

Bringing Psychology in from the Cold
*Framing Psychological Theory and Research
within a Social Constructionist
Psychology Approach*

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Introduction

In the last month I have counseled a number of people who appear to be oblivious to the sexual orientation categories that exist in our society. One of these, David, age 44, is a good example. Married for fifteen years with six children, he was having his first emotional and sexual relationship with another man. He described this as a "top-up" to the relationship with his wife, to whom he is close. Neither he nor his wife used the words "gay," "heterosexual," or "bisexual" to refer to his situation, nor did the conversation revolve around his "sexual orientation." They simply described what was happening and discussed issues in their own relationship.

No doubt my recent client list would leave many constructionists breathless with hope! Perhaps the concept of sexual orientation is becoming irrelevant to personal experience. Perhaps we really *are* beginning to understand relationships, emotions, and attractions without needing to label them as homosexual or heterosexual. However, for every David who comes to my office, I also see another ten individuals whose language is peppered with references to sexual orientation as they discuss sexualromantic attractions to people of a particular gender. Their psychological realities appear to be as "real" as those of David. Or are they?

An element of judgment, wafting through a great deal of constructionist writing, suggests that the lived "sexual orientation experiences" (attractions, identities, and struggles) of individuals are not a primary consideration, that the focus for theorists and researchers should be on sexual orientation as social *construct* and on the purposes such a concept has for society. I have never felt at ease with what I see as this sociologically driven brand of constructionism. As a psychologist, looking at the weight of the literature on cognitions, learned behaviors, motivations, social behavior, and so on and drawing on my clinical experience, I find the attention to the cultural and associated neglect of the psychological disturbing.

Until recently, discussion about constructionist approaches to sexual orientation has nearly always been led by nonpsychologists. This concerns me, not because psychology missed out on the "debate" between essentialism and constructionism (I consider we were largely to blame for this), but because of what I see as the narrow sociocultural determinism that now governs our constructionist discourse on sexual orientation.

Pervading the discussion is an assumption that the public messages provided by Western culture about sexual orientation are directly replicated or copied across into people's private lives (the so-called cultural fax model of human behavior [D'Andrade, 1992; Strauss, 1992]).¹ Supposedly, individuals become heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual because Western society teaches that these states of being are available. Yet it would seem that this approach merely replaces the biological fax model (i.e., people adopt sexual orientations because biological dispositions demand it). Little attempt is made by either approach to address the way sexual orientation as a public construct comes to be taken into the private realm, into people's thoughts, actions, and feelings and sexual arousal patterns. While there can be no doubting the significance of adopting a constructionist approach to sexual orientation, its present superficial understanding of human behavior can only be disturbing to those cognizant of the complexity of behavioral change and development.

That psychological reductionism and sociological models of human behavior dominate constructionist commentary is a result, I believe, of the psychological perspective being either absent from the discussion or so timidly presented as to be easily discounted. This in itself is not surprising, since psychologists are still trained in the paradigms of tradi-

tional (nonconstructionist and anticonstructionist) psychology. In addition, the constructionist psychology movement is still relatively unknown to the majority of psychologists, who are ignorant of its basic premises.

It is therefore pleasing to see the authors of this book examining the meaning of social constructionist thinking in terms of its implications for psychological theory and research. We need to educate psychologists about constructionist thought and provide examples of how training in traditional psychological theory and research methods can unwittingly lead to conclusions that have more to do with socially constructed notions than any objective "truth." Nevertheless, I must admit to wanting more. I don't want us to be satisfied with simply tacking psychological issues onto the present reading of constructionism. As stated, I believe that a sociologically driven version of constructionist thinking is inadequate when one is attempting to understand and explain all the complexities of what we call sexual orientation. The study of sexual orientation must surely include more than the identification of sexual orientation as social construct and consideration of the purpose such a construction holds for society. What about the clutch-at-the-heart experience of feeling romantically attached, the pleasure of sexual arousal, the sense of being lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, or gay, the growing awareness that one's sexualromantic attraction is directed towards a particular gender? These (psychological) experiences of sexual orientation seem to be too easily dismissed as "essentialist" (read: not relevant to the development of social theory) by many constructionists, whereas I maintain that as psychological realities they form an important part of the processes of social construction. These experiences are not essentialist remnants that require tolerance on our part but rather a significant *component* of the whole picture of sexual orientation. Hence I must admit to a little discomfort at talk of a truce in chapter 6. This seems to me to divide the lived psychological realities of individuals from constructionist critique, whereas I think it necessary to consider these realities from *within* a constructionist framework and to acknowledge their role in the processes of construction.

