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Resisting homonormativity

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**Resisting Homonormativity:
Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth**

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit van Tilburg

op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. Ph. Eijlander,

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Resisting Homonormativity:
Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth
Julie Tilsen

Abstract

Youth who are queer-identified face many challenges in a heteronormative and increasingly homonormative world. Among those challenges is how to construct and maintain performance of a queer identity within the dominance of the gender binary and hegemony of essentialist notions of identity. Traditional developmental theories posit that the goal of identity development is the attainment of a sustainable and fixed identity. While contemporary inquiries into queer youth development have offered some critiques of traditional developmental models, the alternatives generated from these critiques continue to rely on the notion of “development.” This reliance reifies the regulatory regime produced by any developmental model. The very notion of “development” is an inappropriate metaphor to guide queerness; rather, queer is constitutive and non-essentialist, thus requiring a metaphor of construction and performance. Consequently, the queering of one’s identity is consistently threatened by dominant cultural practices that attempt to fix, limit, police, and regulate individuals toward stable notions of the “self.” The purpose of this dissertation is to center the experiences of queer youth by creating a queer space for conversations about identity. As a discursive frame, these insider knowledges will share the page with academic literacies from queer and post-structural theory in support of a radical queer re-conceptualization of identity, therapeutic practice, and youth-adult relationships. This dissertation will attempt to bridge the gap between the practice of therapy and the bodies of scholarship generated within interdisciplinary fields of study such as queer theory and cultural studies.

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No road is long with good company—Turkish proverb

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And, speaking of love, my final acknowledgment goes to my partner Lauri. From our walks down Wolseley Avenue discussing possible research questions, to my de facto disappearance as I worked on the dissertation, you were there, always, all ways. Now we can enjoy being Home together.

Resisting Homonormativity:
Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth

What are you wanting people who read this
dissertation to come away with after hearing your words?

That they'll take it seriously--Sarah

Chapter 1:

Introduction

“What’s present is having the awareness to know that when I encounter a person I can’t pretend to know anything about them and just holding onto that. Holding on to the fact that really I know nothing about anyone, right? And I do, and I think everyone does, look for signs that we can recognize or figure out things about someone but just, holding onto the fact that even if I make an assumption, I’m probably wrong, and that’s OK, but that’s what’s sort of there without stability for me.”--Courtney

Bridging the worlds of theory, practice and lived experiences

What happens when the assumptions fundamental to a therapist’s understanding of *how people are who they are* run hugely discordant to those of the people s/he serves? What if the therapist and the client inhabit divergent worlds founded upon conflicting worldviews?

Further, suppose that the therapist’s theories and concepts are widely utilized, distributed, and accepted in both professional and lay domains, although these very concepts often prove more obfuscating than clarifying, limiting rather than liberating in their failure to represent the

client's own self-understanding. Finally, what would the effects be if, unbeknownst to the therapist, the conceptual frameworks that s/he draws on to inform her practice and render respectful, effective treatment, are actually constructed in such ways as to restrict his/her client's capacity for self-determination and personal agency? In fact, what if some of these closely held, highly regarded professional and cultural "truths" were reproductive of the very oppressive circumstances that often created trouble in the client's life?

Therapists and other youth-serving professionals working with queer-identified youth often unwittingly function in ways that are unsupportive of queer youth and their identity constitutions. This occurs when professionals rely on essentialist theories of homosexual identity development based on modernist psychological notions of the "self" that insist on a self-contained, fixed, stable identity. This theoretical foundation (and the practices that emerge from it) exists at odds with the relational and fluid understandings of identity held by many queer youth. "Gay affirmative" therapies are not immune to this misunderstanding; while certainly not as egregiously emotionally or spiritually violent as practices based on beliefs that homosexuality is pathological and/or morally reprehensible, "gay affirmative" therapy--inasmuch as it continues to rely on essentialist and psychologized accounts of identity--fails to capture the constructionist nucleus and political intentionality that help to define queer subjectivities. This failure creates a chasm of theoretical and ethical significance.

At the epicenter of this chasm is the clash of modernist and postmodern accounts of the self, which will be addressed in chapter two. Modernist ideas have established hegemonic status throughout North American culture. They serve as the ideological foundation not only for psychological theories that inform practice, but also for the readily available, avidly consumed, pop psychology offspring of these theories. The gap between the world of the

practitioner and the world of queer youth exists in two discursive frames: “academic literacies” (Chiseri-Strater, 1991) and insider knowledges and lived experiences (Welle, Fuller, Maul, & Clatts, 2006).

Academic literacies refer to the ideas from queer theory that proliferate within the academy in the social sciences and interdisciplinary areas of critical inquiry such as gender studies, anthropology, and sociology. While this knowledge is being generated in the academy, it rarely crosses over into applied fields (e.g., psychology, social work, family therapy). When it does, it has typically lost its theoretical rigor and integrity. It is presented in bits and pieces, incoherently situated within modernist discourses, inconsistently applied in ways that subvert the subversive nature of its original intent (Foucault, 1978b).

Insider knowledge refers to the understandings and expertise that are gained from being positioned within and obtaining experience from being part of a particular community (Anderson & Burney, 2004). This includes the ways in which queer youth think about, talk about, and make sense of, their queerness. Insider knowledge stands in contrast to so-called “expert” knowledge. While we may recognize concepts from queer theory, social construction, and other critical bodies of scholarship in their personal accounts, insider knowledges are born out of lived experiences. These knowledges materialize independent of the happenings in the academy; they evolve experientially, reflect idiographic qualities, and often challenge conventional, “expert” understandings.

