The sociological construction of gender and sexuality

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Abstract

This essay considers how we might come to understand social constructionism sociologically. It examines a number of related approaches to gender and sexuality that speak to sociological concerns and might be termed social constructionist: historicism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and materialist feminism. By recognising that social constructionism is multifarious rather than unified, we find that each social constructionist approach offers particular strengths for analysing the complexities of gender and sexuality. Through closely analysing these approaches and some of the criticisms of them we can reassert sociology's specific contribution, and embrace social constructionist analyses which address the multilayered characteristics of the social in general and gender and sexuality in particular.

Introduction

Precisely what *is* social constructionism? The term has been adopted in several disciplines and subdisciplines (sociology, social psychology, history, anthropology, sociolinguistics, literary theory), and in different approaches within each of these. In spite of this, social constructionism has rarely been constituted as an object of study in itself, particularly with respect to questions of gender and sexuality. The lack of a systematic approach to social constructionist theories has frequently led to monolithic and reductionist descriptions by adherents and critics alike. Understandings of what social constructionism means are, in turn, influenced by disciplinary preoccupations. In recent critical social psychology, for example, 'social constructionism' most often denotes the processes by which discourse constitutes subjectivity, and sometimes represents a form of linguistic determinism. Meanwhile, social constructionism's detractors in psychiatry and biology tend to conflate the term with a simplistic labelling theory or notions of 'learned behaviour'. In light of this confusion and imprecision, I would like to offer a number of interventions.

First, we ought to recognise the multiplicity of social constructionism or, more accurately, social constructionism*s*, and proceed accordingly. When we dig deeper we observe not a single smooth, undifferentiated account of the social world, but a matrix of overlapping perspectives that converge with and

diverge from each other in various ways. To this end, the discussion that follows works through some of the similarities and differences between four forms of social constructionism that have proven particularly relevant for the sociological study of both gender and sexuality:[1] historicism, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and materialist feminism. These are somewhat ideal-typical classifications, and they do not express the totality of social constructionist approaches. However, by subdividing social constructionism in this way its plurality becomes apparent, and we can then consider how we might theorise the complexities of such multifariousness.

Second, I explore the relationships between social constructionisms and sociology as a discipline. Here I am interested in how historicism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and materialist feminism draw from and speak to sociology. Between them, these perspectives address a number of themes central to sociological theorising of gender and sexuality: contingency, meaning, interaction and social structure. Historicist approaches have contributed a close attention to social conflict and stability, as well as shifts in social structures such as work, family and the state (Carlson (ed.), 1990; Lorber, 1994). They highlight the contingency of social arrangements and identities, demonstrating how the meaning and organisation of gender and sexuality vary over time in any given culture (Rahman, 2000; Weeks, 1986). Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology explain how social relationships inform the construction and deployment of meaning and the accomplishment of self in everyday life (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1992; Garfinkel, 1967). Ethnomethodology has been influential in sociological discussions of gender as an everyday achievement, while symbolic interactionism has given rise to a useful theory of sexual scripts. Materialist feminism, which first emerged in France during the 1970s, combines a radically anti-essentialist approach to gender and sexuality with a socio-structural analysis informed by Marxism (Adkins, 1996; Delphy, 1984; Jackson, 1998a).

In particular, we might ask how combining the strengths of these four different social constructionist approaches allows us to address the multilayered character of the social in general, and gender and sexuality in particular. In this way, social constructionist perspectives offer greater complexity and utility to contemporary sociology than is often supposed. Such talk of multiplicity and complexity brings us to a third consideration: post-structuralism's impact upon social constructionist approaches. The exclusion of post-structuralism from my four forms of social constructionism is deliberate. Not only is post-structuralism's relationship to sociology theoretically fraught (Jackson, 2000; Seidman, 1997, chapter 2),[2] but post-structuralist writing frequently claims innovations that were actually developed within sociology earlier on (Lundgren, 2000: 56; Plummer, 1998: 609; Smith, 2002: ix).

Thus, writers inside and outside of sociology credit post-structuralism with displacing assumptions about gendered, sexual and bodily 'essence' (Seidman, 1997: 57; Weedon, 1999: 102; 130), critiquing scientific truth claims (Delamont, 2003: 142; Seidman, 1997: 48), asserting the constitutive role of

language (Waugh, 1998: 179; Weedon, 1999: 102), deconstructing established social binaries (Kirby, 2001: 31), and abandoning the quest for 'truths' about the social world in general (Waugh, 1998: 179–80; Weedon, 1999: 108; Yeatman, 1993: 231). As I will demonstrate, these impulses have long been influential within sociology. To give a further example, sociologists often attribute to Judith Butler the idea that the gendered self is better understood as a socially negotiated 'performance' than an innate quality (Cameron, 1996/7; Campbell, 2000; Plumridge *et al.*, 2002), even though this insight was developed much earlier within symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

Social constructionism and post-structuralism are often assumed to be coterminous, as if all post-structuralism were social constructionist and vice-versa (Burr, 1995: 12; Collins, 1995: 493; Seidman, 1997: 48; Williams, 1999: 798–9). Accordingly, some sociologists downplay the compelling contributions made by the interpretive, Marxist and feminist traditions within their own discipline, particularly in relation to gender (Bell, 1999; Kirby, 2001; Seidman, 1997, chapter 2).[3] These traditions are considered incapable of dealing with nuance and multiplicity, rendering their replacement with post-structuralist approaches inevitable (Barrett and Phillips, 1992; Nicholson and Seidman, 1995; Seidman, 1997, chapter 2). Often these post-structuralist replacements draw almost entirely upon the work of authors located outside of sociology (for a good example, see Delamont, 2003, chapter 8).

In light of this situation I propose something of a sociological turning of the tables, privileging sociology's traditions but where appropriate bringing in post-structuralist ideas for consideration along the way. In this way, the claim that post-structuralist analyses are the originary ones can be contested, and a number of other sociologically useful perspectives can be foregrounded. At the same time, we can gesture toward solving some of the binds in which post-structuralist social theory finds itself.

The fourth main intervention I wish to make concerns the already existing critique of social constructionist approaches. These criticisms come from those who are broadly sympathetic to some of the postulates of historicism, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and or materialist feminism, as well as those broadly antagonistic to any suggestion that the social world possesses its own dynamics instead of inheriting biological or psychological imperatives from a socially unmediated 'nature'. There are several key criticisms, which I address in the later stages of the essay: that social constructionist approaches deny social 'reality', pay insufficient attention to inequality, and cannot account for the aetiologies ('causes') of gendered and sexual subjectivities. An investigation of these criticisms is useful as a means of defense, certainly, but it also provides a way of sharpening our analysis of the multiplicity and specificities of social constructionist approaches to the social world. Perhaps ironically, the criticisms of social constructionist perspectives highlight the value of their contribution to the sociology of gender and sexuality.

