationships and family life, things which have been considered central to the ways that young people ‘imagine’ what their adult sexual lives look like (Gordon *et al.*, 2005). Weeks (2000: 214) has discussed the way that, ‘[d]espite the particularism of the homosexual experience’, there has been a startling convergence of homosexual and heterosexual ‘ways of life’. Central to both, Weeks (2000: 214) suggests, ‘is the search for a satisfactory relationship’. The data presented here suggested the degree to which these young people’s stories of adulthood and intimacy were informed by this desire for a relationship. Liam below mirrors a common account told by many of my participants:

*I would love to have a family; I would love to have a husband. I would love to adopt a child at first and then if I felt more confident in three or four years of having the child I’d get a surrogate and I’d have me own biological child that could just grow up and I could protect and love, and nice home, keep it safe. If it falls over I’m there to protect it. Nice car, just basically I am a family man, I’d like to have a family. You know your husband comes home and you’ve made the tea, ran the bath, the kids are in bed and it’s just that nice warm fuzzy feeling that person coming home to you. And you’ve got it then. As I used to call it as a kid you’ve got like your square, your box. You’ve got four connections; you’ve got yourself, your husband and your two kids, or your one child but then you’re home, it just makes that box, it’s a secure box.*

**Liam, 20**

Liam’s description of adult life is typical in that a number of participants I spoke to tended to think of growing up in largely normative marriage-like terms. Here Liam talks explicitly of wanting a family, husband and children of his own as well

as comfort and security. This was a language that was reiterated in a number of other interviews. Liam's allusion to a 'secure box' reflects a discourse of the modern nuclear family founded around a 'tightly knit' couple forming 'a private, emotionally intense unit' (Jamieson, 1998: 76). This is idealised within Liam's account, although it might be worth mentioning that his own narrative was constructed within a wider account of his own family upbringing which he described as troubled. The way he imagined his own adulthood was in contrast to his own difficult family situation as a young man. At the start of his interview when I asked him where he was from, he immediately told me of the difficulties he had faced with his mother, who had been separated from his father:

**Liam:** *I moved to [Northern city] and late 2006 I moved [down South], I stayed in both areas for a few months and then came back [up North], 'cos it's my home town... I had problems with me mam so I had to get away...*

**Edmund:** *What kind of problems was it with your mum?*

**Liam:** *When I was living with me mam she used to beat me up as a child, I tried to create a relationship with my mam but it didn't feel like it was working at all... Then I found out she was homophobic... and everything came out so I decidedly to basically get away from me mam and get on with me life. When I did I became actually homeless... and mates [nearby] took me in... they got me into a home with a volunteer, then I worked hard and got me own place, which I absolutely love to bits 'cos it's my nest.*

**Liam, 20**

Thomson (2009: 8) has found in previous research that young people from disrupted families 'were more likely to invest in intense couple relationships where families were unstable'. Whilst this is not a 'typical' finding of this research, his narrative of his family life was specific to his interview, Liam does mirror Thomson's findings in the emphasis he placed on his own imagined relationship and family life. He further echoes Thomson's (2009: 8) findings where she has observed that where parental homes were 'disrupted by divorce, conflict and economic turbulence young people could experience acute vulnerability sometimes homelessness.' Liam's investment in particular forms of intimacy and family life may be seen as a way of both avoiding the family life he grew up with, and his subsequent experiences of homelessness and insecurity. In this respect, his story of his adult life is arguably shaped by his own upbringing, and the difficult experiences he faced. The model adopted by Liam has been described by Halberstam (2005: 4) as having a 'middle-class logic of reproductive

temporality' (see also Taylor, 2009) where he emphasises what might be seen as a 'respectable' family life. The stress placed on having a 'nice' family, secure home and happy family frames his understanding of his adult life in terms of the reproduction of a nuclear family unit, his narrative being structured in terms of a life-partner, planned child-rearing, a well-paid job, and a secure house.

The extent to which this is a middle-class logic is questionable, however. Whilst Liam never stated what class background he was from (as this was not an issue raised in any interview), he did say that he had grown up in a working-class area of the North-East. His emphasis on family and security might, in particular, be seen as mirroring Henderson *et al.*'s (2007: 100) finding that 'home' plays a crucial role in providing young people with a sense of personal security, and the making of a home may be the most satisfying marker of adulthood.' Whilst Henderson *et al.* (2007: 124) suggest that class and gender may impact the ways in which 'home' is done, the desire to recreate a 'home' was something that they saw as cutting across class and gender boundaries. This may be something, potentially, that cuts across sexuality too, where the emphasis on family and 'marriage-like' relationships was largely typical of the respondents' stories of their adult lives.

Furthermore, within these stories of adulthood, children were often central. Liam for example, discussed the different ways in which he hoped to have children, discussing first the possibility of adopting, and then using a surrogate. Liam saw his becoming a father within the context of a secure relationship. In telling stories of adulthood, couple relationships were often seen as the basis for developing a wider family. Although when telling how they would have children, this was seen as something to be negotiated and worked out, rather than something that may be the 'expected' thing to do, as might be seen with heterosexuality (Clarke, 2001). These families were instead seen as being assembled through adoption, something discussed by nearly half of the participants. For the young gay men, as seen with Liam, adoption was particularly important, although, it was felt that the young lesbians had alternative options, many addressing the significance of IVF, and co-parenting with another woman. The following quote from Anna addresses some of the thoughts she had had about having a child:

*With my ex-girlfriend we'd been together for two and a half years, we've only just broke up recently but we did start talking about if we ever had kids one day and we spoke about that I would like, I would carry the kid for us and so it's been discussed with us and I wouldn't have any problems with that, that any kid that is brought into a loving family is a kid, it needs love so it doesn't matter who its parents are.*

**Anna, 19**

In the telling of these stories of their 'unfolding lives' (Thomson, 2009), sexual identities, and the projection of those into the future, had a significant impact on the ways in which future lives were imagined (Plummer, 1995). The young people were often actively seeing how their 'being' lesbian or gay was significant in terms of the shapes their future lives would take, and the paths that they would take in getting there. However none of the participants saw the formation of a family in straight-forward terms. Instead they were often seen as in need of planning, for example as with Liam who had set out a series of events through which he saw his family as coming together. Anna too addressed the significance of having to plan, working out with her ex-girlfriend who would carry their child. Additionally, there was often a sense of justification. Anna, for example, saw that it did not matter who were the parents, so long as the child was brought up within a 'loving family' – '*any kid that is brought into a loving family is a kid, it needs love so it doesn't matter who its parents are.*'

Whilst the emphasis on 'family' and coupledom was strong, such descriptions were also couched by a few participants in terms of a language of 'normality'. Andy, for example, told a similar story to Liam, stating that his adult life would not be '*a lot different from a normal straight relationship*':

**Andy:** *I still would like to grow up and get, find someone eventually to have, like a life partner, I guess a secure job, a secure house. I wouldn't say it's going to be a lot different from a normal straight relationship, a normal straight person's life.*

**Edmund:** *Would you plan on having children when you grow up?*

**Andy:** *I'd consider it, I'd seriously consider it but I'm not sure yet. I'd have to weigh up what I want in that time and the benefits...they're quite expensive. So that would depend on current job, future, what the long term future would be, whether I was in a stable relationship with someone.*

**Andy, 16**

Towards the end of chapter five, what Richardson (2004) has described as the 'new story' of the 'normal' lesbian and gay man was discussed. This 'new story',

Richardson (2004: 401) states, has the ‘potential...for reshaping meanings between self and other...gay normalization may lead to the deconstruction of the homosexual/heterosexual binary’. The partial ‘deconstruction’ of this binary might be evidenced in the ways in which adult intimate lives are imagined. This includes the ways that ‘home’, as Henderson *et al.* (2007) describe adult intimate lives, is envisaged. Echoing the sense of convergence identified by Weeks (2000: 214), Andy describes his adult life as scripted in fairly ‘hetero-normative’ terms, with adulthood being defined in terms of ‘care’ for children and intimacy in a monogamous relationship (Thomson, 2009: 94). This parallels Thomson’s (2009: 94) understanding of lesbian and gay identities, ‘While non-heterosexual identities and positionings may disrupt hetero-normative categories of age, the lifecourse and ‘family life’, they do not entirely displace them’. In respect of this, one thing that was apparent in the data was the extent to which stories of adulthood were ‘scripted’ in terms of the ‘conventions’; of heterosexuality, including ‘family’ and ‘child-rearing’ (Ahmed, 2006: 177). This model was articulated widely, many participants felt as though they were not necessarily excluded from heterosexuality’s main ‘conventions’.