By bridging the gap that exists between practice and the ideas embedded within queer theory and the subjective accounts of queer youth, a radical new path can be forged for therapists and their clients. This path--born in conversation, skeptical of specifications, honoring of transgressions, intrigued by possibilities, committed to justice, and embodied in

relationship--opens up conversational space that is welcoming and generative of a proliferation of identity constructions. Building this connection requires the deconstruction of the modernist notion of *identity development* and the introduction of the postmodern notion of *identity construction*. This latter perspective, informed by queer theory and social construction, is a socially just theoretical alternative to the former that represents knowledge not only from the academy, but also from the lived experiences of queer youth. Thus, the practices informed by queer and constructionist frameworks are more responsive to and reflective of how many queer youth think about who they are, talk about who they are, and aspire to be in the world.

Queer conversations, queering conversations, queered research

“I wanted to participate in this because to put queer energy out into the world is talking making change.”—Ruben

The purpose of this dissertation is to privilege the accounts of queer youth by creating a queer conversational space that allows them to bring all of themselves to discuss how they “do” queer. The intentions of queer youth in their construction and performance¹ of queer identities and the meanings they make of these performances in the context of normative regimes can serve as an insider knowledge alternative to universal models of development and essentialist demands for a stable homosexual identity. Holding these insider knowledges alongside the theoretical possibilities offered by queer theory (e.g., Butler, 1990a; Foucault, 1978a; Halberstam, 2005; Rubin, 1984; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1999) is an open invitation to practitioners to re-think, re-imagine, re-member, and re-claim their practice in a way that is

¹ The notion of identity performance will be addressed in chapter two.

relationally responsive and socially just. It's an invitation to queer your practice—not based on *who or what* you see, but on *how* you see.

The central research question that serves as a conversational jumping off point is: *How do queer youth construct a queer identity within a homonormative context?* Conversations with queer youth about queer subject matter require a queer research process. *Queer* itself is a critique of identity categories, an act of resistance against naming and dividing practices that demand stable, essentialist, and binary notions of identity. Just as postmodernism is a critique of modern philosophy and thus, placing an encompassing definition on postmodernism itself would risk imposing a modernist system of knowing, queer cannot be explained or contained neatly. Also, *queer* stands in opposition to “normal” (Warner, 1999) as a political statement and embodiment of resistance. Thus, *queer research* will not be compliantly constrained within the methodological parameters of a particular qualitative research methodology.

Rather, queer research, as my co-researchers² and I have chosen to approach it, is a research process that is facilitative of relationships and conversations. It moves from individualized accounts to collective co-participation by bringing approaches together—a queering of the methodological lines--in the creation of a dialogical process (Parker, 2005). This kind of “research as conversation” (McNamee, 2000) relies on the reflexivity of all participant-researchers, as any “discoveries” of the research are actually identity performances discursively emerging during the research conversations themselves (McNamee, 2000). Ultimately, this is a queer process in its ignoring/blurring of boundaries, taking pieces of certain methods that invite conversations that seem meaningful to participants, and refusing to be limited by maintaining fidelity to one method.

² I intentionally think and speak of the youth whose experiences anchor this work as my co-researchers. This will be addressed in chapter three.

Meeting the Participants

Throughout this dissertation, the reader will hear from the five youth that participated in this research project. Their comments, excerpted from the six meetings we held, appear as insider knowledge that anchors this work in the lived experiences of queer youth. Below, is a brief introduction—in their own words—to each of the participants, all of whom were unequivocal about wanting to be identified in this work as central to the notion of honoring their voices.³

- **Sarah Dack and Courtney Slobojian:** Youthful post-homo lipstick enthusiasts with white privilege in their knapsacks, queer in their hearts and academia in their brains. Both work extensively hard to bridge the gaps in between.
- **Mateo Llanillos:** Ruben’s 23 year-old brother. Born in Nicaragua and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Mateo identifies as a queer trans male.
- **Ruben Llanillos:** Age nineteen, genderqueer, Hispanic. Mateo Llanillos is my older brother. I like wearing fur during inappropriate occasions and enjoy writing in cursive. I am an artist
- **Dylan Ralke:** *Option 1:* Your run of the mill, 20-something, flask-in-the-bag, young professional. A mish-mash of your typical cross- country European background, but with a heart that burns with the passion of Canadiana. Queer-and-questioning, prep and punk. Never quite on one side or the other, but always stuck in the middle. *Option 2:* 23 year old, male identified, strawberry

³ Parker (2005) troubles the notion of “anonymity” in research in convincing fashion.

blonde, hazel-eyed Ukrainian. Queer, yet always questioning. Bored and serious young professional by day. Eccentric and loud un-professional by night.

As for myself, I go through the world with the wind at my back for the most part: white, American, educated, able-bodied, cisgender, middle-class, professional. As a queer-identified, Jewish--non-religious, marginally cultural--woman, I also occupy locations that are marginalized to varying degrees in varying contexts. Coming to this inquiry process, it was important to me to remain cognizant of ways in which my age, class, and position as a professional represent privilege and authority with young people.

Practice implications

“For me to sit there and have to argue for my identity was one of the hardest things I’ve had to do.”—Sarah

How might your practice change if you de-centered professional knowledges about identity, youth identity, and sexuality and gender? What kinds of conclusions, or non-conclusions, may emerge in your work with clients if you had a situated understanding of sexuality and how it becomes imbued with meaning only by locating it historically and culturally? What kinds of reactions, judgments, feelings, and beliefs may become unhinged if you understood the politics of constituting one’s identity—including your own--based on *who someone has sex with*? What cultural or professional discourses that influence your work would become open to reconsideration if you were to sincerely, not in a token manner, center

the opinions, meanings, and actions of young people? Who might you become as a practitioner if you came to un-know much of what we are trained to be quite certain about?