I have organised the following sections of this essay around each of the four forms of social constructionism outlined above, although the similarities

between ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism lead me to group them together under the one heading. The individual treatment of these forms of social constructionism is followed by a consideration of their uniqueness and relatedness, their critics, and their contributions to current sociology. Through this process, we can move towards developing a set of social constructionist tools which assist us to address the multilayered characteristics of the social in general, and gender and sexuality in particular.

Historicism

Historicism can broadly be understood as social constructionism as applied to history. David Halperin prefers the term 'historicism' to 'social construction-ism', which he considers 'hopelessly out of date' (Halperin, 2002: 11). There seems to be little compelling justification for Halperin's statement of intel-lectual fashion, although I see a certain sense in apportioning a specific label to social constructionist investigations of gender and sexuality that employ historical methods. After all, these invoke a particular set of concerns, as will become clear in the following discussion.

There are several key historical examinations of the construction of 'sex', and these problematise the assumed self-evidence of 'male' and 'female' as either 'natural' or 'cultural' categories. In his famous work on the eighteenth-century understandings of genitalia, Thomas Laqueur (1990) argues that the vagina was seen by medical illustrators as an inverted penis. From this, he con-tends that our current understanding of two distinct, opposite sexes emerged during the eighteenth century, supplanting a 'one sex model' in which the female appeared as an inside-out variation on the male. Biological 'difference' then became the key site for the contestation of men's and women's relative social position (1990: 152). Laqueur's work illustrates how the meanings attributed to bodies have varied historically in crucially important ways.

Other authors have investigated the historical construction of sex through the study of hermaphroditism or intersex (Dreger, 1998; Foucault, 1980; Hird and Germon, 2000). Dreger, for example, argues that nineteenth-century medics demanded the delineation of the sexes amid the rise of first-wave fem-inism and a growing interest in gender role variability in non-European cul-tures. As a result, any morphological ambiguities required explanation in ways they did not previously (1988: 26–8). Denise Riley (1988) offers yet another approach, exploring the 'volatility' of 'woman' as a meaningful social category. Riley argues that the oppositionality of the sexes requires historicising so that we may observe its ruptures and discontinuities. Her argument is influenced by post-structuralism, particularly the suggestion that 'woman' and 'man' con-stitute historically specific and multiply differentiated subject positions (Bell, 1999: 7; Hennessy, 1993: 137).

By far the more extensive literature, however, concerns the historical speci-ficity of sexual desires and sexual identities (Chauncey, 1994; Greenberg, 1988;

McLaren, 1999; Phillips and Reay, 2002; Weeks, 1999). In part, this research explores how categories such as 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' have become central to the way we now understand sexuality, and takes issue with the idea that people in past times inhabited sexual identities that more or less reflect contemporary ones (Halperin, 2002: 3). Historians have also challenged other apparent certainties, such as the inextricable intertwining of sexual desire, intimate attachment and romantic love (Katz, 2001; Oram and Turnbull, 2001).

Much work on the historical construction of modern sexual identities takes the rise of sexology in the nineteenth century as its key reference point (Bristow, 1997: 12–61). During this period, sexologists (usually doctors or psychiatrists) catalogued sexual predilections in minute detail, constructing phenomena such as nymphomania, zoophilia and many more obscure. In so doing they worked to consolidate a plethora of emergent sexual personages of whom 'the homosexual' was the most notable (e.g. Krafft-Ebing, 1932 [1886]). Michel Foucault contends that sexology consolidated the idea of the homosexual personage with a case history, a 'kind of interior androgyny' and 'possibly a mysterious physiology'. In his famous words, 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species' (Foucault, 1990: 43).[4]

One of the ironies of Foucault's influence is that he was not primarily a social historian, and has even been criticised for the inaccuracy of some of his historical accounts and their periodisation (Epstein, 1994: 193; Halperin, 2002: 7). He also tends to underplay the role of those advocates who lobbied against sodomy laws and defended same-sex love as 'natural' in certain individuals (Robb, 2003). However, Foucault's genealogical method, which advocates the systematic unearthing of sexuality's shifting configurations and relations of power, has proven useful. Rather than conceiving of sexuality as an unchanging individual essence that we might trace over time, we can investigate its contingency upon historically specific frameworks of thought and practice (McIntosh, 1968). Sexual subjectivities and classifications have emerged within multidimensional processes involving the personal, the discursive and the impacts of social institutions. For example, economic conditions, geographical mobility and changes in the structure of the family are all reflected in the organisation of sexuality (D'Emilio, 1983; Roseneil, 2002). While we might deduce the sexual behaviour of some who lived in the past, we cannot project contemporary notions of sexual identity back onto them, precisely because such identity is historically and culturally specific (Murray, 2002: 84).

But what of individuals and their often strong belief in a personal sexual 'truth'? Both Jonathan Katz and Carole Vance suggest that not only are identities socially constructed, but so too are the desires usually believed to run so deep under any cultural veneer as to be somehow 'biological' (Katz, 2001; Vance, 1998). Katz rejects the 'residual essentialism' in the suggestion that there is some 'natural' and universal sexual impulse lying just below the surface of socially imposed labels and categories (2001: 9–11). Instead, he suggests that over time 'the sexual' as a sphere of action and affect changes shape

on a level more fundamental than the labels used to describe it, so experiences of sexual desire and the meanings of sexual acts also shift. Katz and Vance both argue that affectionate and erotic feelings and pleasures are reconfigured as society changes (Katz, 2001: 10–11; Vance, 1998: 166–7).

For example, 'love' has been organised differently at different times (Jackson, 1993: 203; Katz, 2001: 36–9; 112; Seidman, 1991: 1–5). Katz argues that during the early nineteenth century romantic love and sexual desire were regarded as quite separate, with romance sited on a spiritual plane distinct from sensual pleasure. As a result, women and men could quite freely declare their passionate love and devotion to others of the same sex without social censure. During the latter part of the century, however, the sexological construction of homosexuality as perverse conflated passionate attachment and renegade sexuality and at the same time 'stigmatized all of them as a single, sexually deviant personal identity' (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1998: 130).

The complex continuities and ruptures between same-sex sexuality and intense emotional commitments continue to raise interesting questions even now. For example, male homosociality (the often intense attachments between men in gender-segregated social worlds) and its contradictory relationship to homosexuality remain highly salient in the social construction of masculinity (Sedgwick, 1985). While homosociality has been often deliberately – and sometimes violently – separated from male homosexuality, both share a certain complex commitment to masculine solidarity, and are at times barely distinguishable in this respect (Brickell, 2005b; Zeeland, 1995).