What would constructionist theory look like if it were to include the psychological as part of theory? Clearly, it would focus on *how* Western cultural knowledge about sexual orientation and other relevant concepts (such as the individual, attraction, or development) are translated into consistent, recurring, and desired behavioral patterns, identities, and rel-

evant phenomena that we commonly classify as sexual orientation. For me, as a psychologist, it isn't enough to know that sexual orientation is culturally constituted or even that there may be a biological predisposition to the direction of sexual attraction. This tells me little of the behaviors expressed as sexual orientation. And, while I am very interested in the diversity of behaviors that become subsumed under labels such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual," I am equally keen to understand how it is that Western cultural concepts about sexual orientation, knowledge that we perceive as "out there," become translated into thoughts, emotions, actions and physiological reactions of individuals that fit closely with those categories. I'm interested, too, in how social knowledge becomes translated into self-knowledge ("in here, about me") that provides an understanding of self as "gay," "bisexual," "heterosexual," and "lesbian." As a theorist I want to understand the way large- and small-group dynamics are also implicated in this process of construction, and how biological capacities might play a role. And, importantly, I see an urgent need to track the place of human agency in the construction of sexual orientations, since individuals and groups are not passive recipients of cultural directives but may engage quite actively and intentionally with their environments.

In other words, I see a need to more consciously incorporate the psychological into our constructionist reading of sexual orientation, to extend our focus beyond the sociology of knowledge (Berger, 1970) that underlies sociologically based constructionism, to what might be called the *psychology of knowledge*, the way people at both the individual and the collective levels construct their behaviors from the social knowledge of their cultural environment.

Further, I think we need to get beyond the unspoken belief that social theory, as perhaps a more abstract level of thought, is also a "higher" or "better" level of critique than psychological analysis. There is no doubt that much of the psychological literature on sexual orientation in the past twenty years has come from a blinkered approach, written as if the whole constructionist argument did not exist. Blame our training if you will. But it is time, surely, to move on. The first step in this, as taken in chapter 6, is to sweep current psychological theory and research through the lens of constructionist thought, looking at ways in which our research and approaches need to be changed in order to reflect cultural and anthropological data on sexual orientation. Yet, if we base this

much-needed educational program upon a psychologically reductionistic version of social constructionism, we will limit ourselves professionally and narrow psychological research to fit a model of human behavior that we do not, in fact, uphold.

There is, I believe, a need to go one step further and explore constructionist theory that *includes* the psychology of sexual orientation. We must draw upon sexual theory that recognizes psychological and biological influences and processes, framing these within the potent environment of sociocultural forces. Too often, it seems the psychological and biological are considered untouchable (out of a fear of getting into essentialist territory, perhaps?). Yet the clinician can easily attest to the significance of psychological needs, sexual arousal, and social and learning processes to the individual's construction of sexual orientation. I have seen clients whose strong needs for nurturing, independence, or control appeared to instruct their sexualromantic attractions. Others reveal how sexual arousal seems to have been reinforced through classic learning processes. And the acquisition of intimacy patterns can frequently be traced through childhood experiences.

This leads me to suggest social constructionist psychology as a more appropriate basis for our discussions in the future (eg, Averill, 1980; Bond, 1988; Cole, 1996; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Gergen, 1977, 1984, 1985; Sampson, 1977; Semin & Gergen, 1990; Shotter, 1989, 1991; Shweder & LeVine, 1992; Shweder, & Sullivan, 1993; Smith & Bond, 1993; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1992; Turner & Oakes, 1986).² Constructionist psychology has, I believe, the capacity to direct us to the kinds of theoretical and research questions touched on earlier, questions that not only allow us to access the depth of current psychological knowledge but also promise to bring innovation to constructionist perspectives and research on sexual orientation.³

I turn now to a brief outline of the main tenets of the constructionist psychology framework and use this as a basis for presenting what I consider to be a more fruitful approach to sexual orientation. I also comment on this approach in relation to issues raised in chapter 6.

Opening Up the Discussion: Social Constructionist Psychology

Sexualromantic Attractions as Psychological Realities

An underlying premise of constructionist psychology, stated previously in this book, is that *psychological functioning and, hence, human behavior, including sexual behavior, is never acultural or ahistorical but is strongly influenced, that is, constrained and directed, by the sociocultural environment in which people live at any time.* There are now considerable data (e.g., Blackwood, 1986; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Moghaddam, Taylor, & Wright, 1993; Rorty, 1980) to suggest that psychological states such as emotions, cognitions, personality, perceptions, needs, notions of self, and other aspects of general and sexual behavior are not universal phenomena but vary considerably across cultures and history. Hence, behaviors, including sexual behaviors, can be conceived as social constructions that arise from the relationship that people, individually and collectively, have with the specific sociocultural context in which they reside.