These are questions that I was asking of myself when I first found that I was really listening to the stories of queer youth many years ago. Their lives were the evidence that much of what I took for granted was not an inclusive account of how people move through the world. While I sat in conversations with them, the epiphanic moment that resonated with me loudly, clearly, temporarily frozen to make sure that I *got it*, invited me to realize that they were offering me a gift: a liberatory story buried in their accounts of struggle. Bringing out from the margins those stories of resistance and agency for my clients as well as for myself helped me, and continues to help me, generate answers to those questions. The implications for my practice keep growing.

Chapter 2:

Social Construction and Queer Theory: The Audacity of Difference

“I bumped into this guy I knew from awhile ago and just kind of mentioned this (what we’re doing here) and he thought that queer was just a bunch of gay guys. He thought that I was just getting together with a bunch of young gay guys and hanging out. I had to explain to him what queer was to me, how I felt it was and how I felt that we are trying to explain it and define it. It was just so interesting because he was a gay guy and he just assumed that I just meant other gay guys, that this was just a group of gay guys.”--Dylan

Social Construction 101

Social construction is a philosophical stance that positions clinicians in a radically different way of practicing. This stance represents an important shift away from modernist assumptions about the world. These assumptions have effectively served as Western culture’s guiding meta-narrative since their emergence during the Enlightenment. Gergen (1985) states that social construction is “concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live”(p. 266). The primary distinction between modernism and social construction involves the shift from a focus on objects to an emphasis on language practices. Through the constructionist lens, we are able to consider that many assumptions about our world are produced and maintained through discourse⁴ (Foucault, 1970).

For example, certain discourses specify what sorts of behavior are considered appropriate when at work. As a North American, such discourses produced by and for the maintenance of

⁴ Foucault (1970) defines discourse as a “social practice” that circulates through culture. Discourse has a regulating effect on what may or may not be spoken. We cannot speak, think, feel, or act free from the influence of discourse, as even resistance or transgressions gain their meaning through their relationship to discourse.

a neo-liberal capitalist culture tell me that I need to maximize “productivity,” which is defined as billable hours. I’m to limit my time socializing with colleagues and engaging in activities that cannot readily be understood as generating capital. When I visited professionals working in similar settings as I do in Aotearoa/New Zealand⁵, I found that they worked under a different discourse, one that bore the mark of the Maori and Pacific Island cultures. In these cultures, time spent “socializing” and eating at work with colleagues was considered to be productive. In fact, not to do so, to “keep your nose to the grindstone” so to speak, would be unprofessional and rude because relationships carried value that in capitalist cultures they do not. Consequently, my assumptions about how to conduct myself as a professional became exposed as situated meanings influenced by particular discourses.

As a way of understanding how people make sense of their lives, constructionists also focus on the performative use of language and the production of reality through discursive practices (Guanaes & Rasera, 2006). This view of language shifts from the modernist emphasis on the individual--for whom language was a representation of reality--to the social activities shared between people—who then became agents of the production of reality (Wittgenstein, 1953).

There are many theoretical traditions that fall under the rubric that is social construction. While I will touch on a variety of influences that are located within this broad camp of ideas, my main emphasis will be on those that are informed by post-structural theory (Foucault, 1965, 1970, 1973, 1978a, 1978b, 1979; Derrida, 1967, 1977)⁶. This decision is due to the relationship

⁵ The agencies that welcomed my partner and me during a visit in 2004 included: Taeomanimo Trust and Family Start in Porirua and The Family Centre and Hutt Valley Youth Health Service in Lower Hutt.

⁶ Post structuralism emerged as a critique of the fundamental assumptions of structuralism as it rejects totalizing, essentialist accounts of subjectivity and the centrality of binary opposition. Post structural theory also views the relationship between individuals and discourse as

between queer theory (the primary theoretical resource of this dissertation) and post-structural ideas. Also, as a narrative-trained therapist, the theoretical underpinnings of narrative therapy come from the post-structural camp.

Discourse and Knowledge: Toward multiple realities

“I think that for me, it exists in the way that I’ve been able to see the ways that gender norms have affected the ways that I think I should interact with people sexually, and so, I think that a queer sensibility for me is having that stuff busted open. I feel like a queer sensibility has been forcing myself to see that that stuff has been socially constructed. It’s so different to interact with someone and have all of these norms in your head, like I’m a girl, and I’m large, and I’m sort of passive, and what does that mean in how I relate to someone else?”—Sarah

Fundamental to social construction is a skeptical view toward knowledge. In part, this involves questioning not only *what* we know, but also *how* we came to know it, and *who* such knowledge might privilege. For example, the physical act of sex is generally viewed as “natural.” When we understand things to be “natural” we assume their universality as well as their stability. Foucault (1978a; 1985), Rubin (1984), and Tieffer (2004) discuss the historical and cultural contingency of sex, noting that ideas such as “homosexuality” and “bisexuality” as well as specific behaviors that are understood to constitute sex in a contemporary Western context would be unknown in other places. Sexual essentialism that views sex as natural, existing before and independent of social relationship is an artifact of Western medical discourse, a prevailing discourse in our contemporary culture. (The discourses that produce and maintain notions of *sexual identity* will be discussed at length in chapter four.) While

constitutive of individual subjectivity. Post structural ideas are used as a way of challenging dominant discourses and bringing forward subjugated knowledges.

biology is a necessary aspect of human sexuality, it is not sufficient. As Rubin (1984) remarks, “the belly’s hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine” (p. 276). Thus, social construction does not reject or deny corporeal realities. It does however, question the privileged position of scientific discourse while also highlighting that nothing, including science, goes unmediated by culture.