Despite this emphasis on ‘normalcy’ in many accounts, there continued to be some tension over the definition of ‘normal’. Andy for example continued to suggest that he recognised the way in which gay parenting is constructed differently to heterosexual parenting. With heterosexual parenting, echoing Clarke’s (2001) findings, often being perceived to be the ‘normal’ or ‘usual’ form of parenting and family formation:

**Edmund:** *Would it be a priority to be in a relationship with someone, if you were planning on kids?*

**Andy:** *I would prefer to be, although it’s not going to be for years to come, I would prefer to be with someone I thought to be a life partner before I considered children. Just because I wholly accept that it’s not a normal or a usual family unit so I would prefer to have it as stable as possible for the child.* **Andy, 16**

Here, whilst sameness is claimed by Andy, he also appears to acknowledge the ways in which the ‘doing’ of family as a gay man or two gay men co-parenting, was understood in terms of difference. This notion of the ‘normality’ of heterosexuality was echoed elsewhere. Jess, for example, saw herself as compelled

towards heterosexuality in order to ‘do’ ‘normal’. She recognises the way in which she felt swayed, at times, by a ‘traditional’ life of heterosexual marriage and family, something she saw as unavailable in a same sex relationship, although there is a degree of questioning over that:

*I am quite traditional, my family is very traditional, in the way that I want the husband and the country house and the kids and the dog...I was kind of brought up where you couldn't really have that with a woman... there is a small part of me that thinks you know maybe I will go back into the whole ‘let’s be normal’ in inverted commas but I think like that doesn’t really matter to me I don’t think anymore. I think I can be successful and happy and all of that kind of thing and be with a woman because like women make me happy...I’ve kind of given up trying to predict who I’m going to be with...it’s gonna be whoever I am with and whoever makes me happy rather than convention.*

**Jess, 19**

Jess, whose approach to sexuality was more ‘fluid’ than the others I interviewed, talks of her ambivalence towards her intimate future. On one side, Jess is drawn towards a ‘normal’, ‘traditional’ heterosexual world of marital bliss, country houses, kids and dogs, in this respect, an upper middle-class one (Lawler, 2008). On the other, Jess attempts to see that she could be equally happy with a woman; something she felt was at odds with the image of a ‘normal’ married future which she grew up anticipating. Unlike Liam who came from a working class area of the UK, Jess came from a relatively well off family from the south-east of England, her family history informing her image of an idealised future. Her lesbian identity has, however, presented itself as a rupture with this upper middle-class heterosexual script, suggesting the way in which coming to identify as lesbian has challenged the surety of this idealised heterosexual adulthood. Weeks *et al* (2001: 28) have explored the way in which non-heterosexual people have to forge new ways of living, conducting ‘life-experiments’ in which new kinds of meaningful relationships and ‘bonds of trust’ can be formed. Looking at Andy’s account earlier it might have been tempting to suggest that these young lesbian and gay people were only borrowing from the heterosexual scripts of the world in which they were embedded. There were, however, frequent indications that lives could not simply be mapped onto heterosexual conventions.

Jess indicates the extent to which her non-heterosexual identification has challenged the surety of a heterosexual future. Her future instead being left open

as she had ‘given-up’ trying to plan who she will be with. She suggests that ‘*it’s gonna be whoever I am with and whoever makes me happy rather than convention*’ that determines her future. She demonstrates the way in which readily made classed paths were, at times, challenged, leaving the future open to new stories. Although the extent to which these new stories would be created anew as opposed to being modelled on the image she had of a heterosexual future is unclear. Could she simply substitute a husband for a woman? Or would being with a woman entail a whole new future? Indeed perhaps Jess’ lack of certainty indicates the extent to which she herself was unsure of what the future held for her. What is clear though from her account is the extent to which ‘normality’ was so often framed in terms of heterosexuality with non-heterosexual lives remaining ‘other’ to that, something echoed in previous quotes. This demonstrates the way in which, despite claims to sameness, lesbian and gay identities may also operate as a barrier to being ‘normal’.

The focus on marriage in many quotes, although this is different in Jess’ case, was arguably enabled by the then recent introduction of the Civil Partnership Act, something that is discussed by Alexandra below. A section of the following quote has been used previously in chapter four, as part of a discussion on the ‘routinization’ of sexual identities, it is reproduced here in a fuller form to emphasise the significance of civil partnerships in framing constructions of the future. As an aside, it also reflects the construction of the past that was addressed in chapter five, something that was central to their framing of sexual selves and lives:

*...to be old and in a gay relationship, and have a long lasting gay relationship is an option now, whereas before it would have just been so much harder whereas it's actually a possibility. You can dream of, just as a little girl when she is five dreams of a wedding, if she's really out there, if she really wants to she can now dream of her civil partnership.* **Alexandra, 19**

Shipman and Smart (2007: 5.5) have argued that civil partnerships have had a transformative effect on the ways in which lesbian and gay couples ‘celebrate and legitimise their personal relationships’. At the time in which the fieldwork was carried out, civil partnerships were still just a recent introduction. Yet they may be

seen as having had a significant impact on the ways in which the young people interviewed for this project could imagine their intimate futures. Prior to civil partnerships being made available, lesbians and gay men living in the UK may have formalised and celebrated couple relationships through non-governmental commitment ceremonies (Smart, 2007: 67). The introduction of civil partnerships in 2005, however, appeared to allow participants to tell an additional story, one in which they could get 'married', civil partnerships, at times, being equated with marriage. The shapes in which stories often took then, were informed by a sense of permissibility, that 'marriage' was possible for, and available to, them:

*...obviously gay couples can get married, they can be each others next of kin, it gives a whole wave of rights.* **Chris, 19**

This is not to suggest however that civil partnerships were accepted uncritically. As with Shipman and Smart's (2007: 5.2) research, 'many had had to negotiate complex feelings and degrees of ambivalence'. This was notable, for instance in discussions of sameness and difference, where civil partnerships were not considered to equate to full marriage, several participants wondering why lesbians and gay men were not allowed to marry:

*Why can't we get married though? Why?* **Nathan, 21**

In this respect, there were few examples of the arguments against civil partnerships as 'co-opting' lesbians and gay men (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 2004; Lewin, 2004). One of the participants who came closest to this was one of the youngest participants, although he saw his age as making it difficult for him to fully appreciate the complexities of the debate. In the following quote, Tom briefly touches on the matter:

*I think it is a good idea, but a lot of gay people bash it because it's trying to make it like normal marriage when it is not... When I get older I think I will understand it more, respect it more.* **Tom, 16**

The following quote from David sets out his reasons for not having a civil partnership since he sees them as not the same as marriage, marriage being

something one does in a church, somewhere he considered himself to be unwelcome:

*...at the end of the day civil partnerships doesn't really affect me because I'm not really fussed, the big wedding for me would be in a church and, you know, I would burn if I stepped on holy ground.*

**David, 20**

In these instances, civil partnerships were seen to not equate to marriage. Criticisms of civil partnerships here were predicated on understandings of difference. David, for example, may be seen as implicitly recognizing religious attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, stating that '*I would burn if I stepped on holy ground.*' For David, if he were going to get married he would do it in a church, as he was not heterosexual he thought that having a civil partnership was not an option where it was not the same as marriage.

A more common way in which civil partnerships were critiqued came from a different position, one which may not be so easily described as concerned with the construction of lesbian and gay identities, or as a rejection of being 'co-opted'. This is the case where it mirrored, and was often framed in terms of, reasons for why people would not get married as a heterosexual person. In these accounts couple relationships were considered to be personal, and not in need of being institutionalized (Jamieson, 1998: 33). This was echoed in a story told by four of the participants, by both young lesbians and gay men. These accounts differed from some findings in research by Shipman and Smart (2007: 5.1) who found that some decisions for entering into civil partnerships were 'based on their everyday life experiences'. These arguments were instead based on notions of romance and intimacy that did not require official recognition to be validated. One reason for this, it may be suggested, is that, as young people, their life experiences and priorities were different, with things such as inheritance, kinship rights and tax being less pressing concerns. Whereas participants in Shipman and Smart's (2007) study had had civil partnerships in order to gain next of kin status, and pension and inheritance rights, the young people interviewed in this study tended to focus on the ability to be in a satisfying relationship without signing a piece of paper. These tended to be framed in terms of an acceptance of the importance, to some,

of civil partnerships, although they considered themselves to reject the necessity of civil partnerships (and marriage) personally (Giddens, 1993):

*I don't have the desire to have a civil partnership or the desire to adopt a child...Not in a way, like, 'screw that law', I do understand it. I do respect it. But that law isn't important to me...even if I was straight I probably wouldn't get married, 'cos like to me marriage is something I don't like. I think if you physicalize something, if you write your relationship on paper...it feels easier to lose...it doesn't feel real anymore, it doesn't feel like it's in me. I feel like if I was to get married, I feel like it would be written down and it had been stone, I don't like things that are set in stone, I like things to kind of like be free a little bit.*

**Matt, 17**

**Edmund:** *You said you were against marriage, do you not see yourself having a civil partnership?*

**Louise:** *I mean I won't rule it out but I'm not a big fan of marriage anyway?*

**Edmund:** *What do you mean by that? Why is that?*

**Louise:** *I don't think marriage works, I think it's quite pointless, 'cos I think you can live together happily as a gay, as a married couple, without getting married, there's no need for it in society any more.*

**Louise, 19**

The introduction of civil partnerships may be seen as opening up the possibility of telling a new story of intimacy, one in which legal recognition of same-gender partnerships is available, but rejected. This was not predicated, however, on the participants' identities as lesbians or gay men, or a denial of being 'normalized'; rather it mirrored heterosexual reasons for denying the necessity of marriage, as an outmoded institution which was not necessarily needed to express commitment and love. In these accounts, participants often said, like Matt, '*even if I was straight I probably wouldn't get married*'. Louise, for example states that she felt she had no desire to have a civil partnership where she considered marriage to be outdated – '*I think you can live together happily as a gay, as a married couple, without getting married, there's no need for it in society any more.*' These stories were told as stories of sameness, whilst recognizing that civil partnerships were different to marriage (suggested in the statement '*even if I was straight*'), the reasons for not having a civil partnership were predicated on what they thought they would do were they straight. The option then is there for them to deny the need for a civil partnership, and is told as a story of sameness.

Sameness and difference were significant aspects of these stories of adulthood and the future, sexual identities were also pivotal to the ways in which sameness and difference was made sense of. The ways in which these stories were told may be understood as addressing the centrality of sexual identifications to the imagination of intimate futures. The answering of the questions 'Who am I?' and 'How do I fit into an adult world?' (McAdams, 1988: 18) was informed by the interviewees' understandings of themselves as lesbian or gay. Further, through the telling of these potential futures, they could be seen to be engaging in a symbolic process through which their identities as lesbians or gay men were made meaningful, to which issues of sameness and difference were central. The ways in which stories of adult lives were told, was often done in ways which reflected the different possibilities for imagining adulthood as a lesbian or gay man as compared to a heterosexual man or woman. Although, within this there was a recognition of the changing possibilities for living an adult life as a lesbian or gay man .Civil partnerships (the adoption or rejection of), co-parenting and adoption were discussed in contemplating the formation of a family, as well as in developing a 'satisfactory' and stable relationship (Weeks, 2000: 214).