Quite obviously, this position is a radical departure from traditional (i.e., mainstream) psychology, which states that behavior arises from inner psychological mechanisms that exist within each individual and are located universally in all human beings regardless of where they live (the essentialist approach). Indeed, it can be difficult for those trained in traditional ideas to accept that individuals in some other cultures (to give some examples) do not experience anger or develop ideas of self and, closer to home, have no words in their language such as "homosexual" or "heterosexual" with which to classify behaviors we define as "sexual" and "romantic."

While it is apparent from this evidence that we cannot think in terms of objective universal realities about human behavior, it is possible to consider the idea of culture-specific *psychological realities*, behaviors that arise from the individual/culture interaction and are experienced as "real." In this sense, sexual orientation behaviors are psychological realities, a notion that brings me into conflict with ideas expressed in chapter 6. It is frequently stated in the previous chapter that there is no entity that *is* sexual orientation (hence, how can we look for causes and so on?). The authors are reiterating their point of chapter 2 that sexual orientation is not an objective entity, such as a mountain or rain (although even

these entities can be perceived differently within different cultures), that exists regardless of culture and history. Nevertheless, people in Western cultures experience *something* they define as sexual orientation. As such, I think we need to acknowledge sexual orientation behaviors that arise around that concept as *psychological realities*, as perceived and experienced "entities."

Of course, the interesting question is, What is that something? Here I found some confusion in the previous chapter. At times it seems that "human experience" is presented rather euphemistically as the content of sexual orientation; at others, it is claimed there is nothing at all and it is all just a sleight-of-hand on the part of society; then, at still other times, it is only identity that seems to be the focus. Further, the term "sexual orientation identities" is frequently used to mean "of the self" rather than the more commonly understood meaning of "self-image." This leads to its being applied in contexts that many readers would not, I think, recognize as common usage. I believe this confusion about the content of sexual orientation probably reflects the hesitancy many psychologists have, under the weight of sociological emphasis on sexual orientation as category, to move into the arena of behaviors that express the concept, that is, sexualromantic attraction. Why are we so timid about naming, let alone tackling, this topic? People, generally speaking, do not adopt sexual orientation identities of "homosexual," "heterosexual," and the like because it seems like a good idea at the time. They do so because they are trying to make sense of some aspect of themselves, that is, of behaviors that have been imbued with "sexual" and "romantic" meaning by society. When these behaviors (desires and attachment to others) are perceived to be persistent in their focus, they take on further psychosocial meaning that sees us call them *attractions*. When attractions are persistently directed toward others of a specific gender for any period of time (that is, they are seen to form some *pattern* of sexualromantic attraction), they are given the meaning of "sexual orientation." In the process of attempting to understand these attractions, most people come to adopt an *identity* that they perceive as making sense of their attraction behaviors. The vast majority of individuals in Western cultures identify sexualromantic attractions first and then create sexual orientation identities around their conceptions of those attractions.

In sum, I believe we should not hesitate to name sexualromantic attractions as the legitimate focus of our attention and to place them squarely in the sights of psychological theory and research. Both attrac-

tions and the identities arising from them represent psychological realities and hence need to be recognized as important components of the psychological content of sexual orientation. We must not be timid about including either of them in any constructionist analyses we undertake in regard to sexual orientation.

Indigenous Psychologies

Constructionist analyses should always begin with the understanding that *psychological realities, including sexual realities, are developed within the boundaries of the indigenous psychology of any sociocultural world*. An indigenous psychology is a network of psychological knowledge that exists within each sociocultural world and represents part of the total body of knowledge that makes up the culture of that world (Heelas & Lock, 1981; Smith & Bond, 1993).

Indigenous psychologies are continually evolving entities, the product of historical processes. They include all the information that each sociocultural environment takes to be the truth about human nature or psychology, everything from psychological concepts and processes to the reasons people act the way they do, the problems they experience, and even the solutions available. Hence, they define what the psychological realities are and guide psychological functioning to fit within these parameters. Those who live within any given sociocultural environment do not realize that these limitations exist because the indigenous psychology is so much a part of their thinking, having been learned from an early age, that they simply assume this is the way people are. Within the indigenous psychology of our own Western cultures there is a body of sexual knowledge that defines how people are sexually. This knowledge covers everything we take for granted about sexuality—including our notion of “sexual orientation.” Therefore, we assume without question the existence of something called “sexual orientation.” In our minds, we just “know” what it is, the behaviors that define it, how it develops, and what people with specific orientations do, think, and feel. Without realizing it, we’re perceptually set to see sexual orientation in our world and assume that all people will develop and discover the “true” direction of their sexualromantic attractions (whether heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual). In other words, the Western indigenous psychology is the source of our essentialist beliefs about sexual orientation and sets the stage for the way we experience that something we call “sexual orientation.”