The skepticism of social construction becomes operationalized through the practice of deconstruction (Derrida, 1967; 1977). Deconstruction is an approach that allows us to make visible the relationship between language, knowledge and the contexts in which they exist. Rejecting the existence of singular and absolute “truths,” Derrida proposed deconstruction as a way to illuminate fissures and inconsistencies in particular renderings of reality or knowledge by exposing their contextual contingencies.

When deconstructive questions are asked about sex in order to unhinge the certainty of its natural constitution, we can learn much about the contingency of meaning and its relationship to discourse. Questions such as the following are possible paths to the deconstruction of “sex”:

- *Has the definition of sex remained stable across time and in all places?*
- *Is the understanding of what constitutes sex stable across time and circumstances for all individuals, or might that constitution change in a person’s lifetime?*
- *Trace the meaning you have made of sex throughout your lifetime. What has stayed the same, what has changed? What circumstances influenced the various constitutions that you have embraced?*
- *Where do these understandings come from? Who has had the authority to create these definitions?*

- *What influences impact what we agree to understand to be sex? How have media, religion, technology, the medical profession, and consumerism influenced current understandings of sex?*
- *What might it mean that some people consider certain things to count as sex while some people don't consider those things to be sex? How does the existence of this kind of variation in perspectives affect the assertion that sex is natural?*
- *Who does this particular meaning of sex include and who does it exclude?*
- *What does this idea of sex imply about other kinds of sex? For whose benefit and at whose cost?*
- *In your experience, has your experience of sex been more similar to or more different from what you read about, have seen in films, learned in sex education? Which version is less natural than others?*
- *If sex is natural how come we have sex education?*

Thus de-essentialized and situated contextually, what had passed as “natural” or “immutable” becomes open to consideration and located within discourse. The possibility that other realities may be created out of other contexts, for other purposes, and by other agents of meaning production emerges. Furthermore, the process through which a particular construction, in this case, “sex” becomes reified through language and institutional practices such as heteronormativity, patriarchy, ableism, medicine and consumer capitalism is exposed. Thus, discourse is both a product and process of discursive practices (Monk, Winslade, & Sinclair, 2008). Through deconstruction, social construction asks, “why this construction, in this culture, at this time?” (Bohan, et al., 1999, p. 16).

With a skeptical eye toward the production of knowledge, constructionists take up a radically distinct view of reality as compared to modernists. Reality—everything we “know” about the world—is produced in language. In other words, all that we know is a byproduct of “communal interchange” (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p.2). This differs from the modernists’ discursive tradition which privileges individuals’ capacity to reason, assumes that we can know with certitude, and utilizes language to convey these truths (McNamee, 1996a). Moreover, modernist constitutions of reality render grand narratives, universal truths that transcend place and time. (Indeed, the modernist project is to *discover* explanations that can be universally assigned.) From a constructionist perspective, creating meaning is not a process of private interpretation engaged in by individuals, nor is it a matter of observing and describing the “real world”; it is an interactive social process engaged within relationships and mindful of discourse. When moving from an individual discourse to a relational discourse of knowledge production, we shift from the notion that knowledge is discoverable (“the truth is out there”) to the idea that knowledge is created. As such, knowledge is made, not found (McNamee, 1996a).

In the questions above, for example, “sex” as “natural” is deconstructed. As such, we find that “sex” is not solely a biological function to be observed and described by medical science—that is *one* discursive frame that produces *one* particular reality of “sex”; we also see that “sex” is constructed in a multiplicity of discourses. This leads to a proliferation of “realities” all dependent on context. Here, “context” includes: when in history the knowledge was produced; the cultural influences on its production; and the position and agendas of the people involved in its production. Thus, there are a variety of discourses that generate the “reality” of sex. Knowledge is understood to be historically and culturally contingent, thus making context

paramount to the production of meaning. Consequently, universal truths and grand narratives are rejected for local knowledges.

In a fundamentalist Christian discourse, for example, the reality of sex is very different than the reality created within the discourse of the critical disability movement.⁷ Likewise, notions about sex that originate within hegemonic masculinity will stand in stark contrast to those emerging from third wave feminist discourses. Here are some possible discursive statements that are products of—and are productive of—each of these discourses:

- *Fundamentalist discourse*: “Procreation is the purpose of marriage”
- *Critical disability discourse*: “All bodies are sexual bodies capable of giving and receiving pleasure”
- *Hegemonic masculinity discourse*: “Dude, if you don’t nail her now, you are so gay”
- *Third wave feminism discourse*: “If he gets to be a stud, I get to be a slut”

Whether we are sitting in church listening to a sermon, attending a poetry slam featuring disabled artists, downing beers at a sports bar, or reading *Bitch Magazine*, we are both influenced by and contributing to the production of discourse. While not always explicit, discourses are embedded within the language practices that we engage in. Operating as the assumptions requisite for making what we say or do legible to others, “discourse is the realm in which...what is ‘real’...is constructed” (Monk, Winslade, & Sinclair, 2008).

⁷ Of course multiple discourses are operating simultaneously and we all occupy social locations that place us in, at times, conflicting discourses. For example, an individual that is influenced by fundamentalist Christian ideas of sex but who also, because of a disability cannot participate in the specified sexual activities for procreative purposes may question these notions when she is exposed to sex positive attitudes from critical disability studies that challenge the limited constitution of sex.

