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Introduction

Since the 1990s some sociologists have discussed sexual identities and lifestyles as ‘reflexive’ to conceptualize their increasingly self-conscious and self-determined nature. In this chapter I reflect on how reflexivity has, in fact, been a long-standing (if latent) theme in sociological theory and research about lesbian and gay sexualities, and how it is often linked to the privileging of exclusive experience, the inadequate theorizing of power, and to overly affirmative and normative political projects. I argue that future research should be less concerned with reflexive sexualities and more with ‘reflexive sociology’. Reflexivity has a wide range of meanings in sociology (Lynch, 2000), and I discuss the topic in two ways. First, I consider recent theories that associate lesbian and gay identities and lifestyles with reflexive self-consciousness, self-determination and empowered agency in everyday living. Second, I consider reflexivity as a methodological issue.

The chapter begins by exploring arguments that suggest lesbian and gay ways of living to be highly reflexive ones. Giddens’ (1991, 1992) arguments have been especially influential in this respect, and he explicitly identifies lesbian and gay identities and relationships as exemplars of highly reflexive forms. I then consider a number of analyses of lesbian and gay ‘self-making’ that address the theme of heightened reflexivity (explicitly or otherwise) to illuminate how this is an enduring theme in theory and research on lesbian and gay life. In doing so, I elucidate different conceptions of lesbian and gay reflexivity, and the implications for theory, politics and research. The chapter then identifies problems that are common to these conceptions. These include the erasure of differences amongst lesbians and gay men, and the inadequate theorizing of power. The resources required for self-fashioned and ‘empowered’ sexualities are underestimated, and their implications for diverse lesbian and gay experiences are undermined. Our analyses of lesbian and gay reflexivity tend to assume a fairly universal
subjectivity or form of existence, and imply a lesbian and gay ‘ethos’ of self-making and self-determination that is closely akin to ‘reflexive habitus’ (Sweetman, 2003). Thus, they offer a partial understanding of contemporary lesbian and gay lives, and unreflectively affirm exclusive experiences and normative assumptions. This leads to diminished understandings of both contemporary lesbian and gay politics and of the politics of theorizing and researching lesbian and gay lives.

The final sections of the chapter concentrate on the need for future theory and research to shift the emphasis away from lesbian and gay reflexivity and towards ‘reflexive sociology’. This entails acknowledging the partial nature of our sociological accounts of lesbian and gay life. By considering broader (long-standing) debates about methodological reflexivity, I identify some of the ways in which a reflexive sociology of sexualities could be conceived and the implications for ‘doing’ this sociology. I do not propose one model for this or claim one superior way of knowing. There are, however, a number of principles that could be incorporated into our sociological practice. Above all, reflexive sociology acknowledges the partial nature of the narratives we tell about the lives we study, and the political consequences of these. Unlike developments in the sociology of lesbian and gay reflexivity, it entails concentrated and collective efforts to acknowledge how our sociology is involved in the flow of power.

Lesbian and gay reflexivity

Giddens’ (1991, 1992) arguments about lesbian and gay sexualities are well known. Via his thesis of reflexive modernization, he suggests these sexualities to be key examples of new personal freedoms in late modernity (that stem for the freeing of agency from structure). His post-emancipatory frame for understanding personal life posits lesbian and gay lifestyles as exemplars of self-fashioned identities; dialogically achieved forms of democratic relating; and life political endeavours. In this frame, Foucault’s (1979) emphasis on sexuality as the subject-product of discourse, governance and power is rejected as mistaking the reflexivity (self-consciousness oriented towards control) of modernity for disciplinary operations of power. Foucault’s (1985, 1986) later work theorized ‘practices of freedom’ (and some theorists argue lesbian, gay and queer sexualities to illuminate these, see Halperin, 1995; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). These practices are, however, distinct from the new personal ‘freedoms’ that Giddens deploys lesbian and gay lifestyles to illustrate. For Foucauldians, practices of freedom are tied to the micro politics of resistance. For Giddens, lesbians and gay ‘freedoms’ are indicative of new opportunities for empowerment and increasing quanta of (enabling) power in late modernity. It is not only lesbian and gay sexualities that are becoming emancipated, but also heterosexuality and gender. This stems from a number of interrelated
developments, including the uncoupling of sexuality from the demands of reproduction, increasing gender equality in economic and intimate life, and the decline of institutional heterosexuality. Giddens’ argument is that sexuality is being transformed from an emancipatory political issue to a ‘life political’ one: as sexual liberation is mostly achieved, sexual politics now concerns the negotiation of sexual lifestyle choices.