The boundaries between sex, commitment and intimacy are also difficult to draw in the history of relationships between women. Some historians argue that a modern 'lesbian' identity ought to be understood as primarily sexual, marking a woman's sexual involvement with other women and her difference from prevailing sexual norms (Duggan, 2003: 73; Oram and Turnbull, 2001: 1–15). However, others warn against defining 'lesbian' in narrowly sexual terms, arguing that this denies the continuities between time periods and different aspects of women's commitment to each other. Following Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of the 'lesbian continuum', they argue that intimacy between women is likely to remain invisible if the particularities of sexuality between women form the sole focus of enquiry (Jeffreys, 1989; Laurie, 1987).

In summary, a focus on history proves useful for sociology because it sets own our social arrangements of gender and sexuality in their longer-reach context, thus demonstrating the particularity and contingency of sexuality as it is currently organised (Phillips and Reay, 2002: 3). Such an anti-essentialist approach allows us to examine shifts in the interpretations and organisation of sexuality in the light of more thoroughgoing social changes, and to consider the processes through which sexuality is differentially instantiated in individuals. Historical change may involve continuities, overlays and accretions in the organisation of gender and sexuality as well as sharper ruptures, although we ought to be careful about forming *a priori* judgements that involve projecting contemporary social arrangements and understandings upon the past

(Halperin, 2002: 3; 12). Lastly, historical research provides the longer-reach context for those theorising sexuality's shifting forms in our contemporary society, be they the 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999) or the (re-)blurring of distinctions between homosexuality and hetero-sexuality (Archer, 2002; Bech, 2003).

Ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism

While historical approaches have been highly influential within sociology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism are usually more explicitly identified with sociology as a discipline. These share the phenomenological assumption that the world has meaning only insofar as it becomes meaningful to its inhabitants, and the contention that the social world develops as its participants interact with each other.[5]

Ethnomethodology is concerned primarily with how social life and the individual identities and interpersonal relationships that characterise it are achieved or accomplished through interaction and language. The methods used to create meaning are also worthy of study, so *how* society's members manage their everyday worlds is of prime importance (Craib, 1984: 90; Garfinkel, 1967: 1–4). Since the 1970s, ethnomethodological approaches have been adopted by those wishing to explore how gender is achieved through action and interaction. A rejection of essentialism lies at the heart of this project, as it does in post-structuralist writing: there is no authentic or 'natural' maleness or femaleness. Instead, the subject is gendered through social practices such as naming and talk that construct and relay meaning.[6] Even the attributes of our bodies that we understand as 'biological' markers of sex – such as genitalia – hold no significance prior to social interaction. Instead, these acquire rich layers of meaning that render them crucial markers of social distinction.

The 'sex/gender distinction', developed by Robert Stoller in 1968 and subsequently adopted for feminism by Ann Oakley and others, was never taken up in ethnomethodological studies of gender. According to the distinction, 'sex' denotes a biological distinction between male and female, and 'gender' the cultural overlay that creates men and women, boys and girls. Erving Goffman did not adopt such a distinction because he saw no biological truth to 'sex', arguing instead that any division of bodies into one of two sexes is the outcome of the application of meaning through language in the first instance (Goffman, 1977: 319). Such social practices do not express 'natural' differences so much as produce them (Goffman, 1977: 324; Garfinkel, 1967: 135; Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 155), an argument that presages Judith Butler's suggestion that language performatively constitutes those sex/gender categories of which it speaks (Brickell, 2003; Butler, 1990). Thus, gendered selves are managed presentations or performances rather than expressions of internal truths (Goffman, 1959). In turn, ethnomethodologists (and, indeed,

symbolic interactionists) argue that the subject's sense of gendered selfhood arises through routinised and managed interaction with others within shared 'communities of understanding' about what gender 'is' and what it 'means' (Garfinkel, 1967: 181–2).

Garfinkel (1967) and Kessler and McKenna (1978; 2000) argue that the assumption that sex is 'natural' is not a self-evident expression of any actual underlying ontology, but is instead a socially constructed 'natural attitude'. This 'natural attitude' demands that one accomplish either a socially acceptable maleness or femaleness. Thus, becoming one or the other sex is a 'moral' or evaluative matter rather than a 'natural' one (Garfinkel, 1967: 123–4; Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 163). More recently, others have further developed this analysis of constraint and accountability (Fenstermaker and West, 2002; West and Zimmerman, 1991). They contend that in 'doing gender' we are required to exhibit a certain competence and are thus accountable to the normative conceptions of others. If we fail to 'do' our gender appropriately, we are liable to be called into account and may even be physically disciplined.[7] West and Zimmerman (1991: 14) suggest that this constraint may involve the 'virtual' as well as 'real' presence of others, evoking Foucault's work on self-surveillance within social regimes of normalisation and discipline (Foucault, 1977).

There is a structural element to the accomplishment of an 'appropriate' gender, ensuring this process is neither voluntaristic nor transcendent of social demands. As constraint is exercised, structure is imposed on the proceedings (Fenstermaker and West, 2002: 212–13). This has wider implications. As we do gender, we involve ourselves in the ongoing construction of distinctions between 'male' and 'female' and the accretion of social expectations onto those categories. These are then declared 'natural', which in turn legitimates their ongoing existence (Fenstermaker and West, 2002: 207). 'Doing gender' may also involve 'doing power', men 'doing dominance' and women 'doing deference' (West and Zimmerman, 1991: 32). However, other sociologists have suggested that ethnomethodology's account of power is incomplete, paying insufficient attention to the reproduction of gendered inequalities (Collins, 1995: 491–4; Smith, 2002: xi; Weber, 1995: 499–502). I will return to this question in later sections of the discussion.

What of sexuality? From the 1960s onwards, John Gagnon and William Simon took up a number of key insights from the symbolic interactionist tradition (Gagnon and Simon, 1969; 1973; Gagnon, 1999; Simon, 1996). Symbolic interactionism focuses on how meaning is created, modified and put into action by individuals in the process of social interaction (Craib, 1984: 73–9). Famously, symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer suggested that people act toward 'things' (objects, other people, institutions, ideals and activities) 'on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them' (Blumer, 1969: 2). The meanings that arise through social interaction come to have a sufficiently wide purchase to enable shared understandings of social life (a 'common world') in which participants come to hold strong investments (Berger and Luckmann, 1969). However, while we may be committed to our current

understandings, the social world is also provisional and always changing, albeit in ways informed by current and past arrangements (Blumer, 1969, chapter1).