Adopting these tenets of social construction requires us to abandon the representative view of language. In this prevailing perspective, language is believed to accurately describe reality, and reality is seen as something that can, in fact, be accurately described. Gergen (2009a) points out that the traditional view of language as descriptive is founded on the assumption that “truth can be carried by language” (p.9), an assumption that renders some languages, and those that speak them, more true than others. Indeed, Shotter (2003) asserts that how we talk about our lives serves to “constitute and sustain one or another kind of social order” (p.134). This implication of dominant discourse⁸ can be illustrated by further consideration of the above examples.

The four statements representing divergent discursive frames do not occupy the same position of influence and power. While many people may not subscribe to a fundamentalist Christian perspective of sex, the dominance of this discourse is seen in the lingering effects it has on contemporary American culture. Some of these effects include: the legislative mandate for abstinence-only education; sodomy laws on the books until 2003; and the pervasive assumption that “everyone” seeks a partner and wants to be married (and to desire otherwise is viewed with disapproval). Furthermore, while popular culture is generally considered to be a site of rampant revolutionized sexuality, a closer look reveals the strength of the dominant Christian discourse embedded within these texts. *Twilight*, for example, the mega-popular book and movie series by Stephanie Meyers, has been dubbed as “abstinence porn” (*Bitch Magazine*) and, despite all of the eye candy on screen, has no trouble conveying its message that premarital sex is not acceptable. In contrast, while third wave feminism (McRobbie, 2004;

⁸ Dominant discourse refers to ideas embedded within cultural texts that have gained hegemonic status through reification and reproduction of the ideologies, norms, and values from which they are constituted. They gain traction, in part, through authoritative endorsements from the realms of science, the academy, or law.

Shugart, 2001; Shugart & Waggoner, 2001) provides an alternative counter-hegemonic discourse⁹ we would be hard-pressed to find the ideas and values reflective of this discourse reified through legislation or blockbuster mainstream films. Thus, Shotter's contention that certain "social orders" are constituted and perpetuated (while others remain on the margins) by the discursive practices we engage in can be seen at the level of discourse.

In their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Berger & Luckmann (1966) describe how the social production of knowledge and reality progresses from a contextualized local understanding to an institutionalized sedimentation of reality that "becomes real in an ever more massive way" (p.59). Language serves as the vehicle of this process, fixing ideas and actions in time until they assume a reality status that is ahistorical, creating a "this is how it's always been" effect that goes unquestioned. As clinicians, we need look no further than the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (APA, 2000) to see how this process works.

Daily, we hear about "depression." Comments such as, "I'm depressed, he's depressed, that's depressing" litter our conversations with friends, colleagues, and strangers in the grocery store line. There is no need to ask what is meant--we know, and we've always known. That "depression" has moved from the restricted domain of professionals to the daily discourse of lay people—without question or skepticism-- speaks further to the productive process of discourse that is the focus of social construction. Yet, what is now codified as "Major Depressive Disorder" in the current iteration of the DSM has a long history of name and criteria changes. Contrary to the empirical aspirations of those responsible for the creation and

⁹ Counter-hegemonic discourses are acts of resistance to dominant discourses. They serve as attempts to disrupt, critique, and unhinge taken-for-granted cultural assumptions and institutions that are reified and reproduced through the cultural authority of science, the academy, and law.

publication of the DSM, these changes do not represent the outcomes of more precise and sophisticated scientific classification; rather, they are cultural artifacts, products of the medical and psychological zeitgeist of successive eras. Thus, the psychiatric “condition” commonly referred to today as “depression” is imbued with historical and cultural meaning, even if we’ve come to know it as an ahistorical, essential truth. This meaning serves as an emblem of its time and place, not to mention a badge for those with the authority to name it.

Yet, it is important that a binary opposition of modernism/social construction is not produced in the process of critique. Indeed, the above example of psychiatric diagnosis demonstrates how such a binary is problematic because it ignores the tension that exists between constructionist theory and the materiality of our political existence. On one hand, modernist accounts of depression leave us with a de-contextualized and fixed account that renders reductionistic and totalizing accounts of subjectivity. This obfuscates alternative stories of resistance to the problem and can become a barrier to possible new identity conclusions—a kind of, “I can’t see it because I don’t believe it.” On the other hand, without the currency of a diagnosis, many are unable to access appropriate services or have those services funded, often both.

Spivak’s (1988) notion of strategic essentialism, defined as a “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (p. 205) offers a viable re-working of this dilemma. Spivak suggests that a critique of the limits and consequences of essentialized identity can be both acknowledged and temporarily suspended in order to leverage group identities (e.g., diagnostic categories) within political contexts (e.g., the medical hegemony) in order to facilitate resistance, including accessing necessary resources that are regulated through

institutionalized power (e.g., psycho-industrial complex which includes: big pharma; the insurance industry; psychiatric and other professional discourses; governmental funding).

For example, transgender individuals seeking medical and surgical interventions must submit to what many consider highly oppressive medical and psychiatric regulation. This includes being diagnosed with so-called “gender identity disorder” and going through one year of “real life experience” (RLE) in the target gender. Thus, trans-identified people that want to receive the medical services they desire must first agree to a psychiatric diagnosis that privatizes a social problem that is a result of the discursively produced gender binary system. Second, they must then take up a lifestyle that reifies that system and demands that they solidly “land” as either male or female, even if they prefer a more fluid expression. Moreover, who is granted the authority to determine what “real life experiences” constitute those of “men” and which constitute those of “women” further demonstrates the inherent dilemma. The choice to submit or not to these medicalized discourses and procedures is a false, humiliating and painful choice for many. Yet, they do so because of the political realities that dictate the terms of their existence in our culture.¹⁰ The temporary suspension of preferred identity constitutions is taken up in the service of ultimately promoting these constitutions within political climates that impose limitations that deligitimate particular identities. Thus, strategic essentialism operates on multiple levels in the mediation of the tension between theoretical and political ideals and the materiality of politicized lived experiences.