## **Conclusion**

Discussing the significance of identity to the ways in which lives are understood, Jenkins (2008) has claimed that 'time' is a fundamental aspect of identity. For Jenkins (2008), time gives a sense of continuity and order to the ways in which we understand ourselves, he thus states that:

'...a sense of time is inherent within identification because of the *continuity* which, even if only logically, is entailed in a claim to, or an attribution of identity. Continuity posits a meaningful past and a possible future, and, particularly with respect to identification, is part of the sense of order and predictability upon which the human world depends' (Jenkins, 2008: 48, emphasis in original)

In many ways, the particulars of the different stories looked at here are not the main focus of this chapter, and are not going to be gone over again in this conclusion. Rather, what may be emphasised is what is 'done' in the telling of these stories, notably in regard to the sense of 'order' and 'predictability' highlighted by Jenkins. Plummer (2003b: 525) has highlighted the power of

symbolic interactionism in theorizing how the ‘precarious everyday flux of life is open to constant stabilizing and essentializing.’ This ‘maintenance’ is something Richardson (2004: 400) sees as having ‘received far less attention’ in the literature on the construction of sexual identities. This chapter has focused on two distinct stories, stories of sexual ‘aetiology’ and stories of intimacy in adulthood. Whilst these stories may be concerned with two separate areas of life, they are both brought together where they are concerned with the shaping of lives in terms of sexual identities. This might be understood in terms of the ways in which individuals, having adopted a sexual identity ‘thereafter maintains...such an identity’ (Richardson and Hart, 1981: 73).

The telling of stories of sexuality may be seen as part of this maintenance where they are concerned with the centrality of time to identity, giving a sense of continuity, order and predictability (Jenkins, 2008: 48). Plummer (1995: 40) has suggested that ‘a crucial strategy of story telling is the creation of a sense of past which helps to provide a sense of continuity and order over the flux of the present’. The telling of stories of sexual development may be seen as part of this, maintaining a sense of order, constructing a logical pathway by which they got to their current states of sexual identification. They also work, as Bruner (1987, cited in Plummer, 1995: 40, emphasis in Plummer) states, by *‘laying down routes into memory*, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future.’ These stories were linked by a sense of continuity, seeing sexual identities as extending from notions of sexual development and origins into future lives, those constructions of adulthood being predicated on the adoption of sexual identities.

This may be seen as a central aspect of the making of sexual selves, where the telling of life stories are significant means by which we ‘constitute our selves’ (Plummer, 1995: 172), the telling of a life, as Plummer (1995: 172) argues, ‘may be a major clue to understanding identity’. The two stories addressed in this chapter may be of particular significance to the young people interviewed for this project. Arguably, they are working to make sense of their own ‘burgeoning’ sexual selves (Stern, 2002: 266), as well as the gradual ‘unfolding’ of their adult lives (Thomson, 2009). This maintenance is something that will be picked up on

later in the following chapter, in which this thesis is concluded, with some of the main themes raised throughout this thesis are addressed.

## Chapter 7 – Conclusion

### **Social Change and the Making of Sexual Selves**

Analysing the data derived from interviews with five young lesbians and fourteen young gay men, this thesis has sought to address the ‘making of sexual selves’. In this chapter some of the main themes that have arisen from the data shall be drawn upon, these being discussed within the context of a wider literature on sexuality and self. Throughout this discussion, comments are made about the significance of the data presented within this thesis with regards to this body of literature. The main issue addressed in this chapter, which has been an important theme running throughout this thesis, is the significance attributed to lesbian and gay identities in the construction of sexual selves. This issue is contextualized in terms of understandings of social change, change which has raised questions about the way in which lesbian and gay identities are understood (Bech, 1997; Richardson, 2004; Seidman, 2002). Whilst not seeking to generalize beyond the sample used in this research, questions may be raised from the data about the ways in which the young lesbians and gay men interviewed made sense of their sexual identities within, what may be considered a period of social transformation. This conclusion addresses those issues, claiming both the continued significance of lesbian and gay identities, and the paradoxes and tensions inherent in identifying as lesbian or gay, notably with regards to the claiming of ‘normality’ and sameness. Finally, difficulties in conducting the research, and the limitations of the research, are addressed.

### **Claiming Desire**

Some writers have suggested that, in places, lesbian and gay identities have become less important (Bech, 1997, 2003, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005). Bech (2003), for instance, has argued contentiously that, owing to a homogenization of ways of life in Denmark, the ‘male homosexual’ is disappearing. In the US, Savin-Williams (2005) has identified a generation of ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ teenagers eschewing identity labels: ‘They have same-sex desires and attractions but, unlike earlier generations, have much less interest in naming these feelings or behaviours

as gay' (Savin-Williams, 2005: 1). This questioning of the need for lesbian and gay identities might be understood as bound up in a period of social change, one in which the 'homosexual/heterosexual binary' is potentially 'troubled' (Richardson, 2004: 403). The data presented in chapter four has a bearing on these arguments in that it highlights the continued investments made in lesbian and gay identities. This is particularly important in the claiming of desire against an assumed heterosexuality, with heterosexuality continuing to be experienced as a 'presumed' form of sexual 'being' (Dennis, 2009). The adoption of lesbian and gay labels was observed in this project to continue to be an important way of articulating non-heterosexual states of identification, and as such, maintaining a sense of difference to a heterosexual norm (Richardson, 1984).

One aspect of this addressed in chapter four, and something which that chapter sought to emphasise, was the centrality of desire to the construction of sexual selves (Tolman, 2002). Responding to Plummer's (1981a) query as to why lesbian and gay labels are adopted, the chapter stressed the importance of an understanding of people as desiring. Something that was central to the young interviewees' accounts of their sexual selves. This is significant for a number of reasons, not least where it has been observed, in symbolic interactionist understandings at least, that desire and the body are omitted from the theorization of sexuality (Plummer, 2003b: 525). This is echoed by Halperin (2007: 1) who, although recognizing the political necessity in previous decades, has suggested that the emphasis on lesbian and gay collective identities has come at the expense of enquiries into subjectivity and 'inner life'. Alternatively, it has been suggested that research on young people's sexuality has tended to focus on behaviour over desire (Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000: 184). This sense of interiorty was central to the analysis in chapter four, which sought to address the ways that the construction of adolescent lesbian and gay identities were typically framed by the interviewees in terms of the negotiation and making sense of subjective experiences of desire (Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000). That chapter, following Tolman's (2002: 25) account of adolescent girl's sexual selves, suggested that 'lesbian' and 'gay' sexual desire, or what is labelled as such, is 'not only a legitimate but a necessary area for study'.

One implication of this analysis concerns how the ‘social construction’ of sexuality is understood. This is a notion that underpins this research project, and something that the thesis has sought to engage with, particularly with regards to how understandings of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism may be developed. This is necessary because there has been seen to be a re-emergence of essentialist theorizing around sexuality (Jackson, 2005; Plummer, 2005; Weeks, 2005). One aspect of sexuality highlighted by this thesis is the significance of embodiment in how the young lesbians and gay men interviewed made sense of themselves as sexual, notably where they talked about feelings of attraction (understood in this thesis as desire), as well as in discussing sexual acts and pleasures. This, as stated, is something Plummer (2003b: 525) sees as having been missing from many symbolic interactionist accounts of sexuality, suggesting that:

‘...it is a stunning omission from many earlier formulations that the living and breathing, sweating and pumping, sensuous and feeling world of the emotional, fleshy body is hardly to be found.’

Historically, Vance (1989: 23) has suggested that social constructionism has potentially risked becoming ‘increasingly disembodied’, asking how ‘we reconcile constructionist theory with the body’s visceral reality and our own experience of it?’ In part, this project has sought to engage with these issues by understanding sexuality, in terms of desire, as embodied, and something the participants felt to be true as opposed to ‘make believe’ (Gagnon, 1987: 123). This mirrors Tolman’s (2002: 14) description of social constructionism as:

‘...shift[ing] the debate...from purely physiological explanations (lust) toward the importance of how we make meaning out of our bodily, emotional, and relational experiences (desire)’

Indeed, the focus on processes of intrapsychic and interpersonal scripting of desire, and their relationships to each other (as well as acts of self-labelling as lesbian or gay), parallels the ‘bodily, emotional, and relational experiences’ Tolman (2002: 14) mentions. The symbolic interactionist approach used allows this sense of embodiment to be central to its analysis of sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 148). Senses of embodiment, and memories of embodied sexual

feelings, were, as such, seen as central in this thesis to the ‘agential’ construction of sexual subjectivities (Nack, 2000; Bryant and Schofield, 2007).

One aspect of this understanding of sexuality also highlighted in chapter four is the relationship between sexuality and gender. The relationship between the two is something that Richardson (2007: 468) considers to have become ‘more pluralized and complex’, with it being seen as increasingly difficult to understand one as determined by the other. The theoretical approach adopted in chapter four has sought to address the relationship between the two by understanding gender as having ‘temporal priority’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 113). Whilst sexuality may be understood as distinct from gender where it is concerned with personal ‘desires, practices, relationships and identities’ (Jackson, 2006b: 106), it is in part informed by gender which impacts on all aspects of everyday interaction (Jackson, 2006b: 106). This is, as Gagnon and Simon (2005) understood, the way in which gender and sexuality are shaped by one another, with sexuality coming to be framed in terms of a prior understanding of both oneself and others as gendered. A process to which the body is central where the gendering of the body is seen as fundamental to the ways in which we come to see ourselves as ‘having’ gender (Butler, 1990, 1993; Woodward, 2008).