There are several reasons why Giddens’ analysis might be of interest to scholars of lesbian and gay lives. First, it validates and valorizes lesbian and gay life as creative experiments. Second, it disrupts the ‘heterosexual panorama’ (Blasius, 1994) that tends to characterize mainstream social theorizing. Third, aspects of it seem compatible with elements of Queer theory (especially as it appears to acknowledge lesbian and gay – and heterosexual – sexualities as open ‘fictions’ and partly aims to transcend the homo-hetero divide). The analysis is also compatible with long-standing arguments about lesbian and gay self-making, forms of existence and politics. Indeed, its originality lies in how it links themes that were already prevalent in theory and research about lesbian and gay lives to broader social theoretical concerns.

Self-making and self-determination are well-rehearsed themes in literature on lesbian and gay life, as is the issue of egalitarian relating. For example, personal and academic accounts of ‘coming out’ have long emphasized self-fashioning as a response to absence of social supports and cultural guidelines for non-heterosexual identities (e.g., Davies, 1992; Dunne, 1997; Hall Carpenter Archives, 1989a, 1989b; Porter and Weeks, 1990). Self-fashioning is also a theme in research on lesbian and gay couples (e.g., Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Harry and DeVall, 1978; Johnson, 1990; Peplau, Venigas and Miller-Campbell, 1996); family life (e.g., Nardi, 1992a; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991), and friendships and communities (e.g., Bev Jo, 1996; Nardi, 1992a, 1992b, 1999; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996). The theme is also emphasized in theory and research on issues such as (non-)monogamy (see Yip, 1997), ageing (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2004) and parenting (Bozett, 1987; Dunne, 1997; Lewin, 1993).

The personal-political consequence of ‘making a life of one’s own’ is also an established theme in literature from the 1970s onwards, and Giddens’ conception of life-politics echoes arguments about lesbian and gay living as political practice (as argued by some feminist and liberationist theorists and captured in the slogan ‘the personal is political’). A powerful narrative emerges from the existing literature about how, against the backdrop of institutional or compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1983), lesbians and gay men make the personal project of ‘becoming’ a political one. The personal-political possibilities that such projects enable are, some argue, evident in increasing recognition of the legitimacy of lesbian and gay sexualities. Thus, same-sex marriage, Civil Partnership and other Acts, gay consumer citizenship, and other forms of legal and social recognition, are indicative of changing cultural values and of the personal-political achievements of
lesbians and gay men. Such arguments are central to a number of theoretical accounts of lesbian and gay life and politics that, similar to Giddens, have an argument about reflexivity at their core. In the following discussion I highlight theories that have shaped my own sociological understandings of lesbian and gay life. I do so because of my familiarity with them, and not because they are especially problematic.

Mark Blasius’ (1994) analysis of lesbian and gay politics is striking for its synthesis of feminist and Foucauldian theory, and for the many similarities between his and Giddens’ arguments. Via feminist ideas about institutional heterosexuality and Foucauldian ones about discourse and resistance, Blasius argues that lesbians and gay men are arch self-inventors, whose identities, relationships and lifestyles are underpinned by an ethics of self-invention and egalitarian relating. This ‘lesbian and gay ethos’ underpins creative and self-determined ways of living and relating that are political because they undermine institutionalized (heterosexual) norms and values. Creating a life in the shadow of hegemonic heterosexuality prompts heightened reflexivity or self-awareness that (via engagement with lesbian and gay community knowledge) enables self- and social transformation. For Blasius, the political import of such reflexivity is evident in how lesbians and gay men have effectively challenged the values and norms of the dominant (heterosexual) culture and are on the cusp of the ‘moment of equality’.