The concept of indigenous psychologies is such a dense one that I believe it to be vastly superior to the idea of "scripts" that frequently is used by constructionist writers (and touched on in chapter 6). It reminds us that sexual knowledge is part of a broader network of nonsexual social information and concepts (e.g., "gender," "development," "self-actualization," and "maturity") that feed into our understanding of sexual orientation. Further, indigenous psychologies are themselves guided by other knowledge systems of each cultural world (e.g., spiritual knowledge). Only by considering an indigenous psychology within this total context can we understand fully the meaning of any of its component parts (i.e., sexual orientation).

Now, at this point sociologically based constructionist approaches appear to conclude their discussion of sexual orientation. However, for psychological theory and research, the concept of an indigenous psychology can only be the introduction to the story of how sexualromantic behaviors are constructed. While the indigenous psychology undoubtedly plays a significant role in prescribing boundaries for our sexual realities, it tells us little about the actual development and expression of these realities (that is, the psychological processes involved) and hence is unlikely to be the sole factor in the construction of sexual orientation behaviors and identities. Between societal teachings *about* sexual orientation and the *expression* of sexualromantic attractions, there is a lot of theoretical space to fill. Although not touched on in the previous chapter, this is fertile ground for psychological theory and research. To begin with, we might recognize that individuals, in the course of socialization, come to translate the knowledge that is their indigenous psychology into unique personal versions of that indigenous psychology (Strauss, 1992). Each of us in Western societies (or Western-influenced societies) not only has learned of the social representation (Moscovici, 1981) of "sexual orientation" but has also evolved his or her own specific interpretation or *cognitive schema* of that construct.⁴ This schema is linked with other related schemas, providing each of us with a unique *personal semantic network*⁵ around the notion of sexual orientation. For example, the schema for "heterosexual" may be linked with schemas for "married," "romance," and "success" in the thinking of one person, while for another it may be linked to schemas for "being accepted by others," "being in the closet," and "breadwinner." Hence, personal semantic networks provide each individual with a unique meaning in regard to the concept "sexual orientation." These meanings guide and motivate each individual to sexually act,

feel, and think in ways specific to his or her "sexual orientation" semantic network.

I note that in the previous chapter this personalization of the indigenous psychology is referred to as constructivism and perceived as a process that parallels constructionism. However, I take a quite different perspective, claiming that cognitive schemas and personal semantic networks are a significant *component* of the process of constructionism, not separate from or parallel to it.

It seems to me that cognitive schemas and personal semantic networks are an excellent place to start in our attempt to understand sexual orientation as psychological reality. For example, in looking at why some people adopt identities that appear to be at odds with their sexualromantic attractions, we might find that from their own perspective (personal semantic network) there is, in fact, no mismatch.

The Process of Social Construction

We have yet to address how the process of social construction occurs. Constructionist psychology proposes that *human behavior, development and change are the products of a complex process of reciprocal interaction engaged in between individuals (including their biological and psychological capacities and experiences) and their objective and subjective environments (including their indigenous psychologies).*

Reciprocal interaction refers to an ongoing relationship between individuals and their sociocultural environments in which each *simultaneously* influences and is influenced by the other (Berger & Luckmann, 1975; Gergen, 1984; Shweder, 1992) in the construction of sexual orientation. This relationship is a seamless one in which individuals cannot be neatly separated from their environments, one in which everything is *at the same time* involved in a process of *being* and *becoming*. Within this model, biological and psychological capacities and experiences within any individual are engaged in processes of reciprocal interaction with each other and, at the same time, with the sociocultural environment. In the sexual arena, biological capacities may include sexual arousal, genetic inheritance, physiological functioning, and physical limits, as well as the capacity for language and memory, while psychological capacities may incorporate fantasy, needs, motives, intimacy styles, cognitive schemas, learned behaviors, and so on.

On the basis of this model of reciprocal interaction, I am proposing that the "emergence" (construction) of sexual orientation behaviors (*including stability and changes in such behaviors*) occurs within these complex interaction processes, which are themselves products of historical processes (Birke, 1986). Since the model depicts a dynamic process of continuous interaction, "sexual orientation" behaviors as products or constructions immediately reenter the processes of interaction as part of the individual's experiences.

The analogy of baking a cake has sometimes been used to depict what I've outlined so far—that is, several different ingredients are mixed together, and a process of cooking blends these into a new entity, the cake (the pattern of sexual attraction, the sexual orientation identity, and so on). Introduce new ingredients into the mixture and you create a variation in the cake (or sexual orientation behaviors).