In the introduction to this thesis, it was argued that one priority of the research was to address the lived construction of sexual selves, one that was bound up in people’s ongoing ‘everyday’, material realities. This has been argued to be a priority for current sociological accounts of sexuality, which has sought to see sexuality as bound up in everyday interaction (Plummer, 2003b; Jackson and Scott, 2010a, 2010b). The symbolic interactionist approach adopted in this thesis is, in part, a way of attending to this. Seeing desire as claimed within gendered interactions recognises the significance of everyday sociality to the construction of sexual selves. The young lesbians and gay men interviewed for this project often understood their sexual identifications in relation to desired (or not) gendered others. The different ‘nexuses’ of gendered attraction were described in terms of understandings of people as both gendered and sexual, something often taken as an important aspect of adolescence (Raymond, 1994: 126). This is something that is also understood in terms of people’s material embodiment, where, as discussed,

gendered bodies were central to the construction of sexual selves, those same bodies enabling people to 'feel' sexual (Tolman, 2002: 20).

In asking what contribution this project has made, several issues may be identified. Firstly, the focus on lesbian and gay sexual subjectivities may be taken as a way of addressing concerns about a lack of focus on those areas in the literature, particularly where the body of work on lesbian and gay youth has tended to focus on issues of 'risk' (Miceli, 2002; Talburt, 2004; Talburt *et al.*, 2004; Rasmussen, 2006; Driver, 2008). Secondly, the emphasis on desire as both an important and necessary aspect of lesbian and gay adolescent sexualities situates desire, and thus embodiment, at the heart of a social constructionist analysis of sexuality, something which it has been suggested has been missing from symbolic interactionist accounts of sexuality (Plummer, 2003b). Finally, in emphasising interaction and everyday sociality, a sociological approach to theorizing the construction of sexual selves has been offered. In looking at the adoption of lesbian and gay labels in the making of those selves, I have suggested that those identities remained central to the ways in which the participants interviewed for this project could understand themselves as sexual, as well as enabling them to articulate that to others.

### **Tensions and Paradoxes: The Significance of Sexual Identities?**

The significance of sexual identities was qualified in chapter five, the main themes of which are addressed in this section. Seidman (2002) has suggested that historically, lesbian and gay identities have often been treated as 'core' to people's sense of self, this is something, however, that Seidman (2002: 11) considers, for some, to have changed, with identities being treated as 'threads':

'The pervasiveness of public fear and loathing of homosexuals that sustained the closet made coming out a deliberate, intense life drama. It is hardly surprising that many of these individuals would come to define their homosexuality as a core identity...To the extent that the closet has less of a role in shaping gay life, the dynamics of identity change somewhat...gay identity is often approached in ways similar to a heterosexual identity – as a thread'

This is an issue that was explored in chapter five, where it might be suggested that these changes were something with which the young lesbians and gay men

interviewed for this project were actively engaged. The ways in which they negotiated a sense of self as ‘complex’, ‘multilayered’ and ‘polyvalent’ (Driver, 2008: 12) may be seen as a way of understanding self within a context in which social responses to lesbian and gay identities are potentially changing (Seidman, 2005).

What the data provided in chapter five might point to are the ways in which these forms of social change, including this reconfiguration of lesbian and gay identities, were engaged with by the young people interviewed. The ways in which these issues, including the emerging ‘new story of the ‘normal lesbian/gay’ (Richardson, 2004: 403), were negotiated is of particular interest in understanding the ways in which lesbian and gay sexual selves are made in this moment. One thing suggested by the data given in chapter five was the sense of ‘tension’ often felt by the participants, particularly with regards to their ability to claim a ‘complex’ sense of self, of which sexuality is a thread. Whilst Seidman (2002) has suggested that lesbian and gay people may increasingly choose to make their sexual identities peripheral, this needs to be understood in terms of the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ components of identity (Jenkins, 2008). The ways in which identities may be defined, as Jenkins (2008: 47) states, is not only something done by the individual, but by those around them. This dialectic understanding of self was central to Mead’s (1967 [1934]) symbolic interactionism and his distinction between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ (see page 20).

The tensions often described might be better understood within a context in which lesbian and gay identities and lives are increasingly ‘tolerable’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010a: 100), yet are still positioned as other to an institutionalized, normative heterosexuality (Seidman, 2009). There was, in Dunne *et al.*’s (2002: 110) terms, often a ‘paradox’ between claiming sameness, as ‘normal’ or ‘complex’ individuals, whilst being positioned as different, where heterosexuality presented itself as a ‘constraint’ in terms of definitions of ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’. These were tensions which the young people were engaging with, tensions which may be seen as products of social change, in which new possibilities are created, but new challenges arise where older understandings of difference endure (Richardson, 2004). This was notable in the sometimes contradictory use of pride, something

used by several participants simultaneously with claims to the insignificance of sexual identities; reflections on old stigmas may be seen as remaining an important aspect in constructing lesbian and gay sexual selves (Kaufman and Johnson, 2004). This theme was also often noted in understandings of the past, as well as of how things were perceived to have changed, the invoking of stigmatized lesbian and gay identities in previous decades being engaged with in coming to see how they could potentially claim sexuality as a ‘thread’ rather than a ‘core’ identity.

Appiah (2005: 110) has argued for a politics of identity in which sexual identities are ‘not too tightly scripted, not too resistant to our individual vagaries’. This is something which might be applied to the young people’s understandings of sexual identities as a ‘part’ of who they are, but not all of it. It has consequences for a politics of recognition or visibility, where it raises questions about how far one may, or need, be recognised as lesbian or gay, and how that identity is made known (this being a politics which has been critiqued elsewhere as reinforcing the normative status of heterosexuality (Gamson, 2002; Seidman, 2004)).

One implication of shifting understandings of lesbian and gay identities as ‘threads’, it may be argued, are transformations in the ways in which lesbian and gay identities are ‘done’. Holliday (1999: 487) has argued that people’s ‘comfort’ in identity is ‘produced in the harmony of self explanations and self-presentations – the degree of fit between one’s *explanation* of/for oneself and one’s *expression* of that self.’ This is a useful framing of the relationship between self-understanding and the ‘doing’ of identity for this project, particularly in thinking through the ways in which sexual identities are enacted in situations where lesbian and gay identities are not seen as core identities. One example provided in chapter five related to the disclosure of lesbian and gay identities, something which may be considered central to a politics of recognition. However, and as Seidman (2004: 262-263) argues:

‘...such an identity politic not only has marginalizing and exclusionary effects but reinforces a regime of sexuality...Affirming a lesbian and gay sexual identity still sexualizes the self, reproduces the hetero/homosexual binary as a majority/minority relation, and subjects selves to sexual normalization.’

One theme that emerged from the data was a particular approach to disclosing lesbian and gay identities. It was suggested that ‘coming out’ was often done in ways which minimised the significance of sexual identities, often being articulated ‘in conversation’, sometimes dropped in at the ‘appropriate’ moment. Such an act was frequently positioned as an alternative to a more political expression of sexual identities, typically phrased in terms of not ‘shouting’ about it, or introducing oneself as lesbian or gay. This was, of course, paradoxical. Often the participants endeavoured to not ‘reduce’ themselves to sexuality, or the link between lesbian and gay sexuality and gender as a form of gender non-conformity. However, and as Seidman (2004: 263) states, such a disclosure ‘still sexualizes the self’. What was revealed by the data was the way that this tension shaped the accounts given of self. Those accounts were often an ongoing negotiation between the significance of lesbian and gay labels in naming sexual desire (as discussed in chapter four) and a wish to be seen as ‘individuals’ whose sense of selves was not ‘too tightly scripted’ by those same labels (Appiah, 2005: 110).

Richardson (2004: 401) has suggested that one aspect of the telling of a ‘new story’ of the ‘normal’ lesbian or gay person is a challenging of homo/hetero binary through an assertion of sameness. This was particularly significant in the data with regards to the ‘doing’ of gender. Whilst many participants claimed sameness through the claiming of complexity, they simultaneously questioned the ways in which lesbian and gay identities were seen to be ‘done’. The reduction in the significance of sexual identities often implied a rejection of ‘old stories’ of lesbian and gay identity, and their associated gender performance (Richardson, 2004: 401). This is notable where they have historically been linked with ‘the threat of gender subversion’ (Chasin, 2000, cited in Richardson, 2004: 401). Whilst many questioned the need to ‘do’ lesbian or gay identities through particular gender performances, articulating sexuality instead in terms of desire or preferences with regards to relationships, there was a degree to which, particularly for the young men, the subsequent enactment of gender was ‘normalized’ through conventional gender practices (Seidman, 2002: 323). This was most evident in several claims to a ‘straight acting’ gay identity, as a ‘less feminine or flamboyant’ (Clarkson, 2005: 247) way of doing gay male identities. A way of doing masculinity that is

paralleled with a perceived hegemonic heterosexual masculinity (Connell, 1992), and which has been equated elsewhere with ‘better representations’ of gay men ‘as ‘normal’ guys’ (Clarkson, 2005: 247).

By way of conclusion, it might be suggested that the significance here of the data is not in charting the emergence of these ‘new stories’ of lesbian and gay identity (Richardson, 2004), but to explore how they are engaged with and the paradoxes and tensions which arise from that engagement. The central rationale of this research, as stated in the introduction, is to examine the construction of lesbian and gay identities. Important aspects of the making of sexual selves highlighted by this project are the symbolic processes through which those selves were made meaningful. Whilst potentially questioning the homo/hetero binary through claims to sameness, this project has also sought to address the ways in which that binary is reconstituted through the continued construction of difference. The tensions and paradoxes which were manifested through the negotiation of these understandings of sameness and difference indicated the ways in which sexual selves were formed as a product of conflicts between understandings of sameness and difference. The reconstruction of heterosexuality as the ‘presumed’ form of sexuality, as Seidman (2004: 263) states, ‘reproduc[ing] the hetero/homosexual binary as a majority/minority relation’. Implicated in this was the construction of gender, and the ‘working out’ of ways of ‘doing’ gender as young gay men and lesbians. Whilst lesbians and gay men questioning received gender codes or ascribed notions of gender is not new (Levine and Kimmel, 1998: 26; Stein, 1997: 29), the ‘doing’ of gender as a young lesbian or gay man could not be taken for granted by the young people I interviewed. This represented a significant aspect of how they developed an understanding of themselves as sexual, although this may be something that is of general significance to young people growing up (Robb, 2007).