Gagnon and Simon reject the naturalistic contention that sexual behaviour involves the expression of inherent 'drives', arguing instead that sexuality is an aspect of social life like any other and that the meanings granted to it constitute its most important characteristic. Nothing is inherently 'sexual': whether or not particular activities are *considered* sexual is specified in particular locations, times and cultures, as are judgements about the appropriateness of these activities (Plummer, 2002).[8] The symbolic interactionist position predates the post-structuralist claim that there is no 'sex' outside of discourse and culture (Weedon, 1999: 117; 123).

Gagnon and Simon's theory of 'sexual scripts', patterned constellations of language and action, convention and expectation, explores the connections between the wider social context and individuals' sexual commitments and experiences. Scripts operate on three analytic levels: cultural scenarios, the interpersonal and the intrapsychic (Simon and Gagnon, 1987; Simon, 1996). Cultural scenarios are made available in the society at large and prescribe the *what* and *how* of sexual conduct and its forms. With whom might one engage sexually, why and when? What might one expect to feel? Which cues might one act upon and how? What gestures and utterances might one employ and to what effect? Interpersonal scripts involve individuals shaping these broader cultural scenarios in ways that facilitate sexual exchanges. They mediate individuals' relationship to the wider world of sexual meanings and regulate sexual interactions.

At the intrapsychic level the construction of sexual selves involves the routinisation and internalisation of wider sexual meanings and the development of sexual 'careers' (Whittier and Simon, 2001).[9] Individuals' relationships to scripts generally stabilise once they attain a sufficient degree of 'sociosexual competence' and sexual satisfaction, although interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts may require some renegotiation if the individual moves to a new cultural context (Simon, 1996: 51). Intrapsychic scripts do not emerge out of a mechanistic form of 'socialisation', but are somewhat idiosyncratic composites laminated together by the individual who manipulates the resources and constraints provided by the surrounding culture (Whittier and Simon, 2001). While some post-structuralists claim that discourses produce sexual subjectivity (e.g. Weedon, 1999: 102), symbolic interactionist authors offer an account that is more reflexive, nuanced and flexible. Human agency does not disappear entirely under the influence of a discursive determinism, but plays out in an active engagement with the surrounding culture.

Recently other authors have explored the ways in which we draw upon sexual scripts as we learn how to 'do' sexuality within particular social contexts. Keys (2002) considers how the gender-segregated hierarchies of men's prisons can lead inmates to construct scripts around sex between men that differ from those prevalent on the 'outside'. Mutchler (2000) explores young gay men's stories of sex and safety and observes that public campaigns for

'safer sex' have required individuals to renegotiate their interpersonal scripts and sometimes even their basic understandings of what 'sex' means. Research into heterosexual dating scripts by Laner and Ventrone (2000) suggests that gendered scenarios of 'romantic love' may both support and undermine traditional expectations about gendered sexual behaviour, implicating individuals in the renegotiation of interpersonal scripts. This research raises the possibility that some scripts are more influential than others and that dominant sexual scripts might be created and reworked to varying degrees (Gutterman, 2001: 60).

Scripting theory provides a useful – and somewhat overlooked – contribution to the sociology of sexuality. It is relentlessly social, arguing that while the 'private world' of desire is often experienced as 'originating in the deepest recesses of the self' (Simon, 1996: 43), this 'world' in fact emerges at the intersection of social meanings and ongoing processes of self-creation. Like historicist approaches to sexuality, scripting theory insists upon sexuality's contingency and the constructed character of the narratives employed to make sense of individual and collective experiences. A scripting approach offers one way to bridge the divide between shifts in historical and cultural organisation on the one hand and the instantiation of sexuality within the individual on the other, although there is much scope for further work in this area.

However, the question of structural inequality that arises with ethnomethodology also haunts symbolic interactionism (Jackson, 1999, chapter 1; Rahman, 2000, chapter 2). Scripting approaches offer only a very limited consideration of inequalities within sexual interactions and on the broader social level, even though such an analysis would not be incompatible with scripting theory *per se*. There is no reason why we cannot consider the construction and mobilisation of sexual scripts alongside an analysis of power and social structures. Questions of power and inequality come to the fore in materialist feminist approaches to gender and sexuality, and is to these that I now turn.

Materialist feminism

Materialist feminism combines some of the impulses of Marxism and radical feminism, and its key figures started writing in France during the 1970s. Of these, Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig are the best known in the English-speaking world, although Colette Guillaumin and Nicole-Claude Mathieu have also been influential (Leonard and Adkins, 1996). More recently, aspects of this French feminism have been adopted by a number of writers in Britain and the United States (Hennessy, 1993; 2000; Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997; Jackson, 1998a; 1998b; 1999; 2000; Walby, 1986; 1997). Two interwoven aspects of materialist feminism are particularly relevant for an overview of social constructionism. The first is the theoretical prominence given to social structures, always thoroughly contingent upon social organisation and yet at the same time highly significant and bearing profound con-

sequences. The second aspect is ontological: arising from highly structured social processes, the forms gender and sexuality take are effects rather than causes of inequality.

From Marxism, materialist feminism takes an analysis of oppression as systematic and built into the structures of society. According to a Marxist materialism, relations of production, and hence the appropriation of labour power, form the basis for other social relationships. Materialist feminism does not suggest that gender relations are superstructurally constituted in any economistic sense (Rahman and Witz, 2003: 246). However, a number of Marxist insights about the importance of labour and structural processes in the creation of social life are reworked in order to explain gendered hierarchy and the ensuing claim that gender differences are 'natural'.

Materialist feminists suggest that men and women exist in a class-like relationship, in which women's selfhood and labour power are often appropriated by men (Guillaumin, 1996; Jackson, 1998b: 135). The household is a key site for such appropriation, where women are expected to carry out unpaid manual and emotional labour for men (Delphy, 1984, chapter 4). Women's labour power is often then remunerated indirectly, through the wage paid to and controlled by men (Walby, 1986: 53–4). Some materialist feminists argue that this relationship of appropriation constitutes the gender division at its most fundamental level:

> [T]he reason the two groups [sexes] are distinguished socially is because one dominates the other in order to use its labour. In other words, it is the relationship of production that produces the two classes 'men' and 'women' (Delphy and Leonard, 1992: 258).