However, there are problems with the cake analogy, which is too simplistic to be applied to the construction of human behavior. For each of the "ingredients" in the reciprocal interaction process, we can identify several levels of complexity. Biological and psychological capacities range from simple specific functions to complex processes, while sociocultural worlds are diverse and multilayered. If we recognize that all levels of complexity can become engaged in the interaction process and that at any moment some levels may be involved while others may not, it's apparent that the cake analogy simply cannot depict the enormous complexity that exists. Nor can it present the idea of the cake's (e.g., sexual orientation identity, sexual attraction, romantic attachment) being both a product *and* a component of the cooking process, as constructionist psychology proposes.

The constructionist psychology model of sexual orientation presented here is significant to psychologists because it provides a place for their knowledge and skills in the task of understanding sexual orientation behaviors. Until now, it has been difficult for psychologists to see where their abilities as behavior specialists could be usefully applied within the constructionist approach. I hope that the model I have outlined encourages a greater and more innovative involvement than we have previously seen.

For example, we are now faced with the research question "to what *degree* do biology, psychology, and environment influence the construction of sexualromantic attractions?" a question that has immediate implications for psychological research and theory. It is now possible to imagine

countless different combinations of these factors interacting together to construct a broad spectrum of sexual orientation experiences. Psychologist practitioners are quite familiar with the variability in sexual orientation behaviors, yet they have struggled to have this recognized in the traditional literature on causation, which, as noted in chapter 6, has so often inferred homogeneity within each sexual orientation group. However, the model of sexual orientation outlined here recognizes both diversity *and* similarity (apparent or actual) in sexual orientation behaviors. It is conceivable, for example, that *apparently* similar sexualromantic behaviors and identities may be the result of similar reciprocal interaction processes involving similar "ingredients." Equally, quite different combinations of psychological, biological, and environmental factors can produce similar outcomes. Further, similarity may exist because it is encouraged by the Western indigenous psychology, which promotes the ideal of a unified self consistent with the images taught by the indigenous psychology. Cognitions, emotions, and actions that do not fit notions of self are ignored and incongruencies smoothed out. Conceivably, this could result in attractions and identities that look similar as individuals strive to match the pictures of sexual orientation proffered by our indigenous psychology.

This understanding of similarity places me somewhat at odds with the inference in chapter 6 that nothing is gained by considering the so-called sexual orientation groups (homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals) to be homogeneous in makeup. While acknowledging that the diversity within such groups is often ignored, I think it is inadvisable to suggest that studying the commonalities within the groups is somehow poor research. I propose that similarity of sexual orientation behaviors is constructed, just as is variability, and that we should see both aspects as requiring explanation.

I am aware that the reciprocal interaction model will be difficult to accept for those who equate psychological and biological influences with essentialist thought (with good reason, I might add). Nevertheless, I believe many psychologists have been uncomfortable with existing constructionist proposals that ignore not only the enormous complexity of human behavior but also the input of biological influences and psychological factors in its expression.

We need to be able to accommodate psychological and biological research into sexual orientation without feeling that we have succumbed to the essentialist approach. Take the case of research into genetic causes of

same-sex sexualromantic attractions (e.g., Bailey & Bell, 1993; Hamer et al., 1993). While concerns have been raised about the methodology used and the research is fraught with essentialist assumptions (DeCecco & Parker, 1995), I believe there is enough evidence for us to seriously consider the possibility that some genetic *influence* may contribute *in some men* to the construction of sexualromantic attraction toward men. The situation with women is less clear, but twin studies nevertheless suggest a degree of inheritance of homosexual attractions in both males and females. Now, we do not have to give up a constructionist perspective to accept these findings, as some appear to think. Within the process of reciprocal interaction between individual and environment, genetic predisposition, as an element of biological capacities, can be viewed as one line of influence that feeds into the bigger picture where psychological and cultural factors also play a significant role. There is no need to assume that all individuals must hold this biological capacity, or even that individuals with such a capacity are equal in the influence that it exerts. And we can theorize that even in those individuals who may have such a genetic predisposition, this must still be filtered through processes in which it interacts reciprocally with the other (environmental and psychological) influences. Hence, I see no problems in postulating a process of construction even while acknowledging a biological component of that process.