### **Stories and the Maintenance of Sexual Selves**

Theorizing the self has continued to be a central project to the practice of sociology since the days of the early Chicago school, in which Mead was a central figure (Elliott, 2007: 30). One concern of the theorizing of self, however, is not just the production of self, as emerging in everyday interaction, but the routine

‘maintenance’ of that self (Kimmel, 2007: x). With regards to sexuality, this is something that has been explored in constructionist work on sexual identities (Richardson and Hart, 1981). However, Richardson (2004: 400) sees the maintenance of sexual identities as having ‘received far less attention’ in the literature on sexuality of late. In chapter six, Plummer’s (1995) notion of the sexual story, as a symbolic interaction, was adopted in order to explore the ways that sexual lives are given a sense of coherence and certainty, with sexual identities seen to endure in the telling of those stories. The shape given to sexual lives may be seen to be a product of those stories. This was particularly notable in the stories of sexual ‘becomings’ discussed in chapter six. Plummer (1995: 93) has described the ‘modern story of homosexuality’ as one in which an ‘essential and deterministic causality’ is affirmed. Despite the emergence of ‘new stories’ of the ‘normal’ lesbian and gay (Richardson, 2004), suggestions of sexuality becoming ‘free-floating’ (Giddens, 1993: 14), as well as evidence of a counter ‘anti-normalizing’ queer politics elsewhere (Seidman, 2001), it was interesting to see that these modern stories had endured. However the range of explanations on offer in the accounts given by the participants, and the ongoing critique made of those explanations, may indicate the extent to which stories have diversified. As well as, potentially, indicating a degree of scepticism at the heart of them, where many participants saw fault with different explanations.

In chapter six, the notion of sexual stories was also applied to constructions of the future. McAdams (1988, cited in Plummer, 1995: 172) has argued that ‘[i]dentity stability is longitudinal consistency in the life story.’ It may be suggested from the data presented in chapter six that one aspect of the maintenance of sexual identities, through the telling of sexual stories, is the sense of continuity through pasts, presents and futures. Of course sexual identities are not necessarily maintained, and are open to revision (McAdams, 1998, cited in Plummer, 1995: 172), but for the most part, with the exception of a couple of participants, the young people interviewed for this project maintained a degree of surety in their intimate futures. Current sexual identifications were often seen as having a degree of fixity in the sense that they provided a sense of direction, through which adult lives could be planned.

Both of these types of stories, those of sexual development and imagined adulthoods, are significant in terms of thinking through the ways in which sexual selves are, as Plummer (2003b: 525) puts it, 'open to constant stabilizing and essentializing'. This is something Plummer (2003b: 525) sees as having implications for the ways in which sexuality is theorized, where recently the focus has been on the changeable nature of sexual selves. Instead, Plummer (2003b: 525) argues that sexuality, along with gender, is 'organized very deeply indeed'. One thing that may be drawn from these stories of pasts and futures are the sense that sexual identifications are used in 'telling' a deeper 'truth' of the self that was considered to be enduring. This is something which, in this thesis, is attributed to the sense of embodied desire discussed in chapter four, and the ways in which selves, as sexual, are made sense of and understood in terms of the continuity, and memories, of those desires (Nack, 2000). This may be taken as a particular contribution of this research where, rather than focussing on the instability or variability of sexual identities (Plummer, 2003b: 525), it has addressed the ways in which those were patterned through the telling of stories.

### **Sameness and Difference: Constructing Lesbian and Gay Selves**

One conclusion that may be drawn from the telling of these stories is their utility in providing accounts of 'unity', or 'sameness, and 'difference' (Plummer, 1995: 173). This is an important aspect of the maintenance of sexual selves, as well as being a unifying theme running throughout the thesis. This is something that will be discussed here in pulling out what is considered to be one of the main contributions of the research. Reviewing the literature on sexual selves, Richardson (2004: 400) has suggested that '[i]t is claimed that this complex process of negotiation of the sexual self is managed through the monitoring of 'identity borders''. Something that may be revealed in the stories provided in chapter six are the telling of this sameness and difference, through the negotiation of boundaries with heterosexuality. For instance one theme noted in chapter six was what Weeks (2000: 214) has described as a 'convergence' of homosexual and heterosexual 'ways of life'. It was noted in the final section on adulthood that many participants focused their discussions on intimacy, care and family life. There was, in the articulation of those, a sense of 'likeness' with the desires of heterosexual people. Many of the young lesbians and gay men claimed that they

were no different to heterosexual people, framing their understandings in terms of what are described as the ‘conventions’ of heterosexuality, namely ‘family’ and ‘child-rearing’ (Ahmed, 2006: 177). Of course, this was also in tension with other claims to the ‘normality’ of heterosexuality, and heterosexual parenting which accounts of lesbian and gay patterns of intimacy were often equated with.

This echoed tensions that ran throughout the rest of chapter six, notably in a question with regards to having to account for sexuality, to be able to give a reason. David, for example, (see page 164) raised concerns over the expectation that he should have to give an explanation as to why he was gay since he thought that this may not have to be the case if he were heterosexual. Yet this was offset by a desire for an answer, again it may be asked whether this concern with explaining the ‘aetiology’ of sexual development is shared by young heterosexual people. In chapter five a similar tension was described where there were equivalent questions asked over the need to come out, where some considered that this was something only expected of lesbian and gay people. This was despite frequent claims to sameness with straight people. Indeed, in the section of this conclusion which described chapter five, I highlighted the centrality of this tension between sameness and difference in the construction of lesbian and gay sexual selves.

The issue of sameness and difference, and the ways in which constructions of sameness and difference were engaged with by the young lesbians and gay men interviewed for this project might be taken as central to this thesis. Richardson (2005: 521) has noted that one implication of recent changes in lesbian and gay sexual politics, notably a ‘politics of normalization’, is the challenging of the homo/hetero binary through the claiming of equivalence with heterosexual people. This Richardson (2005: 521) sees as a complex twist where constructions of difference ‘operate at a corporeal level, as evidenced by continuing attempts to identify a distinct ‘homosexual body’’. This may be seen to be a dichotomy which the participants were actively negotiating, as well as being frequently challenged by. The ‘modern’ story of the homosexual as having an ‘essential’ sexuality that can be explained causally (Plummer, 1995: 93) is one evidenced in chapter six. This ‘modern’ story may be seen in terms of a continuity, echoing the theories of

the aetiology of homosexuality which concerned early social constructionists (see literature review). In this thesis, however, this is understood as pertaining to the explanations given for embodied sexual subjectivities, including personal desires, feelings and practices discussed in chapter four. The recourse to essentialist narrative in chapter six is perhaps typical of the kinds of accounts available to describe homosexuality in the West (Terry, 1999; Stein, 2001).

This might, additionally, be understood as a story of difference, where, historically, the aetiology of homosexuality has often been motivated by a desire to understand why people were not heterosexual (heterosexuality often being invisible in previous accounts of the aetiology of sexual development) (Gagnon and Simon, 2005). The adoption of lesbian and gay identities then might be seen in terms of the claiming of an 'essential' difference. However sameness was often claimed simultaneously, with many participants wishing to look beyond this 'embodied difference' to an understanding of sameness as individuals or persons. This was something that was frequently done through the claiming of complex selves as discussed in chapter five. This sameness is further evidenced in claims to normality, particularly in terms of the ways in which lives are lived (as discussed in chapter six). Of course there were tensions evident in the negotiation of these different levels of sameness and difference. The extent to which 'normality', for example, could be claimed was predicated on a construction of a specific monogamous, marital form of heterosexuality as 'normal'. Thus claiming sameness was often done through a distancing of the self from lesbian and gay sexuality, 'normality' for example often being claimed despite their sexuality, with sexuality being 'contained' and 'divided' from this claim to sameness (Nack, 2000: 118).

In an account of the sexual selves of women with sexually transmitted diseases, Nack (2000) claims that 'tainted' areas of the self are 'contained to the private sphere', so as to avoid stigmatizing the core self. One aspect of the changing construction of lesbian and gay identities identified by Richardson (2004: 405, emphasis in original) is a reconfiguration of the boundaries of public and private, in that a rights based movement has campaigned primarily for 'the right to public recognition *and* the right to privacy'. In part, this tension between being

‘recognised’ as lesbian or gay, whilst being allowed to maintain that as a private aspect of the self is a significant one and may be applied to the data provided throughout this thesis. Maintaining a self that is complex and irreducible to sexuality may be taken as a means by which to claim a lesbian and gay sexuality whilst not being wholly defined by that. It may also be taken as wishing to make something public, where it is considered to be an important aspect of the self, and as part of who they are, whilst not maintaining that as a significant part of a public persona. Or perhaps this may be better put as a significant aspect, but not all of it. In terms of the ‘privatization’ of sexuality, this was mirrored in claims to sexuality as something which may be articulated in terms of intimate relationships and personal attractions, as opposed to a central identity.

### **Contributions and Limitations**

What is the significance of this research then in terms of a wider literature on sexuality and symbolic interactionism? One suggestion that may be made is that whilst there is a significant body of literature on the changing construction of lesbian and gay identities, as yet there is little empirical work on the ways in which ‘new stories’ of sexual selves are actually being negotiated and lived. The emphasis on youth in this project is deliberate where it has wanted to focus on a group of people growing up at a specific period of time, and as such was concerned with the ways in which their sexual selves were being made at that moment. This relates back to the issue of social change addressed at the beginning of this thesis, to hope to begin to map out the ways in which sexual identities are being constructed, and the significance attached to those identities. This is an important point, and something to be considered in other research. It suggests a need to address the ways in which the construction of sexual selves are changing as a result of wider shifting understandings of lesbian and gay identities, including the ‘normalization’ of those identities. This is necessary to document what the ways in which identities are changing, as well as the ways in which boundaries between identities are changing, creating new ‘normative’ forms of sexuality, as well as new exclusions.