¹⁰ For an excellent analysis of the dilemma of the GID diagnosis, the reader is referred to Butler’s 2006 essay, “Undiagnosing Gender.”

Un-doing interiority

“I feel like as a person queer isn’t the biggest part of me, it’s not my most central point. But because of the kind of friends that I keep and the social group I’m in, it is a really big aspect. It almost happens without a choice or without a decision, it naturally falls that way. And, I find that it helps our group evolve, too, because, in a sense, when we look at each other, we don’t recognize each other as queer—like, at times our sexual identity is very important to us but we’re all so accustomed to being the person who’s recognized as a sexual entity, as a gay or a queer or a lesbian, that when we look at each other we can see other things.”—Dylan

In order to accept that meaning is relationally produced, constructionists must reject another firmly held assumption of modernism: the idea of the self-contained individual. This assumption holds that a person’s identity is determined by his or her *essence*, what is “inside.” This essential self is understood to be fixed and stable. The hegemony of discourses that privilege essentialist notions of identity are readily available in the clichéd use of phrases such as “authentic self,” and “true self,” or in common admonishments to “just be yourself.” The prevailing cultural discourses of patriarchy and capitalism bear the mark of this notion of the self-contained individual, serving to reify and demand its centrality in contemporary North American culture (Cushman, 1995). Gergen (2009b) points out that, historically speaking, “the view of the individual as singular and separate, one whose abilities to think and feel are central to life, and whose capacity for voluntary action is prized” (p.xiv) is a product of the Enlightenment, thus a construction as recent as three hundred years ago. Given its youth, we can’t help but be struck by the strength with which this notion has taken hold.

Foucault (1965, 1973, 1979) contends that this modern invention of the individual has led to practices of objectification and subjugation through “dividing practices”¹¹ (1965) and “scientific classification”¹² (1973). These practices relied on the attribution of individual and social identities in order that regulatory regimes (the state, medicine, the prison system) may exercise social control. Furthermore, these practices established the specification of the self-contained individual, which Foucault maintains is critical to the operations of power in the modern state. Thus, the creation of certain *specified* self-contained individuals—and the discourses that maintain them—is in service of particular regimes of power.

Sampson (1989) also points to the ways that the self-contained individual exists in order to maintain modern power. He argues that the resistance of North American psychology to abandon its allegiance to the notion of the self-contained individual is not evidence of the idea’s validity as a “real” and “natural fact; rather, it speaks to the function that psychology’s focus on the self-contained individual serves in upholding the social structure. As a cultural artifact, psychology’s view of subjectivity as a self-contained interiority “fits” with the “ongoing structures and arrangements of current Western society” (p.3). Thus, to modify the view of self would require a wholesale paradigm shift. Just as Cushman (1995) implicates the capitalist project in the construction and privileged maintenance of the individual, so does Sampson. Sampson opines that the notion that a person is self-contained and unique reflects “the sham and the illusion that is the bourgeois individual” (p.3) arguing that this kind of

¹¹ Dividing practices are a method of objectification through social and spatial regulation that gains authority through the institutional power of science (or pseudo-science) and imposes specifying identities on individuals.

¹² Scientific classification is another method of objectification that works by objectifying the body through the authority of the discourses of medicine or science.

constitution serves to uphold ideologies that reproduce a capitalist society, which in turn, requires individuals committed to the reproduction of a self-contained interiority.

From identity to relationship, from essence to text

“There’s parts of the label that you attach yourself to but there’s also parts of the label that you don’t necessarily agree with...things that you don’t agree with and so even though you may term yourself as something, you’re always kind of resisting it... Like, I’m kind of, but at the same time, not really...”—Dylan

Given the limitations of the essentialist “self,” constructionists prefer the term “identity.” Unlike the fixity of the modernist “self,” the notion of identity is preferred for its fluid and emergent qualities. Context dependent, identity shifts through time and space, holding multiple possibilities for a proliferation of identity conclusions. How is identity constituted from a constructionist perspective? While identity within a modernist framework is an object that can be clearly determined and understood as fixed and stable, constructionists hold that “identity becomes the accomplishment of situated activity” (McNamee, 1996b, p. 150) where relationships and the social discourses they embody are the situated activity. Thus, identity becomes both a *result* of relationships as well as an antecedent to relationships. Bakhtin (1986) suggests that our “self” would be illegible to others if it were not for the productive and recursive impact relationships have. Alluding to the notion of identity construction, Bakhtin (1986) states that we acquire a “self” through the appropriation of the images that others hold of us. As Madigan (2008) puts it, “we are contributors to each other’s identity” (p.103) and these constitutive contributions are situated within dominant discourses.

This relational constitution of “identity” points to a dilemma we encounter when shifting from a modernist account to a constructionist perspective. Deconstructed and thus de-

essentialized, identity is exposed as an artifact of modernism. Thus, constructionists focus on relationship, or the discursive space between people as the site of identity production (Gergen, 2009a; Gergen & Gergen, 2003; McNamee, 1996a; McNamee, 1996b). In this space, texts, or embodied stories of self are constructed in relation to others.