Materialist feminism employs Marxist analogies of appropriation, while also reflecting the 'sex class' analysis developed within radical feminism where patriarchy is recognised as an independent sphere of social action (Walby, 1990: 3).[10] Appropriation, however, is not only a characteristic of the relationships between women and men. It is also the means by which sexual difference is itself established and maintained, constituting the ontologies of gender at the most fundamental level. In much the same way that Marx argued that the 'proletariat' and the 'bourgeoisie' arose from the labour process, materialist feminists argue that 'men' and 'women' are constructed as categories through their relationship of appropriation. In other words, 'men' and 'women' would not exist outside of a relationship of inequality; inequality comes first and difference after. As Delphy suggests, '[i]f women were the equals of men, men would no longer equal themselves' (Delphy, 1993: 8). Following this logic, Wittig argues that feminism's goal for the future of gender ought to follow Marx's for class:

> The class struggle is precisely that which resolves the contradictions between two opposed classes by abolishing them at the same time that it

constitutes and reveals them as classes. The class struggle between women and men, which should be undertaken by all women, is that which resolves the contradictions between the sexes, abolishing them at the same time that it makes them understood (Wittig, 1992: 3).

Given that women and men are social rather than natural categories, materialist feminists join ethnomethodologists in rejecting a distinction between ('biological') sex and ('cultural') gender. Instead, divisions between 'male' and 'female' and 'sex' and 'gender' are symbolic and political, and therefore socially contingent (Delphy, 1993; Jackson, 1998b). Materialist feminism and ethnomethodology also share the contention that bodily morphologies are rendered significant only through socially agreed-upon meanings. However, for materialist feminism these meanings are conditioned by social processes involving particular relations of power. From these processes a series of socially relevant and hierarchical distinctions emerges (Delphy, 1984: 23).

In this view, essentialist perspectives on gender (referred to by Guillaumin as the 'naturalist discourse') are not only wrongheaded, but are effects of domination that serve a powerful legitimating and hegemonic function (Guillaumin, 1996: 89–102; Rahman, 2000: 96–7; Wittig, 1992: 2). This is not to say that 'men' and 'women' are fictions, however. Although gender 'difference' does not arise from 'nature', it is deeply socially significant precisely because it is brought into being through hierarchical social processes (Jackson, 1998b: 138). In this sense, 'difference' is both entirely socially constructed and profoundly material.

Sexuality emerges from within these particularly gendered social dynamics, rendering an analysis of gender crucial for any investigation of sexuality (Jackson, 1999: 124). Categories such as 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' have no meaning without their gendered underpinnings, and we always bring our genders to sexual interactions. Materialist feminism shares with historicism and symbolic interactionism the conviction that there is no essential 'drive' underlying sexuality, thereby rejecting the widespread belief that 'repression' constitutes the primary form of power in the sexual realm.

Materialist feminists offer a number of interventions into the well-worn debate over whether heterosexuality ought to be understood as a form of institutionalised gender inequality, or whether assertions of women's sexual pleasure can subvert notions of women's sexual passivity (Richardson (ed.), 1996; Vance (ed.), 1984). Delphy suggests that because heterosexuality is usually understood as an expression of gender complementarity, it expresses something fundamental about a distinction predicated upon domination (Delphy, 1993: 8). What is more, it may involve men's appropriation of women's emotional and sexual labour power as institutionalised in the marriage contract and extended into the workplace (Adkins, 1995, chapter 2; Guillaumin, 1996: 82; Hennessy, 2000: 63). Some materialist feminists also argue that monogamy and ideologies of romantic love help to sustain the power of institutionalised heterosexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Langford,

1999, chapter 1). There is some disagreement within materialist feminism over whether or not heterosexuality is always exploitative on the individual level. For example, although Wittig (1992: 20) implies that heterosexuality is always oppressive of women, Jackson contends that experiences of individual women cannot simply be read off overarching inequalities at the institutional level (Jackson, 1999, chapter 9).

If heterosexuality expresses a complementarity between the two genders as they are constituted, then homosexuality appears as something of a logical impossibility, posing a threat to the forms of appropriation through which heterosexuality and gender are mutually defined. Heterosexuality is not only privileged, but is also taken for granted to such a degree that it is unmarked within symbolic orders while homosexuality is marked as Other and devalued (Wittig, 1992: 25). In this sense materialist feminism shares ground with the notion of 'heteronormativity' that emerged within those loosely affiliated approaches referred to as 'queer theory' (Jagose, 1996; Warner, 1996). Within heteronormativity, men and women are constructed as sexual opposites in ways that assume the ubiquity of heterosexuality, such that one can only achieve true 'masculinity' and 'femininity' by becoming and remaining heterosexual (Garlick, 2003: 158–9).

However, some of those writing within a materialist feminist tradition have argued that this 'queer' emphasis on heteronormativity is accurate in one sense but overly simplistic in another. While heteronormativity accurately describes the exclusion of homosexuality from the realm of the socially normative, it does not account for the power relations within or between 'gay' and 'lesbian', and within 'queer' theories heterosexuality usually appears as a force that disciplines homosexuality but itself contains no internal differentiation or hierarchy (Jackson, 1999, chapter 12). As Jackson suggests, it is important to understand heterosexuality in terms of hierarchies between women and men, and not simply as the normative form of sexuality.[11]

In summary, materialist feminist writing on gender and sexuality suggests the pervasiveness of social arrangements, fusing a thoroughgoing anti-essentialism with an account of the centrality of gender to our lived experiences of the social world. One potential criticism is that in some versions of the theory, such as that of Delphy and Leonard (1993), labour is accorded rather too much determining power. It is difficult to believe that the gender distinction would disappear were men's and women's work in the private and public spheres equalised, or, conversely, that the pervasiveness of gender distinctions makes such equality impossible.[12] However, the central insight remains: distinctions between 'women' and 'men' are expressions of hierarchical social relations, and thus bear profound consequences in all areas of social life. Our genders count because they are made to count *in* society, not because they existed in any essential sense *before* society. Meanwhile, sexuality is always intimately connected with gender, and, although it is useful to examine the cultural creation of sexual meanings, an attention to inequality is also crucial.

Sociological constructionisms: critiques and convergences

Thus far I have outlined four social constructionist perspectives (historicism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and materialist feminism) and their key contributions to sociology. This has involved highlighting a number of points where these perspectives might productively intersect. In the following discussion I consider three criticisms that have been levelled against social constructionism as a whole: that it precludes a recognition of 'reality', that it underplays social inequality, and that it offers no account of the intrapsychic or causative aspects of subjectivity. Although an examination of these criticisms is in part a defensive move, it also serves to highlight the relative strengths of social constructionism's different strands.

First, some critics of social constructionism contend that it is nominalist, concerned solely or predominantly with the naming of persons, categories, situations or social forms (Chambers, 2002: 165). Consequently, social constructionism is said to ignore the 'real' existence and importance of gender and sexual identity. This argument is exemplified by such binary oppositions as 'reality or social construction' (e.g. Weinrich, 1992), and the phrase '*only* socially constructed' that one often hears in criticisms of social constructionism. These imply that only something deeper and ultimately more stable than the social (such as 'biology') is 'real' (Vance, 1998: 161). In a related vein, social constructionist theories are sometimes considered unable to deal with 'real' individual or collective experience, particularly when social constructionism is assumed to offer a solely discursive analysis (e.g. Ussher, 2000: 218).