Of course the data presented here is highly provisional, and any conclusions drawn from it must be aware of the limitations to this research. Particularly when

considering the voices that have not been heard in the research. Miceli (2002: 200) has stated that research on lesbian and gay youth has focused largely on ‘‘out’, urban, and male youth in need of and receiving support’. Ryan and Rivers (2003: 105) echo this where they suggest that lesbians and LGBT youth of colour continue to be under represented in the literature in the UK and US. This is a sampling problem which is potentially recreated in this project. The sample is small and overwhelmingly male, white and focused on people who live in or around large urban areas in the North-East. As stated in the methodology there were a number of problems in recruiting young lesbians, notably due to lack of local groups to access as well as potentially my presence as a male researcher. Issues of class, ‘race’ and ethnicity are also relatively invisible in this project. Any claims that are made are done so with this in mind. More research needs to be done in order to address the ways in which these different intersections shape the construction of sexual selves. For instance, in claims to ‘normality’ or sameness, how are these shaped by gender, class and ‘race’? These are issues that cannot be explored here. As such this needs further attention, and is an area for further research.

This research has attempted to contribute to the literature by offering a sociological account of the construction of sexual selves (Jackson and Scott, 2010b). This is considered to be an important area of work. Whilst the analysis offered in this thesis may be considered partial and slight, it has hoped to begin to explore the ways in which, sociologically, the sexual may be theorized. The use of symbolic interactionism has been deliberate, showing that the tools required to do this are available. Writers such as Gagnon and Simon (2005), Plummer (1975, 1981a, 1995) and more recent work by Jackson (2006a, 2006b, 2007) and Jackson and Scott (2010a, 2010b) provide ways of theorizing sexuality from within people’s everyday interactions. This is something which may be taken up in further research.

## **Appendix A – Relevant Policy Decisions Since 1998<sup>8</sup>**

### **1998**

- Human Rights Act 1998 and Scotland Act 1998 bring European Convention on Human Rights into UK law, enshrining the ‘right to respect for [a person’s] private and family life’, strengthening the position of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in relation to family law.
- First vote in the House of Commons for age of consent for gay male sex to be reduced to sixteen. Defeated in House of Lords.

### **1999**

- Changes to immigration policy legislation mean same-sex couples need only fill a two year, rather than four year, probationary period.
- Law society proposes that unmarried couples, including same-sex partners, should be recognised in law.
- Rail companies legally recognise same sex couples for travel subsidy.
- House of Lords rule that same-sex couples should be allowed to succeed to a tenancy.

### **2000**

- Government lifts ban on lesbians and gay men serving in the armed forces.
- Section 28 repealed in Scotland.

### **2001**

- Age of consent reduced to sixteen.

### **2002**

- Equal rights granted to same-sex couples applying for adoption (not implemented until 2005).

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<sup>8</sup> Sources: LGF (2010); Stonewall (2010).

- Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations come into effect, giving lesbian, gay and bisexual people equal rights in the workplace.
- The Sexual Offences Act abolishes the crime of buggery and gross indecency.

## **2004**

- Civil Partnership Bill Published.

## **2005**

- Civil Partnership Act implemented. The first Civil Partnerships take effect from 21 December.
- Section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 implemented, empowering courts to impose tougher sentences for offences aggravated or motivated by the victim's sexual orientation.

## **2006**

- The Equality Act 2006 establishes Commission for Equality and Human Rights and makes discrimination against lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the provision of goods and legal services illegal.

## **2007**

- Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) 2007 implemented.

## **2008**

- Implementation of Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, allows lesbian partners to be treated as parents of a child conceived together in certain circumstances.

## Appendix B – Interview Guide

### Beginning Interview

- 1) Who is this person: 2) How old are they?
- 3) Are they a student or do they work?
- 4) Are they from Newcastle/North-East or have they come from elsewhere? Class?
- 5) Do they live with parents or not?
- 6) What is your sexuality?**

### Sexual Identity

- 1) How central is your sexuality to how you see yourself? In what way? Do you think this is typical of someone your own age? How do you define the term gay/lesbian?**
- 2) Do you think labels such as gay/lesbian are important? Do you think your view is typical? Do you think young people identify as heterosexual/ straight? Do you think it would have been different had you been this age in the 60s/70s?**
- 3) Can you imagine not identifying as gay/lesbian? Why? Why not? Would you want to not be gay?**
- 4) What makes people gay? Is whatever theory important to how you see yourself? Is it important for people to think about this? Acceptance, justification? Why do people identify as gay? Does it change?**

### Inclusion/Exclusion within categories of gay/lesbian

- 1) Is it important for you to be part of a gay scene/community? Why, why not? Is there such a thing? Feeling at home: Do you? Or do you feel at home in some other scenes, places you hang out? How has this changed over time? Why? Critical/Political: Is there a need? Or are there more relevant scenes/communities you belong to?**
- 2) Do you think that perceptions of homosexuality shape how people see you? Can you give me an example? Do you think that these perceptions are correct? Does this shape how you see yourself? Stereotypes? Are they correct of other gay**

people? What do you think about that? Do you think it would have been different had you been this age in the 60s/70s?

**3) Is it important for you to be recognized and accepted as gay/lesbian? Do you feel to be accepted by straight people you have to present yourself in a certain way? How does this change depending on where you go? Do you feel to be accepted as gay/lesbian by other gay men/lesbians you have to look or act a certain way? Does this matter to you?**

#### **Inclusions/Exclusions over time – what has changed?**

**1) Do you think experiences of being gay/lesbian have changed over the past few decades? Compared to people growing up in 60s/70s? How so? Why? Do you think it is more or less acceptable/visible? Do you think the scene has changed? Is it more or less important? What has not changed?**

#### **Equality: Inclusions/Exclusions**

**1) Do you think gay men and lesbians have the same rights as heterosexuals? How has this changed from previous generations e.g. those growing up in the 60s/70s? What has not changed?**

**2) Do you think it is necessary to get involved and campaign for gay rights? How important are gay rights to you? Why? Why not? Are there more important things to you? Do you think there is still a need to see being gay as a political thing?**

**3) How have recent gains in civil rights shaped how gay men and lesbians can live their lives? What's lost? How is this different from previous generations? Why? How do you think these will affect the things you can do with your life? Respectability?**

#### **Boundaries of exclusion/inclusion between hetero/homosexuality**

**1) Do you think your life might be different if you were heterosexual? Do you think being gay/ lesbian makes you different? Different from hetero men /women? How does it make you the same? In what ways? How would it be the same? How do you think being gay will shape your life as you grow older? How different from straight?**

**2) To what extent do you feel that you are treated differently from heterosexual people? In what ways? Which situations or places, communities (e.g. school, uni, home)? Who by? Which bother you the most? Do you think your view is typical of lesbians/gay men? Any examples? Is this distinctive about now?**

**3) Are there times you would rather people did not know you were gay?\*\***  
*Where? What reasons would stop you from telling someone you are gay/lesbian? Who? Why? Why not? Can you give an example?*

**Ending the Interview**

Are there any final comments you have?

Are there things you expected me to ask about which you think are relevant?

## Appendix C – Groups Approached

Group Contacted	Details	Contact Made
<b>Young Gay Men's Group (16-19) (Accessed)</b>	Web: ***** Phone: ***** Fax: ***** Minicom: *****	Have already been and left fliers, posters. Have contacted again regarding setting up a meeting with a project worker and leaving an updated set of fliers with restricted age limit (16-19 y/old) and doing presentation. Been back in touch with and asked about young lesbians' provision. Can only think of ***** which is for all young women but is NHS funded so cannot use.
<b>Young Gay Men's Group (Cannot access)</b>	Call: ***** Email: ***** Or ***** Web: ***** Or: *****	I have emailed this group at both addresses requesting info on the group. As yet had no response. I called the number and it is no longer operating. After further research I noticed it runs from a place called ***** which operates a broader young person's organisation. The website for ***** says centre will no longer operate from ***** Not sure what this means for the gay youth group. Have received an email. This group is still up however now operates as *****. Waiting for further confirmation as to who the group now serves. No confirmation, cannot call as no phone number, just email.
<b>LGB Youth Group (Accessed)</b>	Phone: ***** Web: ***** Email: *****	Called *****, spoke to him and discussed project, he said fine. Got his email and sent stuff out. Going to arrange to go out to him and have an informal chat. Have posted out stuff to him in mean time.
<b>LGB Youth</b>	Phone:	Have called, got response, said to email

<b>Support Project (16-25) (Accessed)</b>	***** Email: ***** Web: ***** ***** Age: 16-25	stuff and they can all have a look at it. Had response, they said great and will post out to their kids. Have posted to ***** including fliers and information sheets in separate envelopes for them to distribute to people.
<b>LGB Youth Group (16-25) (NHS - Can't access)</b>	Phone: ***** Email: ***** Web: ***** ***** Age: 16-25	Called, no response. Keep getting put through to an answer-machine service after three seconds which the person doesn't subscribe to so I cannot leave message. Will keep trying. No response on email. Found out is NHS so is a no go.
<b>Uni LGBTs (Accessed)</b>	Website: ***** Website: ***** Joint Webspace: *****	I have not used these groups as much now as I had quite a number of students come forward at the beginning though that number fell when I started interviewing. Not worth chasing up just now as of summer hols, though could be useful if I need one or two more people in September as there would be a whole bunch of new students. My research is still advertised however on the **** LGBT Website.
<b>Young Lesbian Group (Defunct)</b>	Phone: ***** Email: *****	Called, no answer. Answer machine says is operated by *****. Will call later. ***** moving premises, no funding to pay the rent. Moving to *****.
<b>Lesbian Bi Youth Group (Defunct)</b>	Phone: ***** *** Age: 16-19	I called this group. ***** Funding has been pulled. Call ***** instead as it is no longer running
<b>Young Women's Project (Cannot Access)</b>	Phone: ***** ***** Web: *****	Contacted ***** at *****. She said best person to contact to get in touch with young lesbians is ***** at the ***** which is connected to the *****. Have emailed her. Waiting

	Email: *****	for a response (28/07/08) Got an email back from a *****, no mention of said group. Instead putting me in touch with ***** at *****. Contacted her. No response.
<b>Young Persons Health Service (NHS Can't Use)</b>		Left fliers there, also hoping to get a copy of there report for service provision for young gay women which will be really helpful.
<b>***** LGB Group Based at ***** (Under 25's) (NHS Cannot Use)</b>	Call: ***** Email: ***** Web: *****	Redirected to this group by ***** after enquiring about the now defunct ***** they used to run. Looked at their webspace, it seems to be currently up and running and operates for men and women. Various contact with *****, wants more confirmation on confidentiality and think about ethical approval. NHS, so can not use.