For example, I have a long-standing story of myself as being “funny.” I “know” this about myself (that is, how I have constructed this story about myself) through the stories my older siblings and my parents have told me over the years. Some of these stories about me I only know *as stories*; that is, the stories serve as my memory of the times my family recounts my being funny. (For further reading on social constructionist ideas on memory, the reader is referred to Billig, 1990; Sampson, 2008; and Shotter, 1990.) I have, in turn, told some of these very stories told about me to others as examples of my longstanding identity as a funny person. Because of these stories, and the way in which people engage with me around them, I have embraced “being” funny. In middle school and high school, I continued my embodiment of “funny” as my peers carried on this story with me. In 8th grade I was voted “best sense of humor” and in high school I was a candidate for that award. (Another story about me, however, prevailed in my senior class, as I won in the category of “most likely to succeed.” Moral of that story: we are multi-storied.) The story of me being funny generated stories about those stories. I came to embody funny, and those that know me share (as well as help to construct) that embodied story about me, as they expect me to “be” funny in our relationship.

Embodied stories are a performance: we know how to “do” the identities that these stories script. How do we know how to perform these stories? Butler’s (1990a; 1990b; 1993) notion of performativity is relevant here. This concept developed from speech-act theory (for example, the work of John Searle, 1969) focuses on the ways in which identity comes to life through

discourse. Performative acts are types of authoritative speech, speech that isn't merely representative but speech that *does* something. According to Butler (1990b), reality is constantly created "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" (p.270). Through the embodied performance of identity and social conventions these constructions come to appear natural and immutable. Key to performativity is repetition. My story about being funny gained its authority through its multiple tellings by multiple tellers. Also critical, is the idea that "a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (Butler, 1993, p.13). This occurs only through its reference to, and reproduction of, the accepted norm: that which is accepted as funny within particular contexts as informed by the dominating discourses of those contexts.

Thus, performance is not about "acting" or "pretending"; rather, it stands in juxtaposition to the essential self that is cast as "authentic," "true" and self-contained in modernist discourse. Having abandoned essentialism for a relational and discursive constitution of subjectivity, the notion of performance gains traction because it accounts for the recursively productive relationships between individuals, their stories, and the discourses that give these stories meaning.

Beyond text to discourse

"I started dating a boy. A friend that I hadn't seen for six months showed up one day and said, 'I hear you're dating a boy.' I was like, 'I haven't seen you in six months—how'd you hear that? You've not been in the country.' It was an enlightening moment: 'I get it. I can't move in this space.' It wasn't any different from being straight and feeling like I couldn't date a girl."—Courtney

However, while the shift from essence to story frees us from the limitations of the self-contained interior, some argue it does not go far enough in its failure to adequately account for the specifying and regulating influences that institutional power wields on individuals and their identity constitutions (Butler, 1990a; 1993; 1997; Foucault, 1965; 1973; 1978b; 1982). The idea that identities live in social interactions and can be accounted for by individual texts is contested by queer theory (Butler, 1990a; 1997). This critique becomes especially pertinent when considering the lives of queer youth, a constituency that must contend with multiple dominating discourses. How then, do we negotiate the tension between these related ideas and facilitate the transition from a focus on texts to an emphasis on discourse?

McNamee's (1996b) ideas may serve as a bridge between the two traditions. Noting that "identity" as a concept is historically and culturally important (and I would add, pragmatically important as well, given that we traffic in an economy of language), she suggests that we needn't abandon it altogether. Rather, we can adjust our relationship with it, moving from viewing it as an "entity" to a "conversational resource." McNamee notes that by de-essentializing the term we can focus on "the way in which terms are used and the ways in which they gain significance in particular discursive contexts" (p. 151). More explicitly stated, Butler (1990a) asserts that "the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (p. 189). Thus, "conversational resources" becomes a pliable concept available for the project that is a politically situated construction of fluid identity.

Parker (1989) provides further consideration of the relationship between texts and discourse. Parker contends that texts are delimited areas that exist within the domain of wider cultural discourse, where discourse refers specifically to Foucault's (1970) idea, previously

noted. Identity or “the self” Parker states, is “constructed in discourse and then re-experienced within all the texts of everyday life” (p. 56). Similarly, Butler (1990a) also states that daily social interaction is only part of discourse, asserting that discourse encompasses texts, institutional practices, media representations, and law. Thus, while social construction points us to the daily interactions between people and the texts produced within those discursive exchanges, a Foucauldian analysis broadens the view to include the dominating cultural narratives that shape and give meaning to the texts of individual lives and what we call our identity. These constitutions of “self” are both influenced by and productive of cultural discourses and their normalizing specifications.

Consequently, Madigan (2008) asserts that our identities are “profoundly political” as we can only know ourselves within the context of normalizing discourses. As such, post structural accounts of identity are greatly interested in the role of power and discourse in the shaping of identity categories. Indeed, social theorist Calhoun (as cited in Madigan, 2008, p. 103) states, “the fundamental reference of identity is a discourse in social location.” Sampson (2008) concurs. Pointing out that there is “no meaning independent of the cultural discourses which have engendered them in the first place” (p.22), the significance of the relationship between individual texts and cultural texts is duly noted. Thus, if identities are produced within specifying dialogical structures, they cannot help but carry the influence of discourse. Identity is not an independent product of a “natural” developmental process or a representation of an internal, essential self (in fact, Foucault would argue those ideas are the embodiment of discourse). Nor is identity what emerges in unsituated social activity. Rather, identity ultimately is a product of discourse that polices and regulates what is available and acceptable for us to constitute our identities out of, lest we incur societal sanctions (Shotter, 1989).

This centrality of discourse to individual constitutions of self reflects yet another principle undergirding constructionist philosophy. For meaning to be historically and culturally contingent, it is imperative that we recognize that guiding cultural narratives influence the individual meanings people make. Failure to do so is a failure to fully comprehend the discursive implications of constructionism and can effectively suck the meaning out of individual stories.