Intentionality and Sexual Orientation

My rather heretical notion is made more palatable if we consider another significant tenet of constructionist psychology, namely that *human beings actively and intentionally participate in the construction of their psychological and hence sexual realities*. Constructionist psychology rejects the traditional view of people as passive creatures who simply react to their environment and to their own biological or psychological capacities, adopting instead the idea of the dynamic, active, and intentional character of human beings. After all, as we psychologists well know, human beings have the capacity to monitor, attend to, select, organize, ignore, or in some way act upon their environmental givens (Gergen & Semin, 1990; Shweder, 1992) and do so quite readily at all times. Indeed, we must recognize that both individuals *and* environments have intentionality, that is, can act with purpose toward each other. It is this inten-

tional capacity that can be said to drive the process of reciprocal interaction (Berger, 1970; Emler, Ohana, & Dickinson, 1990; Shweder, 1992).⁶

Thus, the notion of intentionality allows us to perceive the individual as playing an active role in the construction of sexualromantic attractions—but within the bounds of factors such as the indigenous psychology, genetic inheritance, and cognitive schemas. Presumably, this intentionality can be moderated by the varying degrees (strength) of influence exerted by the environment and by the psychological and biological capacities, as well as different aspects of them. If so, some quite complex areas of research and theory are suggested, although I doubt we have the research methodology to explore them all.

However, the way in which individuals take an active role as they acquire, manage, influence, and are influenced by the knowledge of sexual orientation stored within their indigenous psychology should be within our research grasp. Drawing upon established areas of literature such as attributions, perceptions, and social influence, I see no reason why psychological research should not be able to make a valuable contribution to the issue of intentionality and sexual orientation.

Negotiated Relationships

While acknowledging the individual's capacity for intentional action, constructionist psychology also recognizes that *individual behaviors, including sexual orientation behaviors, cannot be understood separately from the social relationships in which they arise (remembering that such relationships are themselves part of the broader sociocultural context)*.

I have found it useful to extend the idea of human intentionality to include that of *negotiated relationships* (Shotter, 1989). Within social relationships, individuals influence and are influenced by others. The unique qualities and responses one individual brings to the encounter influence the behavior of others present in the interchange, and the responses of these people, in turn, influence that individual. These social interchanges involve a process of negotiation, with each person altering cognitions, emotions, and actions in a negotiated response to others. Since individuals engage in multiple social interchanges with others as they go about their daily lives, they are constantly involved in processes of negotiation on many fronts. Out of this complex network of negotiated relationships the "self" is constructed.

I am proposing that *negotiated relationships are a significant site at which reciprocal interaction processes are played out. Hence, sexualromantic behaviors are experienced and constructed within the context of negotiated interpersonal relationships, whether these be actual or symbolic, individual or collective.* Our Western (or Western-influenced) social relationships inevitably incorporate the concept of sexual orientation (via the content of personal semantic networks, psychological and biological experiences, social assumptions, expressions of gender, social policies, institutional structures, and many other means). This knowledge becomes part of the negotiated process. For example, when people perceive another's behavior as fitting the notion of "sexualromantic attractions," they react (e.g., by actions, verbal exchanges, expectations) in ways that fit their perceptions. These reactions signal clear messages about how the individual's behavior is received and generate a negotiated response in return. A negotiated response sees an individual arrange his or her cognitive schemas, emotions, and actions around the other's reactions—rejecting, fitting in, rethinking, selecting, shifting beliefs, altering behaviors, revising, and so on. Other individuals present in the social exchange are, of course, simultaneously doing the same thing. Each individual's sexual orientation "realities" become part of this process of interpersonal reciprocal interaction, influencing and being influenced by others over the vast number of relationship networks in which each person participates. It is within this context of multiple negotiated relationships that I place the process of sexual orientation identity formation, whereby individuals form an understanding or self-image of themselves as "belonging" to a particular sexual orientation group. In this sense, the development of a "homosexual," "heterosexual," or "bisexual" identity can be understood as the process by which people translate their (indigenous) everyday understanding of homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual identity into self-knowledge, behaviors, beliefs, and experiences via the process of reciprocal interaction (Cass, 1996). This involves a shift from perceiving and experiencing the social categories from a third-person perspective ("some people are homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals") to a first-person perspective ("I am a homosexual/heterosexual/bisexual").⁷

By acknowledging identity formation as part of the reciprocal interaction process, we can describe sexual orientation identity as both product and component of that process. Feeding back into the process of sexual orientation construction, identity has the capacity to reinforce, enhance, and change the strength and direction of sexualromantic attractions

(Cass, 1990). Obviously, these processes are complex and may not be readily studied. Nevertheless, the point is made that the development of a sexual orientation identity is complex and not simply a matter of individuals attaching a societal label at some convenient time, as some constructionist writing seems to suggest. By placing these processes within the arena of negotiated relationships, I hope to open up the study of sexual orientation identity formation, which for some years has been hopelessly stagnant, unable to move beyond debating which theoretical model is superior. Imagine, for example, tracking the flow of language and cognitions during multiple negotiated relationships as identity acquisition takes place. What motivations and cognitive and emotional processes might we observe as someone negotiates an apparent incongruency between identity and attractions?