## Appendix D – Information Sheet (Project Workers)



### Participants Required: Researching Lesbian and Gay Youth

#### Researcher: Edmund Coleman-Fountain, Newcastle University

I am a PhD candidate, supervised by Professor Diane Richardson and Dr Janice McLaughlin at Newcastle University, conducting my doctoral research on sexuality and youth. I hope that you will be able to aid me in approaching young gay men and lesbians, aged 16 to 21, as potential interviewees for my study. If you think you may be able to help please read this information sheet and contact me using the details provided overleaf. I have provided contact details for both my supervisors if you wish to contact them separately.

**Research Objectives:** The purpose of the study is to examine the different ways in which young gay men and lesbians feel part of, or excluded from society due to their sexuality. The research seeks to explore how young gay men and lesbians use their experiences of exclusion and inclusion in making sense of what it means to be gay or lesbian. By listening to people aged between sixteen and twenty-one talk about their sexuality, the research will help us to greater understand what it means to be young and gay or lesbian in contemporary British society and the experiences of exclusion and inclusion which are part of that.

**Recruitment:** I am looking to recruit twenty-five to thirty young gay men and lesbians aged between sixteen and twenty-one living in the North-East of England and split evenly between young men and women to represent the views of both. To do so, I will be approaching a number of LGB youth organisations around the North-East, including university and college LGBT societies. I hope that organisations such as your own will be willing to allow me to advertise my research to young people attending your organisation/group. This could be through distributing flyers and information sheets,

putting up a poster or allowing me to make a brief presentation explaining the details of the research project. People interested in taking part can then contact me directly.

**Research Design:** The field work will be conducted entirely by me under the supervision of Prof Richardson and Dr McLaughlin. The interviews will be approximately one hour long. Questions will address: what it means and what it is like to be young and gay or lesbian; friendship, familial and intimate relationships; and how the social world young gay men and lesbians inhabit shapes their sexual identities.

**Confidentiality and Safety:** During interviewing I am not under any obligation to report anything an interviewee may say that could be defined as illegal. However, disclosure may be required if they were to say something that potentially indicated that they or someone else was at risk of harm. If the interviewee said something that potentially indicated that they or someone else was at risk of harm I would indicate this and the interviewee could then choose whether or not to continue the discussion. We would also discuss what the next steps would be. If the discussion is to be taken further I would go first to my supervisors as well as a nominated child protection lead working for one of the organisations through which I am recruiting interviewees and the issue will be discussed anonymously excluding details of the individuals involved.

These limitations to confidentiality will be discussed with the young person at the beginning of the interview so they are fully aware of what they are agreeing to. Such issues of disclosure will be fully addressed in the consent form.

As part of the planning for this research a police enhanced disclosure has been carried out.

Interviews will take place at Newcastle University. However, if the young person feels safer to do so, it may be beneficial to conduct interviews on your youth group premises if the facilities offer suitably private, quiet space. Of course this is dependent on your say so. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form if they agree to take part. In the interviews I will endeavour only to cover things people feel comfortable with, they will not have to answer any questions on topics that they don't want to talk about. The interview can be ended at any time or cancelled altogether if someone changes their mind about taking part. With the interviewees consent all interviews shall be tape-recorded and transcribed in order to fully appreciate the data provided. Tapes and transcripts shall be kept securely at the university.

**Dissemination:** The results of the study will be used in material I am writing about gay and lesbian youth, including my doctoral thesis, journal articles and presentation papers. This study has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

**Interested?** If you would be interested in assisting me with my project and/or have any further questions I can be contacted by email or phone at:

**Email:** Edmund.Research@ncl.ac.uk

**Phone:** 0191 241 3658 or (mobile)

**Address:** Newcastle University,  
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology,  
Claremont Bridge Building,  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne,  
NE1 7RU

Or contact my supervisors:

**Prof Diane Richardson**

**Email:** diane.richardson@ncl.ac.uk

**Phone:** 0191 222 7643

**Address:** Room: 539, Sociology  
Claremont Bridge Building  
University of Newcastle  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
NE1 7RU

**Dr Janice McLaughlin**

**Email:** janice.mclaughlin@ncl.ac.uk

**Phone:** 0191 222 7511

**Address:** Sociology  
Claremont Bridge Building  
University of Newcastle  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
NE1 7RU

## Appendix D – Information Sheets (Young Persons)



### **Participants Required: Researching Lesbian and Gay Youth**

#### **Researcher: Edmund Coleman-Fountain, Newcastle University**

I am a PhD candidate, supervised by Professor Diane Richardson and Dr Janice McLaughlin at Newcastle University, conducting my doctoral research on sexuality and youth. I am looking for young gay men and lesbians, aged 16 to 21, as potential interviewees for my study. If you think you may be able to help please read this information sheet and contact me using the details provided overleaf.

**Research Objectives:** The research seeks to explore the different ways in which young gay men and lesbians feel part of, or excluded from society due to their sexuality and how these feelings are used in making sense of what it means to be gay or lesbian. By listening to people aged between sixteen and twenty-one talk about their sexuality, the research will help us to greater understand what it means to be young and gay or lesbian in contemporary British society and the experiences of exclusion and inclusion which are part of that.

**Research Design:** The field work will be conducted entirely by me under the supervision of Prof Richardson and Dr McLaughlin. The interviews will be approximately one hour long. Questions will address: what it means and what it is like to be young and gay or lesbian; friendship, familial and intimate relationships; and how the social world young gay men and lesbians inhabit shapes their sexual identities.

**Confidentiality and Safety:** Interviews will take place at Newcastle University. In the interviews I will endeavour only to cover things you feel comfortable with,

you will not have to answer any questions on topics that they don't want to talk about. The interview can be ended at any time or cancelled altogether if someone changes their mind about taking part. With your consent all interviews shall be tape-recorded and transcribed in order to fully appreciate the data provided. Tapes and transcripts shall be kept securely at the university.

During interviewing I am not under any obligation to report anything you may say that could be defined as illegal. However, disclosure may be required if they were to say something that potentially indicated that they or someone else was at risk of harm. If you said something that potentially indicated that you or someone else was at risk of harm I would indicate this and the interviewee could then choose whether or not to continue the discussion.

These limitations to confidentiality will be discussed with you at the beginning of the interview so you are fully aware of what you are agreeing to. Such issues of disclosure will be fully addressed in the consent form.

As part of the planning for this research a police enhanced disclosure has been carried out.

**Dissemination:** The results of the study will be used in material I am writing about gay and lesbian youth, including my doctoral thesis, journal articles and presentation papers. This study has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

**Interested?** If you would be interested in assisting me with my project and/or have any further questions I can be contacted by email or phone at:

**Email:** Edmund.Research@ncl.ac.uk

**Phone:** 0191 241 3658 or (mobile)

**Address:** Newcastle University,  
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology,  
Claremont Bridge Building,  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 7RU

## **Appendix E – Promotional Materials**

### *Following Pages*

Poster: Lesbian and Gay Youth, 16-21

Brochure One: Lesbian and Gay Youth, 16-21

Brochure Two: Young Lesbians, 16-21

Brochure Three: Young Gay Men, 16-19

### *This Page*

Text of Advert for young lesbians.

#### **Research Project: Young Lesbians And Sexual Identity**

Over the past few months at Newcastle University Sociology department we have been running a project on youth and gay and lesbian sexualities and whilst we have had loads of young gay guys come chat to us, we've had hardly any young women. So here's a chance for you to come forward and say your piece.

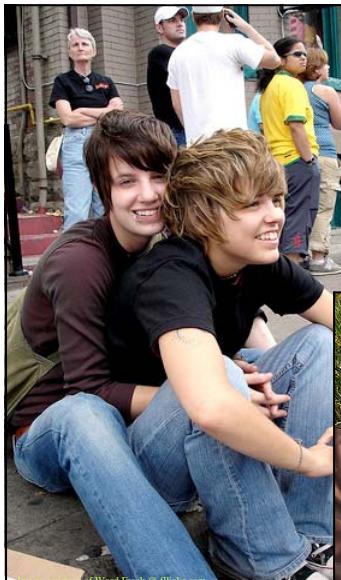
So if you are 16-21 and want to have a chance to voice your opinion on growing up lesbian, coming out to your family and friends, your first girlfriend or even say what you think about Katy Perry's 'I kissed a girl' now's your chance. All that's involved is a short 50 minute interview held here at Newcastle Uni.

If you're interested email: [Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk) and we will get back to you.

# Researching Lesbian and Gay Youth: Have Your Say!

- Are you aged 16 to 21?
- Do you identify as lesbian or gay?
- Want to take part in a new study into lesbian and gay youth?

Here in Sociology we think it is important that your voices and the things that matter to you are heard. This project aims to do just that; finding out just what it is like to young and lesbian or gay today.