Language is indeed important in social constructionist approaches and shouldn't be underplayed (Burr, 1995: 56). It does not merely describe pre-existing entities that exist in a neutral state awaiting labelling. Rather, language works within particular social contexts to constitute the phenomena that words then come to represent (Austin, 1962). Thus, language can function as an important resource with which meaning and subjectivity are constructed (Lemke, 1995). At the same time, an emphasis on language cannot encapsulate all aspects of social life. While language often serves to legitimate relationships of power (Thompson, 1990), such relationships might also involve forms of labour, coercion, constraint or resistance that are not purely linguistic. However, as materialist feminist writers have demonstrated, these relationships remain resolutely social in their materiality (Delphy, 1984; Jackson, 1998b).

Might we call such relationships 'real'? I hesitate to do so, primarily because 'reality' is such a contested – and politically charged – concept (Frye, 1983). Having said this, social divisions (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual and so on) are highly salient for those who live within them, and structure their lives in profound ways. Current arrangements of gender and sexuality are 'real' in W. I. Thomas' sense: if people collectively 'define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (cited Collins and Makowsky, 1984: 189). Not all definitions of 'the real' are socially equal, of course, and

the ability to make one's own definitions adhere is mediated by one's location within relations of power (Branaman, 2001a: 9).

Rather than imagine that social constructionist perspectives are diametrically opposed to 'reality' in all senses of the word, we might think of them as anti-foundational. In other words, as forms of knowledge they do not start out in search of an inner essence or truth (Rahman, 2000: 42). This is not to say that the forms gender and sexuality take are unstructured, or that they represent voluntaristic 'choices' for those involved with them. Indeed, they are always 'performed and understood in the same fashion as all other social practices, as thing[s] of artifice and social construction, smoke and mirrors with serious consequences' (Gagnon, 1999: 120). We might even follow Blumer's lead, and suggest that in many respects the social world comes to possess 'an obdurate character' (Blumer, 1969: 22). We can challenge the phrase 'only a social construction' without conceding to essentialist notions of 'reality'.

The second criticism is that social constructionist approaches lack a theory of systematic social inequality. For example, West and Fenstermaker's ethnomethodology has been criticised for lacking a clear grounding in 'gender, race or class analysis', and paying insufficient attention to social relations of dominance and subordination (Weber, 1995: 500). Accordingly, Patricia Hill Collins contends that:

> Recasting racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation solely in social constructionist terms reduces race, class, and gender to performances, interactions between people embedded in a never ending string of equivalent relations, all containing race, class, and gender in some form, but a chain of equivalencies devoid of power relations (Collins, 1995: 493).

Thus, it is argued that macro-social relations of domination are underplayed in ethnomethodology in particular and social constructionism in general. A related argument is that ethnomethodology does not fully grapple with historical changes in the organisation and meaning of gender, thereby retaining a functionalist impulse that neglects change, challenge, conflict and resistance (Thorne, 1995: 498; Weber, 1995: 500).

There is some value to these criticisms. Historical shifts and specificities are rarely addressed within ethnomethodology, although there is no reason why a historicism focussing on challenge and resistance ought not to be combined with ethnomethodology to good effect. For example, historical investigations might employ ethnomethodological insights to consider how masculinity and femininity have been achieved, regulated and contested in particular historical contexts. Similarly, while structural inequalities are usually downplayed within this tradition, this can be remedied by careful theorising of the relationships between 'micro' and 'macro' levels of social analysis. 'Micro' and 'macro' may be understood to interact in reflexive ways, where individual and collective forms of action are integral to the reproduction or reconfiguration of power relations at the 'macro' level (Brickell, 2005a).

Materialist feminism offers another challenge to Collins' claim that social constructionism is 'devoid of [an analysis of] power relations' (1995: 493), a claim that arises from her conflation of social constructionism and ethnomethodology (and both, implicitly, with post-structuralism).[13] Those writing within the materialist feminist tradition argue that ontologies of gender are founded on structural inequality and so cannot exist outside of it. The French materialist feminists describe how the categories of gender and sexuality (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) are constructed oppositionally and hierarchically. Their contention that the gender distinction only exists because men appropriate women's labour power is in places troublingly monocausal, but nowhere can it be denied that these authors resolutely locate social inequality at the centre of their theorising.

Some materialist feminists in Britain and the US have sought to combine an analysis of structural inequality with other forms of social constructionism. Jackson (1999) and Lorber (1994) explore how the social construction of meaning can bolster gendered hierarchies, while they resist conflating the personal and the institutional; Rahman (2000) argues for a 'materially-grounded interactionist perspective' that combines an awareness of inequality with an interest in contingency and interpretation; and Smith (1990; 1999) splices together interaction, meaning and 'relations of ruling' in order to examine how social relations are 'objectified' and consciousness is constructed. Clearly, micro- and macro-social approaches are not mutually exclusive and can work together in productive ways.

The third major criticism of social constructionist theories is that they offer no account of the intrapsychic processes through which individuals come to inhabit particular forms of sexuality (Epstein, 1987: 24). These critics often lament the lack of an account of 'determination', 'causes' or 'origins' of individual sexual identity in social constructionist writings (Epstein, 1987: 23; Kauth, 2000, chapter 3). Significantly, these terms ('intrapsychic', 'determination', 'cause' and 'origin') encode somewhat divergent assumptions and are not synonymous. 'Determination' implies a mechanistic biological, psychological and/or cultural process of moulding individuals into particular, identifiable sexualities, and 'origin' implies a closely held inner sexuality that passively awaits discovery. 'Causes' are rarely sought for dominant and naturalised forms such as heterosexuality, suggesting that a medicalising model (complete with notions of 'diagnosis' and 'treatment') underlies the use of this particular term.