Jeffrey Weeks (1991, 1995, 2005, 2007), in various analyses, has theorized lesbian and gay identities as creative fictions that illuminate the possibilities for self-fashioning and self-determination. His arguments are in some ways similar to Blasius’ and Giddens’, and his later work explicitly incorporates Giddens’ ideas. Weeks’ and Giddens’ ideas are compatible because the issues of self- and relational reflexivity have been latent concerns in the former’s work for some time. Weeks has also deployed Foucault’s later ideas on ‘practices of freedom’ to theorize lesbian and gay self-determination. However, Foucault’s impoverished notion of agency has long been a sticking point for Weeks. Ultimately, the latter is more concerned with the possibilities of lesbian and gay creativity and self-fashioning (especially as they are mediated through lesbian and gay community values). For Weeks (1995, 2005), reflexivity (awareness of self-creation) is at the heart of lesbian and gay creativity and agency, and the political import of this is evident in that lesbians and gay men have arrived at the ‘moment of citizenship’.

Ken Plummer (1995, 2003), in his work on the personal-political nature of sexual storytelling and intimate citizenship, has also been influenced by Giddens’ analysis. Giddens’ arguments and Plummer’s earlier ones about lesbian and gay identity are compatible because the latter’s symbolic interactionist approach has, in fact, always had a latent argument about reflexivity at its core. This is evident in his concern with lesbian and gay coming out narratives as personal-political resources – resources that
can facilitate self-fashioning and self-determination, and influence social, cultural and political change. There are also some notable links between aspects of Giddens' arguments and Henning Bech's (1997) phenomenological account of the self-consciousness of modern homosexual forms of existence, although the latter's account of reflexivity is far less voluntaristic than Giddens's. Bech's account emphasizes reflexion over self-fashioning, but he does, however, argue the case for a shared homosexual form of existence that entails heightened self-awareness. Finally, Sasha Roseneil's (2002) incorporation of Giddens' arguments within a Queer theoretical frame illuminates how (on the surface at least) compatible arguments about reflexivity are with this frame. Roseneil discusses transformations taking place with respect to heteronormativity, and suggests that increasing lesbian and gay and heterosexual reflexivity points to radical shifts in the sexual order.

Taken together, the various arguments considered in this part of the chapter tell a powerful story about lesbian and gay lives: that they can be understood as reflexively achieved forms of existence that are the exemplars of the life politics of self-fashioning. All of the arguments seem to imply that lesbian and gay identities and ways of living could be viewed as exemplars of what Sweetman (2003) terms 'reflexive habitus'. Sweetman developed this term to argue that certain groups or experiences might be more inclined to chronic reflexivity than others. Rather than habitus implying fairly solidified ways of being or forms of existence that have their roots in early (classed) experience (as Bourdieu argued), reflexive habitus implies constant movement with respect to self-identity and lifestyle construction. Most of the arguments considered so far are consistent with this idea, as they imply that reflexivity penetrates to the heart of lesbian and gay existence.

Common problems in sociological narratives of lesbian and gay reflexivity

Arguments about lesbian and gay reflexivity are appealing because they speak to the agency of lesbians and gay men – in their personal and relational lives, and politically. The disciplinary vision of modern sexualities offered by Foucault and others, some argue, always promoted a one-sided view of lesbian and gay life by overplaying disciplinary forms of sexual subjection. In contrast, arguments about lesbian and gay reflexivity appear to acknowledge personal-political agency and contemporary empirical realities. It seems clear, after all, that lesbian and gay sexualities are more ‘empowered’ and visible in the culture than ever before, and recent legislation in Britain and elsewhere (such as the Civil Partnership and other Acts) seems to promote and defend the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. There are, however, a number of problems with narratives of lesbian and gay reflexivity that should be heeded.
Giddens’ arguments about lesbian and gay lifestyles have been challenged on a number of grounds. First, it is argued that Giddens’ arguments about reflexive and ‘more equal’ lesbian and gay relationships are unjustified empirically (Jamieson, 1998). Second, some critics argue that the extension of his arguments about lesbian and gay identities and relationships to the possibilities for ‘freer’ heterosexual ones is problematic (Jamieson, 1998). Giddens, some critics argue, undermines sexuality, and especially heterosexuality, as an institution and underplays patriarchal ideologies. He ignores feminist and Foucauldian arguments about the ‘ideological’ nature of cultural – and theoretical – accounts of sexual ‘freedoms’, and the normative thrust of his theory blinds him to the evidence that exists for the persistence of sexual and gendered inequalities. The most theoretically sophisticated variants of this latter argument point out that theoretical accounts of reflexivity are not neutral (Adkins, 2002). Rather, they make invisible how sexual and gendered inequalities are being reconfigured (as opposed to erased) in late modernity.