The narrative style, mentioned in chapter 6, has some relevance here, although I advocate a much more directed use of the approach. Since language is both a precondition and a condition of successful social interchange, it represents a significant component of the construction process. Hence, we might analyze conversations between individuals by searching for examples of identity statements and the ways these are negotiated. We might also ask questions to elicit talk that reveals personal semantic networks held about sexual orientation and observe these over time.

Stability and Change in Sexual Orientations

I have not yet addressed the issue raised in the previous chapter in regard to stability and flexibility of sexual orientations. As outlined in chapter 5, the subject of fixed sexual orientations has raised difficulties for constructionists, since this notion infers an essentialist quality to sexualromantic attractions. Yet, any suggestion that sexual orientations can be altered soon flushes out those people whose agenda is to push for the conversion of homosexuals and bisexuals to heterosexuality. Of course, the reality for most clinicians is that, in addition to seeing people who experience sexualromantic attractions that vary over time, they regularly encounter individuals who claim to have *only* felt sexualromantic attractions for those of one particular gender. Obviously, *both* patterns of attractions need to be recognized as significant psychological realities (regardless of our ideological stance on the matter). Unfortunately, the

stability of sexual orientation is often presented as belonging to the essentialist side, while flexibility is claimed by the constructionists as evidence for the construction of sexual orientation. This approach does no more for our understanding of the range of sexual orientation behaviors than biologically based research, which has focused attention *entirely* on the so-called exclusive homosexual attractions while ignoring the evidence that for some people sexualromantic attractions can also shift direction.

I (like many others, I'm sure), find this either/or approach unrealistic, restrictive, and, from a clinician's viewpoint, quite fruitless. Both change *and* stability, I suggest, need to be accommodated within any approach to sexual orientation. Yet, neither biologically nor sociologically based constructionist approaches have been able to do this successfully, leaving psychologists with a gaping theoretical (and clinical) hole. Within the constructionist psychology framework, however, I find there is no difficulty conceptualizing both stability and flexibility of sexualromantic attractions. Both qualities would be considered to arise out of the reciprocal interaction process. Remembering that this process is about *being* and *becoming*, I propose that *stability of sexualromantic attractions can be viewed as a sameness from moment to moment, that is, as a continuity of attractions over time that occurs when reciprocal interaction processes are similar from moment to moment.* In this sense, sexual orientation attractions are being reproduced in identical fashion over and over again.⁸ Whether occurring in childhood or adulthood, this situation of sameness is described through the lens of our Western indigenous psychology as "behavioral consistency," "the inner self," "a trait," and so on. Alternatively, *a shift in sexual orientation behaviors would be predicted whenever a new element is introduced into the interaction process.*⁹ I recently watched a young Indonesian man, with no concept of sexual orientation and diffuse "sexualromantic attractions" (apparently like many others in his village), gradually shift toward a Western, homosexual sexual orientation pattern after he came to stay in Australia society, lived with a "gay" man, and eventually accepted a Western view of sexual orientation.¹⁰ The shift in culture presented a new component in the interaction process leading to new behavioral developments. Equally, a shift in psychological or biological capacities could also lead to a change in sexualromantic attractions (although it should not be inferred that all components of the reciprocal interaction process are equally amenable to change).

I should at this point say that in no way does this conception of change imply that it is easily achieved. When we put together the whole picture of reciprocal interaction and site this process within the multiple networks of negotiated relationships, it is clear that stability and change in sexualromantic attractions arises from a complex and multifaceted process that has ties to early as well as later development.

Research Focus and Ideology

In the previous chapter, the goal of research was presented as the development of an understanding of human experience without relying on use of the sexual orientation categories of "homosexual," "heterosexual," and "bisexual." It was emphasised that such labels were not accurate reflections of the many different expressions of sexual orientation behaviors (hence, the focus on a narrative methodology as a more suitable way of studying sexualromantic attractions). As such, their use in psychological research contributes to a perpetuation of the traditional belief that sexual orientation can be neatly divided into discrete "out-there" entities.

To a degree, I can endorse these sentiments, but I am concerned that this research directive will breed more of the timidity that I mentioned previously. We must be careful not to infer that there is any stand-alone behavior (in this case, sexualromantic attraction) that can be understood or studied outside the meanings given it by the indigenous psychology. Of course, we can study (and need to study) sexualromantic attractions and other relevant behaviors without linking these directly to a particular sexual orientation label. However, we must be careful not to make those labels into some form of ideological bogey. They are a component of our indigenous psychology and, as such, part of the whole process by which sexual orientations are constructed and given meaning.