However, we can theorise the intrapsychic without recourse to 'determination', 'origins' or 'causes' by engaging symbolic interactionist perspectives. These suggest that the self is not an outcome of mechanistic, causative processes but rather something that emerges within interpretation and social interaction (Blumer, 1969). Our selves are created as we engage, interpret and negotiate the resources and meanings our culture makes available to us through language, symbolism, roles and scripts. The scrutinies and encouragements of those around us are critically important to the ways we define,

enact and experience our selves (Branaman, 2001b: 169). Thus, processes of self-construction are never arbitrary or voluntaristic but are always constrained and enabled within the parameters of the wider social context (Brickell, 2005a).[14]

Selves can evince both stability and change. On the one hand, the repeated enactments through which individuals present themselves to others 'ossify' over time and support a belief that the self has always taken its current form (Blumstein, 2001: 184). In this way, we 'become' the person we have thus far appeared to be. We express our commitment to particular 'careers' or life-courses (Gagnon, 1999) in ways that demonstrate a certain degree of consistency. The investments ('side bets') we hold in our current state constrain the temptation to continuously re-invent ourselves (Becker, 1960). We may even manage to reconcile inconsistencies in our sense of self (Bertram, 1998: 241). On the other hand, although we often adhere reasonably consistently to our current conceptions of self, new forms of self-understanding can occur as the self changes over time in dynamic tension with other social processes (Blumstein, 2001: 184–5; Turner, 1976: 990).

While particular configurations may be considered to express a 'true self', symbolic interactionist perspectives suggest that this truth does not exist in any objective, essential sense. Instead, as an *idea* it constitutes one means of accounting for the socially contingent self as it is subjectively experienced (Turner, 1976: 900; 1012). One's sense of who one 'is' results not from a combination of internal or external factors that combine to build 'true' selves, but from processes of interpretation mediated by one's continual interaction with others. With respect to the sexual, for example, the individual 'arranges information in order to construct a sexual essence for him or herself' in the process of becoming a sexual person (Plummer, 2002: 28). In other words, the 'defining process' in which the subject is actively involved is central to self-becoming, and essence is an effect rather than an origin (Brickell and Taylor, 2004; Blumer, 1969, chapter 1).[15]

We might bear this in mind as we theorise aetiologies of individual sexual commitments, for instance. Instead of asking after the 'causes' of particular desires in the individual, we might interrogate particular *explanations* of sexuality and the conditions in which these have emerged (such as nineteenth-century sexology or late twentieth-century genetics) (Brickell, 2005b). By working at the interface of historicism, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism, we can understand such explanations as historically specific social attributions that reveal the temporal conditions of their own production and the meanings they have held for those subjected to them. We can ask after the methods by which such accounts are created an have come to make sense, vary over time, and open up or close off new ways of thinking about and defining 'sexuality'. We might investigate what such explanations reveal about the connections between wider social changes and individual scripts. Bearing materialist feminist analyses in mind, we can question the political effects of all of these. In the final analysis, the significance of such accounts lies in their

social purchase and purpose rather than in their veracity (D'Emilio, 2002, chapter 10; Rahman, 2000: 55–6). Ultimately, explanations of sexual causality may be considered truth claims that allow us to make sense of the social world and thereby assert our particular prescriptions for it.[16]

Conclusion: multiplex constructionisms

Systematising social constructionist approaches to social life affords sociologists a number of insights to be taken up in our theorising as well as our more empirical research projects. A systematic approach allows us greater precision when we write and talk about 'social constructionism' as a field of theoretical knowledge, and lets us pinpoint more accurately which ideas are circulating and who their adherents and detractors are. It also permits the relationships between these forms of social theory and knowledge to be explored in greater depth. By breaking down what has appeared all too often as a monolithic field, we can better explore its contours and intricacies, its analytical and political uses.

Undoubtedly each of the four forms of social constructionism I have analysed here differs in focus thematically (time, meaning, hierarchy) and in terms of its level of analysis (macro, micro or both). What we have here is a multiplex field of endeavour, even though these forms share that common ground that qualifies them as social constructionist in the first place. Thus, meaning does not emanate from a nucleus within presocial bodies, but circulates reflexively among the nodes connecting subjects to each other and to social structures, and is renegotiated in the process. At the same time, limits are always imposed by the broad forms of social organisation that work upon subjects at the local level. Lastly, the explanations and justifications for the social forms in circulation at any moment often have ideological effects that merit close investigation.

Many of the criticisms of social constructionism ignore its multiplicity, hingeing instead on the synecdochical assumption that one particular strand of the tradition stands in for the whole.[17] If ethnomethodology represented the totality of social constructionist theory, one might reasonably draw the conclusion that social constructionism's analysis of power is partial; were materialist feminism representative, one might look elsewhere for a comprehensive account of meaning and subjectivity; and only if we forget symbolic interactionism can we suggest that social constructionism offers no theory of the intrapsychic. Such criticisms appear compelling only when social constructionism is reduced to one or other of its forms.

The multifariousness of social constructionism also proves useful when confronted with post-structuralist approaches that claim the ground tilled by earlier sociological theories. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman contend that post-structuralism 'represents new ways' of understanding social life, recognising it

as historically emergent rather than naturally given, as multivalent rather than unified in its meaning, and as the frequent result and possible present instrument in struggles of power . . . [these] approaches can be seen not as those which avoid the social but rather as those which reinterpret its meaning (Nicholson and Seidman, 1995: 26).

As I have discussed at some length, these insights emerged within sociology before they turned up in post-structuralist writings. The notion of historical specificity is a commonplace within social history and historical sociology, and all four forms of social constructionism discussed here conceptualise social power in various ways. Similarly, the shiftiness of gendered and sexualised identities is a central premise of all social constructionist approaches, not merely those influenced by post-structuralist thinking.

In addition, the more explicitly sociological forms of social constructionism provide a useful contribution to one of post-structuralism's central dilemmas: an ongoing difficulty in reconciling contingency and social inequality. The contingency of sex and gender on the one hand, and the fact that actual people find themselves unable to escape the significance of gender and its norms on the other, continues to cause problems for a feminist post-structuralism in particular (Brown, 2003: 366; Waugh, 1998: 180). The multiple social constructionisms that emerged within sociology allow us to recognise the contingency of social categories and identities as well as the material effects of these. Patterns of social organisation are embedded in time and space, yet constrain and enable the intricacies of everyday life.[18] Social constructionist sociologies, insofar as they represent an interlocking mesh of approaches that focus on particular levels of social analysis, provide a way out of this unresolved poststructuralist impasse. Once we survey a broad terrain of sociological theory, we discover that it is possible to reconcile material conditions of existence and the contingency of social life.

Throughout this essay I have asserted sociology's specific contribution to social constructionism in particular and the study of social life more generally. Such an exercise is fraught insofar as sociology, like all other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, is rather porous at its many edges. The line between sociology and a more generic social (or even cultural) theory is a fine one, particularly in the study of gender and sexuality where the debates are so very interdisciplinary (Delamont, 2003: 148). The difficulty of border maintainance aside, sociology does offer some rich theoretical traditions that provide distinct contributions with which we might analyse the social construction of gender and sexuality. Of the four forms of social constructionist theory examined here, all share the pivotal sociological concerns of contingency, meaning, interaction and social structure, even while configuring them somewhat differently.