These criticisms of Giddens are applicable to the other accounts of lesbian and gay reflexivity to varying degrees. In the following discussion, I draw on these criticisms to argue three interrelated bases on which our narratives of lesbian and gay reflexivity tend to be problematic. First, there is the blurring of arguments about theoretical possibilities and empirical actualities. Second, there is the issue of difference, and how exclusive and well-resourced lesbian and gay experience is valorized while other experiences are made invisible. Third, there is the issue of power: how power with respect to lesbian and gay life is inadequately addressed, and how the relationship between power and sociological narration is ignored.

### Theoretical possibilities and empirical ‘realities’

Sociological narratives of lesbian and gay reflexivity are powerful because they too speak to social developments that seem self-evidently ‘true’. The close correspondence between our theories of reflexive sexualities and empirical work on lesbian and gay lives is often noted when we forward such theories. Our theories (and the empirical work they reference) are not, however, simply factual accounts of the world ‘out there’. They are often accounts of how things could and should be in an ideal world. There is often a prescriptive and normative quality to theory and research that is unacknowledged. Sociological accounts of lesbian and gay sexualities often contain caveats about the complexity of ‘real lives’. Research accounts of lesbian and gay life often contain caveats about the particular experience that was studied, and the problems with generalizing beyond this. Despite such caveats, however, the narrative conventions we deploy in constructing theories often means we present these as if they are evidenced by ‘the real’ events and experiences. Similarly, research into small and exclusive groups
of lesbians and gay men is often presented as if it illuminated general experience. Such problems are common to theory and research more broadly. They are, however, especially evident in narratives about lesbian and gay reflexivity that are (often unwittingly) driven by an overly affirmative agenda that often goes hand in hand with particular liberationist or emancipatory (or in Giddens’ case ‘post-emancipatory’) agendas. This does not necessarily invalidate our theories and research. However, the (unintended) effects of such affirmative, normative and political thrusts should be considered. One way to do this is to ask whose experience is valorized in our accounts of lesbian and gay reflexivity, and whose is made invisible.

**Difference, exclusivity and exclusion**

Several approaches to social and cultural analysis emphasize ‘difference’ as key to understanding sexualities. On the one hand, there are the differences inherent within language and the human psyche (see Fuss, 1989; Heaphy, 2007), that poststructuralists argue limit self-making and self-determination. On the other hand, there are the differences that are shaped through the intersections of class, race and ethnicity, generation, geographical location and the like. Taking these latter differences seriously would mean acknowledging that there is no one lesbian and gay experience or form of existence, and that lesbian and gay living should be studied in their diversity of forms. This could lead us to ask how significant resources (economic, social, cultural and corporeal) are in shaping different possibilities for lesbian and gay living, and how their embodiment gives rise to different possibilities for identification, relating and life political practice (see Heaphy, 2007). Theory and research that emphasizes lesbian and gay reflexivity often ignore these issues: discussing lesbian and gay identities as if such differences did not matter (much), as if sexual identity was the determining factor of people’s existence and agency, and as if resources were not significant in influencing diverse possibilities for lesbian and gay existence. Where our analyses of lesbian and gay reflexivity do consider resources, the tendency is to privilege cultural resources (discourses, representations and ‘stories’) above others. Where social resources are considered, it is most often in terms of access to lesbian and gay networks and groups – other social resources are ignored. The interrelationships between cultural, social and economic resources, and how they influence lesbian and gay lives, are rarely explored or articulated in any depth. Thus, we fail to comprehend their significance in limiting and enabling different possibilities for self-fashioning and self-determination.