Hence, I see no problems in studying groups of individuals who identify by one or another label, provided we work from the assumption that these identities are socially constructed. For example, it might be revealing to examine whether people who *identify as* heterosexual differ in pertinent personal semantic networks compared with those who *identify as* homosexual or bisexual. In this case, the comparison of homosexual-, heterosexual-, or bisexual-identified individuals is acceptable, provided we do not try to claim that any differences found are evidence for the groups being discrete "entities" in other respects.

I would prefer to see the examination of patterns of sexualromantic attractions held up as a goal, rather than *the* goal of research. The latter, I maintain, is to understand the psychology of knowledge and covers the study of *all* psychological realities that form part of what we call sexual orientation (identities, patterns of attractions, the relationship between identities and attractions, processes of social categorization, and so on). By keeping in mind that all of these realities are socially constructed, and by setting our work against the broad questions posed in chapter 5 regarding the purpose of the concept of sexual orientation, we can focus on sexual orientation as psychological reality and avoid the traditional (essentialist) trap of identifying it as objective entity.

With the goal of research focused on the psychology of knowledge, we shift attention away from the thorny question of who is a homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual and ask instead how the indigenous knowledge about sexual orientation is translated into personal knowledge, behaviors, and experiences. The difference in focus is breathtaking and offers psychologists an exciting vista from which to launch future research into sexual orientation. Within the framework outlined in this chapter I have suggested a number of areas where our skills and knowledge of human behavior can usefully be deployed to this end.

NOTES

1. I use the term "behavior" in the psychological sense to mean all actions, emotions, cognitions, and processes, expressed consciously and unconsciously, overtly and covertly.
2. I do not mean to suggest a sociology-versus-psychology debate, which serves no purpose. I apply the terminology of constructionist *psychology* to a theoretical approach that has derived largely out of the thinking of social, cultural, and anthropological psychologists concerned by the neglect of psychological processes in constructionist writing.
3. While one can argue that current psychological knowledge has been obtained via traditional psychological methodology, I believe we can still learn from the vast body of information about human psychology.
4. Cognitive schemas are evolving units or "packets" of knowledge held by people about specific social constructs and experienced as a combination of thoughts and feelings (e.g., schemas of "getting up in the morning," "success," "love," "being a woman/man"). Schemas are unique to each individual and may vary in content from the social representation of the construct.

5. Personal semantic networks are loose hierarchical arrangements of cognitive schemas, which, taken as a whole, represent the meanings each person gives to his or her world. These meanings then operate as a guiding and, most important, *motivational* force in human behavior (D'Andrade, 1992).

6. The idea of human agency is another aspect of the constructionist process that cannot be explained by the analogy of the cake mentioned earlier.

7. This approach differs from those of other theorists of homosexual identity formation, who present models that track changes in overt behavior rather than the shift from social knowledge to self-understanding and self-knowledge. For me, stages of formation are markers for shifts in cognitions and related emotions and behaviors, in contrast to other models, which mark stages by different *events* (e.g., joining gay groups). Although I consider the criticism of events-based models of identity formation as mentioned in chapter 6 to be valid on the grounds that the stages are not necessarily linear, I maintain that this does not apply to models based on changes in self-knowledge, since this shift (and the attendant shifts in self-awareness, self-cognitions, and emotions) follows certain patterns of logic derived from our indigenous psychology, patterns that have a certain linearity to them. For example, perceiving one's own attractions to be directed toward members of the same sex is likely to initially raise the question, "Am I homosexual?" (at this historical time, anyway) but not the statement "I am proud to be gay." The social logic and cognitive decision-making styles of our indigenous psychology guides this order in our thinking (and would not, for instance, allow us to reverse the order of these self-statements).

8. In addition, since sexualromantic attractions become, in turn, an element of the interaction process, it might be hypothesized that this would lead to a strengthening of these attractions since the pleasurable aspects of sexual arousal and romantic attachment can act as powerful reinforcers of behaviour.

9. Unless strategies are introduced to return the interactional relationship to its original status.

10. This example brings into the discussion the issue of whether "sexual" and "emotional" behaviors in non-Western cultures can be described as "attractions" in the same way we use the term. This area requires more consideration than I have space for. Suffice to say at this point that constructionist psychology is not antiuniversalist, that is, opposed to finding that sexual behaviors are similar across sociocultural boundaries. Similarity may indicate that, within different societies, coincidentally similar processes of construction occur or similar guiding sexual constructs exist. Historical events may also have led to the transfer of elements of one sociocultural environment to another. Equally, constructionist psychology is not antirelativist, that is, opposed to finding that behavior is quite distinct in different environments.

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