If you would like to know more about the project, or are interested in taking part, please call, text or email Ed at the following:

**Mobile:** 07XXXXXXXX

**Email:** [edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk)

Or Write:

Edmund  
Coleman-Fountain  
School of Geography,  
Politics and Sociology,  
5th Floor Claremont  
Bridge Building  
University of Newcastle,  
NE1 7RU

## USEFUL CONTACTS

**National Lesbian & Gay Switchboard**  
Tel: 020 7837 7324 (24 Hours)  
Web: [www.llgs.org.uk](http://www.llgs.org.uk)

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS **NEEDED:**

### **LESBIAN AND GAY YOUTH**

#### **Newcastle Lesbian Line**

Tel/Minicom: 0191 261 2277 (Tues, 7-9pm)  
Mobile: 07968 605 429  
Email: [newcastlelesbianline@hotmail.com](mailto:newcastlelesbianline@hotmail.com)  
Web: [www.newcastlelesbianline.com](http://www.newcastlelesbianline.com)

**NEEDED:**

### **LESBIAN AND GAY YOUTH**

#### **MESMAC (Gay & Bi- Men's Support)**

Tel: 0191 233 1333  
Address: 11 Nelson St, Newcastle, NE1 5AN  
Web: [www.mesmacnortheast.com](http://www.mesmacnortheast.com)

- Are you aged 16 to 21?
- Identify as lesbian or gay?
- Want to take part in a new study on lesbian and gay youth?

Contact **Ed** directly:  
Mobile: 07XXXXXXXX  
Email: [edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk)



Image courtesy of lawandadventure @ flickr.com

## **RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED**

Phone/Text: 07XXXXXXXX  
E-mail: [Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk)

This project is based at Newcastle University and is

## USEFUL CONTACTS

**National Lesbian & Gay Switchboard**  
Tel: 020 7837 7324 (24 Hours)  
Web: [www.llgs.org.uk](http://www.llgs.org.uk)

## YOUNG LESBIAN

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

#### NEEDED:

- Are you aged 16 to 21?
- Do you identify as lesbian?
- Want to get a £10 HMV Voucher

and take part in a new study into  
lesbian youth?

Contact **Edmund** directly:  
Mobile: 07XXXXXXX  
Email: [edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk)

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

## LESBIAN YOUTH PROJECT



Courtesy of Philippe Le Royer (Flickr)

### Newcastle Lesbian Line

Tel/Minicom: 0191 261 2277 (Tues, 7-9pm)  
Mobile: 07968 605 429  
Email: [newcastlelesbianline@hotmail.com](mailto:newcastlelesbianline@hotmail.com)  
Web: [www.newcastlelesbianline.com](http://www.newcastlelesbianline.com)

### Outpost Housing (LGBT Housing Support)

Tel: 0191 222 1937  
Address: The Outpost Housing Project, 13 St  
James St, Newcastle, NE1 4NF  
Web: [www.outpostproject.org](http://www.outpostproject.org)

### Streetwise (Advice & Support for under-25s)

Tel/Minicom: 0191 230 5400  
Address: 35-37 The Groat Market, Newcastle  
Web: [www.streetwisenorth.co.uk](http://www.streetwisenorth.co.uk)

Newcastle University  
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology  
Clarendon Bridge  
Clarendon Road  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
NE1 7RU

Phone: 07XXXXXXX  
E-mail: [Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk)

This project is based at Newcastle University

## USEFUL CONTACTS

### National Lesbian & Gay Switchboard

Tel: 020 7837 7324 (24 Hours)

Web: [www.llgs.org.uk](http://www.llgs.org.uk)

## YOUNG GAY MALE

### Outpost Housing (LGBT Housing Support)

Tel: 0191 222 1937

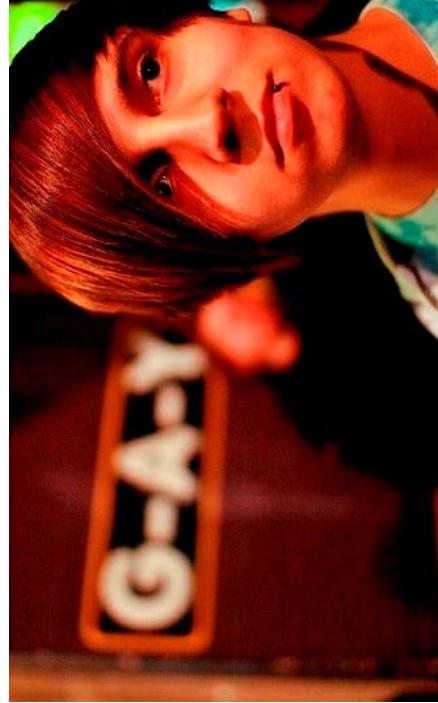
Address: The Outpost Housing Project, 13 St James St, Newcastle, NE1 4NF

Web: [www.outpostproject.org](http://www.outpostproject.org)

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

### NEEDED:

- Are you a young gay man aged from 16 to 19?
- Want to earn a £10 HMV voucher whilst taking part in a new study on lesbian and gay youth?



Courtesy of Idan Cohen (Flickr)

## YOUNG GAY GUYS PROJECT

### MESMAC (Gay & Bi- Men's Support)

Tel: 0191 233 1333

Address: 11 Nelson St, Newcastle, NE1 5AN

Tel: 01642 804 400

Address: 4th Floor, Prudential House, 31-33 Albert Road, Middlesbrough, TS1 1PE

Web: [www.mesmacnortheast.com](http://www.mesmacnortheast.com)

### Streetwise (Advice & Support for under-25s)

Tel/Minicom: 0191 230 5400

Address: 35-37 The Groat Market, Newcastle

Web: [www.streetwisenorth.co.uk](http://www.streetwisenorth.co.uk)

## RESEARCH

Contact **Ed** directly:  
Mobile: 07XXXXXXXX  
Email: [edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk)

Newcastle University  
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology  
Claremont Bridge  
Claremont Road  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
NE1 7RU

Phone/Text: 07XXXXXXXX  
E-mail: [Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk)

## PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

This project is based at Newcastle University and is

# Researching Lesbian and Gay Youth: Have Your Say!



thoughts and feelings about your sexuality. The study has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

## Aims

I am looking to explore what it is like to be young and gay or lesbian today. The aim of the research is to look at the experiences of gay and lesbian youth, exploring what it means for you to be young and gay/lesbian.

## What will this involve?

I am looking for gay men and lesbians aged between 16 and 21 to interview. The interviews should be about an hour long and, if you agree, will be tape recorded.

**Objectives**  
My main objectives are:

- To explore what it means for you to be gay or lesbian;
- To look at how the acceptance of gay men and lesbians impacts on how you see yourself;

- To find out if being gay or lesbian is important in shaping how you see society and how people see you.

## Background

I am a PhD student based at Newcastle University carrying out a study on the experiences of young gay men and lesbians. I want to hear about your experiences of being young and gay or lesbian and your



## GET IN TOUCH

If you would like to know more about the project, or are interested in taking part, please telephone, text or email me at the following:

### Mobile

07XXXXXXX

### Email

edmund.research@ncl.ac.uk

Interviews will be strictly confidential and anonymous. You do not have to give your real name. Interviews will take place within Newcastle University.

Travel expenses will be reimbursed.

## Appendix F – Participants

### *1) Gay Men*

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Access	Interview Date
Kevin	16	6 <sup>th</sup> Former	Northern Pride	18/07/2008
Tom	16	6 <sup>th</sup> Former	Online Space	19/02/2008
Andy	16	6 <sup>th</sup> Former	Snowballing (Kevin)	18/07/2008
Matt	17	College	Online Space	24/06/2008
Dan	18	College	Youth Group	10/03/2008
Warren	19	University	Uni LGBT	Could not arrange
Greg	19	University	Online Space	Arranged for 03/10/2008 Rescheduled for 04/10/2008 Did not show
Chris	19	University	Uni LGBT	10/04/2008
Liam	20	Employed	Northern Pride	24/07/2008
David	20	University	Uni LGBT	06/06/2008
Kenny	20	Employed	Online Space	02/04/2008 Did not show
William	20	College	Online Space	22/04/2008
Ben	20	University	Uni LGBT	09/04/2008
Mike	20	University	Uni LGBT	12/03/2008

Nathan	21	Employed	Youth Group	25/06/2008
Jack	21	Unemployed	Youth Group	03/06/2008
Steve	21	College	Youth Group	08/04/2008

**2) Lesbians**

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Accessed	Interview Date
Katy	18	Unemployed	Online Space	Could not arrange suitable time/space
Joanne	18	University	Uni LGBT	Arranged for 10/10/2008 Rescheduled for 13/10/2008 Did not show
Louise	19	University	Uni LGBT	06/11/2008
Jess	19	University	Northern Pride	21/07/2008
Anna	19	University	Uni LGBT	18/12/2008
Samantha	19	Employed	Online Space	29/02/2008
Alexandra	19	University	Northern Pride	21/07/2008
Rachel	21	Employed	Snowballing (Elizabeth)	Arranged for 18/12/2008 Did not show.
Elizabeth	21	Employed	LGBT Newsletter	Arranged for 18/12/2008 Did not show

## Appendix G – Consent Form



### Consent Form

#### Lesbian and Gay Youth

**Researcher: Edmund, Newcastle University**

Please Select as Appropriate

Have you read the attached information sheet? Yes/No

Do you feel you know enough about the research project? Yes/No

Do you know that taking part is completely voluntary? Yes/No

Do you know you can stop being involved at any time? Yes/No

Do you know that what you say will be treated in strict confidence? Yes/No

Are you aware that information may be passed on if there are concerns of anyone being harmed? Yes/No

Do you agree to be interviewed? Yes/No

Do you agree to be tape-recorded? Yes/No

Signed..... Date.....

Name..... (Please print in BLOCK LETTERS)

**Signature of Researcher.....**

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