At a very basic level, few would deny that diminished resources (such as those associated with lower social class, disability, old age and non-urban environments) have very real consequences for the kind of lesbian and gay lives that poor, disabled, old and rural people can construct. This raises the issue of whose experience of reflexivity we articulate in our accounts of
reflexive lesbian and gay lives. It might be argued that this is often that which most closely resonates with our own experience of lesbian and gay lives. As those who tend to embody and have access to relatively high levels of cultural, social and economic resources, we tend to imagine and narrate the world as we experience it. Unsurprisingly, such ways of knowing often reflect white, urban, middle-class habitus. Further, as sociologists we are likely to be highly attuned to (and prize) our own reflexivity, as we are, after all, trained in the ‘critical’ interpretation of the world. We often narrate – and mistake – our own experience (or imagination) of reflexivity as that of lesbians and gay men in general. In doing so, we often validate, valorize and make visible exclusive experience as lesbian and gay experience. The effect of this is to make invisible those experiences that do not so easily fit (including our own non-reflexive ones). This raises the issue of power.

**Power and sociological narration**

There are three ways in which our narratives of reflexive lesbian and gay sexualities tend to inadequately address power. First, we tend to ignore how power and difference are interlinked in contemporary social contexts. By erasing the significance of difference, we often ignore operations of power at the work through economic, social and cultural differences. Power, in this sense, refers to how different possibilities are enabled and limited by unequal access to resources. Second, there is the issue of power as it relates explicitly to reflexivity. As noted earlier, discussions of ‘self-making’ and self-determined lesbian and gay lifestyles equate reflexivity with self-consciousness and agency. However, the discursive ‘material’ through which our reflexivity is mobilized shapes it in particular ways. In this sense, reflexive resources are not the opposite of disciplinary discourse as Giddens implies. Rather, for Foucauldians and feminists, reflexivity could be argued to be a technology of effectively self-monitored and regulated self-identities and ways of living. One example of this is how the aspiration to be fulfilled, recognized and/or liberated as a sexual being is shaped by ideological accounts or discourse about ‘sexual freedom’. From a Foucauldian perspective, the more we buy into this idea the more we are tied to the workings of power-knowledge.

The third way in which the sociology of lesbian and gay reflexivity tends to inadequately address power is in its lack of explicit reflection (or reflexivity) about the ways in which sociological narration is itself bound up with power. Often, we take the normative qualities of our theory and analyses as obviously ‘just’. This is the case because of the (explicit or implicit) understandings of sexual politics we (often unconsciously) embrace. Some of our analyses are driven by affirmative, liberationist or emancipatory imperatives. Others are driven by the quest to articulate post-emancipatory life politics (as is Giddens). That the former might be naïve in its liberationist understandings of power and politics, and its assumption that
sexual emancipation is achievable, is not explicitly reflected upon. Neither is the latter’s proposition that liberation and emancipation has all but been achieved. The ultimate effect of inadequately dealing with power as outlined here is that lesbian and gay diversity is undermined, certain (exclusive) forms of existence are valorized as reflexive, and contemporary sexual politics is inadequately conceptualized. This raises the issue of how our theories and analyses of lesbian and gay reflexivity tend to be methodologically unreflexive with respect to their knowledge claims, normative assumptions and political projects.

**Reflexive sociology**

A number of questions emerge when we overemphasize the self-making and self-determining capacities of lesbians and gay men: What operations of power are we colluding with (intentionally and otherwise)? How are our own resources, political values and habitus shaping our theory and research? What vistas are we keeping intact, and what inequalities do these support? What is the political effect of assuming commonality as opposed to assuming difference? What is the effect of narrating lesbian and gay empowerment as opposed to critically interrogating this notion? Such questions lead us away from a primary concern with lesbian and gay reflexivity and towards reflexive sociology. Methodological reflexivity has a wide variety of meanings, as Alvesson and Skoldberg point out in their discussion of the different kinds of reflexivity noted by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992):

> These include ethnomethodological ethnography as text, social scientific studies of the (natural science), postmodern sociology, critical phenomenology and the writings of authors such as…Giddens (double hermeneutics). Bourdieu’s own variety – where the researcher is seen as being inserted into a social field, with specific relations of competition and power conditions generating a particular ‘habitus’, that is a pattern of action dispositions, among the participants – also belongs here.

(Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000: 5)

The conceptions of reflexivity as implied in our theories and research on lesbian and gay lives are distinct from ideas about methodological reflexivity or ‘reflexive sociology’. In terms of research methodologies, there are three broad positions with respect to critical reflexivity that can be noted (see Heaphy, 2007). First, there are constructive arguments about reflexive methodology and research methods, whose primary objective is to produce ‘better’ knowledge than unreflective approaches. Second, more akin to (and sometimes influenced by) poststructuralist ideas, there are deconstructive arguments for dismantling modernist methodologies on the basis of their involvements with power. Third, there are reconstructive approaches that
deconstruct modernist methodologies to address power, but that also aim for a reconstructed reflexive methodology that ultimately has faith in its knowledge claims (e.g., on the basis of feminist epistemology).

Critically reflexive methodology generally emphasizes the need for critical self-reflection on behalf of social researchers or analysts with respect to the production of the sociological narrative, to acknowledge how their social, cultural and academic positioning has shaped that narrative. It also promotes recognition of how such positioning combines with the contexts of research to shape knowledge on any given topic (Steier, 1991). Deconstructive and reconstructive approaches to reflexive methodology acknowledge that academic narratives exist in the flow of power. From the reconstructive perspective, feminist researchers have long emphasized that mainstream (or malestream) modernist methodologies worked to reproduce existing power relationships and inequalities. The challenge, from this perspective, is to develop alternative research and sociological strategies that would incorporate awareness of knowledge production as political practice. As Ramazanoglu remarked with regard to feminist methodology:

Feminist methodologies are...new ways of knowing and of seeking ‘truths’, but they are also forms of political commitment to the empowerment of women...There is no alternative to political commitment in feminist or any other ways of knowing. Since knowing is a political process, so knowledge is intrinsically political...Other ways of knowing...are committed to other political goals.

(1992: 210)

Reflexive methodology argues that sociological projects involve complex sets of relationships and negotiations. Throughout the processes that constitute these projects, from the formulation of the research topic to its final presentation, researchers negotiate with themselves and others the ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the project. It is through such negotiations that the possibilities and limitations of projects are set – as they impact on decisions about what constitute interesting or appropriate aims, strategies, methods and convincing narratives. In exploring this some writers have proposed seeing academic research as a form of story production that entails story actions such as multiple ‘conversations’ and ‘dialogues’. In doing so, they aimed to account for the diverse influences and interests that shape research (Schrijvers, 1991; Steier, 1991). Some reconstructive approaches to reflexive methodology also argued that the notion of a ‘dialogical ideal’ could help envision radical methodologies that could be aligned to emancipatory political projects, and that could challenge existing power relationships with respect to how sociological knowledge tends to be produced. Schrijvers (1991: 169), for example, suggested that the notions of *dialogical* and *reflexive* research are interchangeable to a certain degree. Dialogical or reflexive...
research, it was argued, can reduce inequality in research relationships, and encourage the researcher/the researched to acknowledge that s/he is actively engaged in sets of power relations and to some extent, a political project.

Deconstructive approaches to reflexive methodology more forcibly argue that ethnographers and sociologists construct the realities of the world that they study and narrate. They point out that if, as Foucault argued, expert narratives exist in the flow of power, so do sociological accounts. While sociologists may not aim to engage in questions of power, in the production of their accounts (theoretical or empirically based) they are explicitly or implicitly asserting, accepting or contesting what is rational, sane and true. In this sense they are involved in the production or flow of knowledge-power (Foucault, 1979). Deconstructive approaches to reflexive methodology adopt such arguments to acknowledge the constructed and contingent nature of claims to truth and knowledge (Steier, 1991). In attempting to account for their own involvements in the story actions that make up sociological knowledge, some argue the value of a different view of ‘conversations’ and ‘dialogue’ to the one that Schrijvers proposed. As Steier suggested:

Taking reflexivity seriously…is marked by a concern for recognizing that constructing is a social process, rooted in language, not located in one’s head…It is precisely through such an orientation to language that the self to whom our reflexivity refers is most clearly a social self, who becomes ‘that’ self precisely through participation with others, and allows research to become understood as a conversation (or rather, several).