In a single essay I cannot do justice to all of social constructionism's nuances, or even all of its forms, concentrating as I do on the fundamentals of only four. Without a doubt, there remain many prospects for further devel-

opment, particularly in the areas of subjectivity, embodiment and the relationships between the macro- and micro-levels of social analysis. However, by recognising some of social constructionism's complexities and bringing its different forms into dialogue, we can begin to thoroughly explore the complexities of social life. We need not resort to reductionist or monocausal explanations in which all aspects of the social result directly from 'biology', the hegemony of overarching structures (economy, patriarchy), the direct and thoroughgoing manipulations of discourse, or the sovereignty of the individual.

Social constructionist approaches offer valuable tools for investigating the meaning and organisation of social life, and thence the investments we all hold in the particular constellations in force in our own time and place. By thinking about the complexities of social constructionism, we locate and clarify its forms as specific and variable knowledges. In so doing, we become clearer and perhaps more critical towards both the particularities of the theories we are employing, and the social world we are attempting to understand in the process.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 I examine both gender and sexuality in this article for two reasons. First, these two spheres of social life are inextricably intertwined in practice even though they are partially separable analytically. Second, some social constructionist literatures address both of these together, in particular materialist feminism and the sexual scripting approach that developed within symbolic interactionism.

2 Some of post-structuralism's sociologist cheerleaders and critics share the assumption that post-structuralism and sociological theories are mutually antagonistic. Jackson (2000: 92–3) and Jackson and Scott (2000: 21) contend that post-structuralism is too disinterested in social structure to 'count' as real sociology, while Smith (1999: 109) suggests it lacks the necessary desire for social change. On the other side of the ledger, Seidman (1997: 60) argues that 'sociological theory' is problematic in its teleological search for truth and progress and ought to be replaced by a more 'multi-sided' and politically provisional post-structuralist 'social theory'.

3 While Seidman does not credit non-post-structuralist theories with much utility in relation to gender and social analysis in general, he does concede that symbolic interactionism has been influential in the development of 'queer theory' (1996: 6–7; 1997: 27).

4 Foucault and Foucauldian scholarship are sometimes interpreted as contending that there were no sexual 'types' prior to this period (see Halperin, 2002). Although such 'types' appear

to have existed in some form throughout history (such as the *kinaidos*, the molly and the sodomite), we cannot assume that these are synonymous with our own understandings of gender and (homo)sexuality. Rather, a range of complex and nuanced historical specificities are always at play.

5 Given that both traditions regard social life as a product of interaction and interpretation, it is not surprising that some authors working in the tradition have proven difficult to classify. For example, Goffman is usually described as a symbolic interactionist (Craib, 1984: 75; Wallace and Wolf, 1999: 227) but his writings on the self as a presentation sit very closely with ethnomethodology's account of the self as an accomplishment.

6 Recent work in sociolinguistics and conversation analysis (CA) has taken up and further developed this strand of ethnomethodology in order to explore the role played by language in the construction of gender and sexuality. Good examples include Holmes (ed.) (2000); McIlvenny (2002); Stokoe and Smithson (2001) and Weatherall (2002).

7 For example, children who deviate too far from norms of gender deportment may be subject to therapeutic attempts to incite them to comply (Hird, 2003; Sedgwick, 1994).

8 To give one example, manipulation of the genitals in a medical examination would rarely be thought of as sexual, while it would be in other situations. See Plummer (2002) for further examples.

9 In a similar approach, Plummer (1995) proposes that sexual subjectivities are created through the cultural reproduction of 'stories': narratives and symbolism which can then be employed to account for sexual selves. This type of analysis, in turn, appears in some sociolinguistic work: on narratives and the construction of masculinities, for example, see Coates (2000) and Johnson and Meinhof (eds) (1997).

10 That is to say, patriarchy does not derive from any other system such as capitalism, despite the borrowing of the term 'class'. US radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon reworks Marxism in a slightly different way, suggesting that sexuality is to feminism as labour is to Marxism, i.e. that which is most appropriated from the subordinate by the dominant group and is hence constitutive of both. For MacKinnon, a male-dominant (hetero)sexuality is the foundation on which gender division is built (MacKinnon, 1989, chapter 7).

11 These criticisms highlight a problem some 'queer theory' presents for historical research: when the heterosexual/homosexual binary is taken as a starting point to then be deconstructed in Derridean fashion, the possibility of carefully examining the (often precarious) historical construction of the binary in the first place tends to be overlooked (Brickell, 2005b).

12 One solution to this problem might be to replace the sole focus on labour with a more multidimensional analysis in which a range of forms of social organisation intersect in the creation and maintenance of gender divisions (e.g. Walby, 1990).

13 The criticism that post-structuralism pays insufficient attention to social inequality is discussed by Delamont (2003, chapter 1) and Thompson (2001).

14 Epstein has argued that social constructionism 'emphasises the possibilities for the self-conscious creation of sexual identities ("choice")' (1987: 25), thus implying that social constructionism is a form of voluntaristic liberal individualism. This appears to be a (not uncommon) misreading of the social constructionist literature, at least of the type surveyed here.

15 This implies an interesting critique of the currently popular 'recipe' approach to the self, where 'biology' and 'culture' mix together in particular proportions and fuse together, almost chemically, to create a person. An example is provided by Kauth (2000).

16 Again, the post-structuralist position that truths about genders and bodies turn out to be truth *claims* about them mirrors the earlier ethnomethodological and symbolic interactionist contention that 'truths' can best be understood as means of presenting and accounting for the self.

17 Interestingly, of the chapters in Stein (ed.) (1992), none of those critical of social constructionism surveys the field at all systematically. Weinrich cites only one social constructionist author – Mary McIntosh – and then only in passing, while Stein cites only Halperin in any detail. Generally social constructionism appears as a combination of a nominalist historicism and labelling theory, as it does in the more comprehensive overview offered by Kauth (2000).

For an interesting analysis of the selectivity of critiques of social constructionism, see Kitzinger (1987: 186–8).

18 Post-structuralist perspectives are sometimes adopted as a response to other theories' apparent inability to deal with the nuanced interlacing of different aspects of social life, particularly gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality (Bell, 1999: 146). For the argument that these nuances can be addressed within social structural and microsociological frames of analysis, see Jackson (2000); Jackson and Scott (2000); Thompson (2001, chapter 1); Walby (1992). Indeed, Jackson (1998a: 28) suggests that the current challenge for feminist social theory is to 'analyse the localised contexts of women's everyday existence and the meanings women give to their lives without losing sight of the structural patterns of dominance and subordination'.

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