(Steier, 1991: 2–6)

From Steier’s perspective, it was possible to recognize that multiple conversations are involved in constructing our sociological narratives that are, in fact, multiple realities – with no one being ‘the real conversation’. Implicit in this was an acknowledgement that the writing and presentation of academic work involved focusing on some realities and editing out others. The narratives that were eventually told never fully exhausted the wide variety of conversations that could have been focused on. Rarely did social analysts and researchers present, or were they aware of, the multiple realities that could be presented. For Steier (1991), the reflexive approach allowed contradictions and paradoxes to appear. Arguments about reflexive methodology, like Steier’s, are sensitive to, and compatible with, poststructuralist and radical difference (feminist, postcolonial and Queer) arguments that all truth and knowledge claims should be viewed with scepticism. Rather than simply expressing knowledge, the nature of language and discourse means that that all knowledge claims are caught up in the flow of power. This entails viewing all knowledge (including sociological knowledge) as narratives or text that can be deconstructed. In discussing the implications of poststructuralist
ideas for research, Alvesson and Skoldberg quote Clifford’s arguments about ethnography:

The maker…of ethnographic texts cannot avoid expressing tropes, figures and allegories that select and impose meanings as they translate it. In this view more Nietzschian than realist or hermeneutic, all constructed truths are made possible by power ‘lies’ of exclusion and rhetoric. Even the best ethnographic texts – serious true fictions – are systems, or economies of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control.

(Clifford, quoted in Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000: 170)

Given the kinds of problems about sociological knowledge that deconstructive reflexive methodologists and others highlight, how should sociological analysis proceed? The short answer, from the deconstructive position, is that sociology must acknowledge that it is involved in narrative production, and that it is the business of producing contingent knowledge that is open to contestation and, at best, can provide the basis for diverse interpretations of the social world. This moves sociology a long way away from the ‘scientistic’ aspirations it may have once have had, but also challenges interpretivist approaches that assume knowing and knowable actors. Rather, sociologists must more radically recognize that they are involved in story productions. Further, these can never be neutral stories, and are always in some way or other involved in proposing some realities over others, and as such are involved in the flow of power.

Looking to the future: towards a reflexive sociology of lesbian and gay lives

The arguments about lesbian and gay reflexivity considered in the earlier sections of this chapter are distinct from the ideas about reflexive sociology discussed in the previous section. While our arguments about lesbian and gay reflexivity talk about social and personal reflexivity, they tend not to be reflexive in the sense of critical reflection on the dynamics of difference and power involved in the production of the sociological narrative. In forwarding them, we rarely explicitly explore the limits of our analyses in terms of whose realities are represented, whose are made invisible, and what interests of power are promoted (explicitly and inadvertently). We do not aim for reflexive sociology, because we often seek theoretical and narrative coherence about lesbian and gay lives. We achieve this by bracketing questions of difference and power. Indeed, the coherence of our narratives is, from the perspective of the arguments considered in the previous section, also an expression of their limited reflexivity. To acknowledge complexities
of difference and complex flows of power, these arguments suggest, is to complicate coherence.

In terms of the future directions for theory and research, in contrast to the sociology of reflexive lesbian and gay life that analyses such as Giddens’ promote, Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) proposes a vision of reflexive sociology that could be more useful for comprehending contemporary lesbian and gay life, as it places difference and power at the centre of the conceptual frame. Reflexive sociology, from this perspective, requires that sociologists become collectively skilled in critically interrogating how particular social fields operate, the rules of the game that apply to them, and the distinctions and resources that matter in giving some groups an advantage over others via their position within the structure of the field. It entails recognizing that such advantages are the consequences of how the embodiment of – and access to – combined economic, social and cultural resources promotes the empowerment of some groups over others. While Bourdieu emphasizes class distinctions, his analysis is applicable to other kinds of distinctions and relations (such as gender, ‘race’ and ethnicity and the like), and his theory has been employed by sociologists to generate nuanced analysis of the relationships between difference, resources and power in diverse social settings. For Bourdieu, the habitus (habituated and embodied ways of being in the world) cannot be fully made conscious, and sets limits on the extent to which social action and interaction can be reflexively managed. Applying this idea to lesbian and gay life would entail first, recognizing the limits of reflexivity. It would also imply acknowledging how economic and socio-cultural differences shape the possibilities for claiming reflexivity. It would further entail reflection of whose claims to reflexivity are being theorized and presented as ‘given’ and universal in narratives of reflexive lesbian and gay sexualities. Finally, for theorists and researchers, it requires collectively interrogating how habituated dispositions and ways of viewing the world potentially lead us to misconceive and miss-recognize our (imagined) worlds for ‘the world out there’, or mistake our own (imagined) reflexivity for ‘lesbian and gay reflexivity’.

Despite the possibilities Bourdieu’s conceptual frame offers, deconstructive approaches to reflexive methodology argue the case for a more radically reflexive sociology. The most radical of these arguments propose the case for viewing sociology as a form of narrative production that involves power. The production of sociological narratives, they argue, involves the negotiation of diverse and contested versions of reality that are impossible to include or represent in any one narrative. Sociological narratives are therefore always partial in how they privilege some versions of reality over others. The versions of reality that are represented are often those which fit most closely with sociologists own experiences of the world, and resonate with their own values – or habitus. Even where sociologists interrogate (individually or collectively) how their own values shape the narratives they tell,
they cannot simply neutralize these or control how their narratives will be received and interpreted. Further, language is not a neutral medium through which sociological theories, ideas and narratives are simply or straightforwardly expressed. Rather, language is itself a relay route for power. These arguments are deconstructive to the extent that they challenge the methodological assumptions that have long underpinned sociological investigation. But they are also, in some ways, reconstructive to the extent that they propose ideas for re-envisioning sociological practice. These include an ethos of critical interrogation and an openness and willingness to subject our assumptions, procedures and narratives to intense scrutiny (our own, other sociologists and research publics). In advocating these, the intention is to acknowledge and make visible – as far as it is possible – the dynamics, assumptions and experiences that shape sociological knowledge. While constructive arguments about reflexivity often aim to produce ‘better’ or ‘purer’ knowledge, radical proponents of reflexivity aim for something more modest, but nonetheless complex: to acknowledge that sociology itself is involved in strategies of power. In doing this they suggest a number of reflexive principles that could be fruitfully incorporated into theory and research on lesbian and gay lives. First, reflexivity acknowledges that there can be no neutral sociological project that is untainted by power and political interests. Second, radical reflexivity does not aim to correct bias as such, but to investigate, make visible and make public the procedures and assumptions that underpin sociological claims and interpretations. Third, reflexivity is a political strategy that recognizes sociology’s part in the politics of knowledge. Fourth, reflexivity is an endeavour to produce situated knowledge that explicitly alerts its audience to the positioning and interests that inform it to the extent that they are known and knowable (Haraway, 1988).

The kind of reflexivity proposed here could only ever provide the basis for a modest sociology of lesbian and gay life: one that is attentive to the potential political effects of its interpretations and claims and explicitly recognizes its own limits. It would be mindful of the dangers of claiming ‘successful’ reflexivity and superior knowledge on the basis of this. It would have its roots in the kind of analytical strategies that take difference seriously as an expression or a medium of power (e.g., feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, Queer and the like). Such analytical strategies tread carefully where universal or generalized claims are concerned, as they are attuned to the risks they present for erasing or making invisible difference and the political effects of this. The radical sociological reflexivity they promote provides a strong counter-argument against our claims about ‘lesbian and gay reflexivity’, and the sociology they promote. In summary, the reflexive sociology of lesbian and gay lives would emphasize the need for explicit and critical (collective) reflection on dynamics of difference and power that are central to the construction of sociological narratives of lesbian and gay lives. The sociology of lesbian and gay reflexivity has, in contrast, more often been concerned
with constructing a powerful narrative about lesbian and gay lives that for the sake of coherence often erases difference. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive approaches to the study of lesbian and gay lives. But it is fair to say that in the sociology of lesbian and gay reflexivity, we have so far failed to seriously engage with arguments for reflexive sociology. Looking to the future, we will always fail to generate a convincing analysis of contemporary lesbian and gay life to the extent that we fail to participate in reflexive sociology.

Notes

1. This is a slightly modified version of a paper that was originally published in 2008 under the title ‘The Sociology of Lesbian and Gay Reflexivity or Reflexive Sociology?’ in Sociological Research Online 13(1): 9, <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/1/9.html>
2. By using ‘our’ throughout, I include myself amongst those who have contributed to the ‘sociology of lesbian and gay reflexivity’.

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