For example, when I embody funny-ness as an instructor in front of a group of graduate students, there are discourses operating that specify what is professional conduct for an instructor (as well as, what is appropriate conduct for a woman my age and skin color); these discourses lend certain meanings to my performance of funny when I stand in the front of the classroom, meanings that differ, say, from those constructed by a group of friends when we sit around a campfire together where discourses of professional conduct do not apply. For some students, my performance might make me cool and my classroom fun; for others, I may seem like an unprofessional flake, leading them to question what I know and my ability to teach them. All of these meanings are produced within the crucible that is my performance, their engagement with my performance as they perform their personal renditions of “student,” and the various discourses that are operating and serving as constitutive backdrop.

In summary, the move from modernism to social construction is a philosophical shift on a grand scale, the implications and consequences of which are tremendous. When we reject universal truths for multiple realities and replace the self-contained individual with identity stories constructed discursively in relationship and situated within a multiplicity of discourses, we do many things. First, we unleash the potential for new and preferred identity conclusions, as identity is unhinged from the idea of stable “essence.” By exposing the specifying and

regulating power regimes of dominating discourses, we open up space for identity performances that challenge these regulations to be seen as honorable acts of resistance. Further, alternative, non-dominating discourses may be made available for consideration in support of preferred identities. Finally, by acknowledging the relationship between individual stories and the discourses that they exist within, we ensure a situated understanding that avoids the burden of individualism.

Queer Theory: Queering Theory, Theorizing Queer

Queer Theory and Social Construction

“For me it’s about constantly trying to deconstruct things that are put in place to make people feel safe, like gender and sexuality. But it also applies to how people do relationships. I use it in a much broader context. I take queer and apply it to things outside of gender and sexuality to disrupt or deconstruct.”—Courtney

As previously noted, there are many theoretical traditions existing within social construction. Queer theory, a term first enunciated by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991, offers constructionist-oriented practitioners a radical and challenging array of conceptual ideas and political strategies for working with identity, power, and relational ethics. While many theorists have contributed to the development of the body of scholarship that constitutes queer theory (for example: Butler, 1990a, 1993; Doty, 1993; Duggan, 2002; Foucault, 1978a; Halberstam, 1998; Rubin, 1984; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993), the work of Foucault (1978a) and Butler (1990a) have been particularly instrumental in the articulation of queer theory and its emphasis on the production of power, resistance as a central tenet of queer politics, and the role of discourse. Queer theory owes much to feminist theory and its pioneering work in articulating the constructed nature of gender and the power relations produced within the

gender system. Central tenets of queer theory include: a focus on de-essentialising cultural discourses; utilization of a Foucauldian analysis of power as productive and multi-directional; view of identity as constructed, fluid, and culturally mediated; deployment of a politics that challenges normativity in all ways, especially the regulation of sex and gender; and a position of sex-positivity. For me, queer theory is a theoretical resource, an “intellectual tool” (Garber, 2003), one of many I draw on.

In terms of its relationship specifically to social construction, queer theory is firmly founded on anti-essentialist notions of identity. *Queer* itself is a “consequence of the constructionist problematizing of any allegedly universal term” (Jagose, 1996, p.74) and an acknowledgement of the contingent nature of meaning. As an embodiment of the constructionist rejection of interiority and a fixed, unified identity, queer functions as a critique of identity (Halperin, 1997; Jagose, 1996; Warner, 1999), amounting to “an identity without an essence” (Halperin, 1997, p. 62). Furthermore, queer theory deploys the constructionist tenet that identity is relationally produced as expressed by de Lauretis (1991): “It takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian” (cited in Crimp, 1993, p. 313)¹³.

Butler’s (1990a) pioneering work, *Gender Trouble*, serves as another example of the constructionist ethic embedded within queer theory. Butler challenged feminists to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of the feminist argument that there are two biological sexes and that “women” constitute a unified constituency. Butler’s work asserts a constructionist position in stating that no body is unmediated by culture. Thus, while not

¹³ While de Lauretis’ quote is useful in illustrating the constructionist shift from an essentialist to a relational construction of identity, it is somewhat ironically, a double-edged sword in its reliance on essentialist terms such as “lesbian” and “woman.” Queer theory and the lived experiences of trans and genderqueer people would problematize the implicit reliance on and privileging of biological markers of gender in this quote.

denying materiality, Butler insists that we remember that even the corporeal world—that is, its objects and their workings—is constructed discursively. For example no one would deny the materiality of a rock. Yet, how we talk about rocks certainly varies. In an angry playground fight, rocks might be weapons. In a solar home, rocks are a source of heat. In my garden, rocks are a nuisance. Our location, community, and traditions all shape meaning; the materiality of the world does not provide evidence against the discursive constructions of reality. Furthermore, it is Butler’s notion of *performativity* as discussed previously in this chapter that has furthered the constructionist articulation of identity as non-essential and discursively produced.

Queer theory’s primary focus is to complicate the hegemonic assumptions about the continuities between anatomical sex, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice. Challenging binary constructions—especially gender and sexual binaries—is of particular importance in queer theory. While constructionist discourse has promoted this practice and the de-essentializing of cultural truths, in the areas of sex and gender, the firm grip of naturalized accounts has been sadly evident, even in the constructionist literature.

For example, Mary Gergen (2003) seems blindly essentialist and firmly established within the male/female, homo/hetero binaries when she writes the following: “If He is the subject of the story, She must be the object” (p.69) and when she reduces the options for personal stories to “manstories” and “womenstories” (p. 67). Similarly, Kenneth Gergen (1991) in an attempt to expose the limitations of the gender binary by discussing “transsexualism” (p. 144)--a term that focuses on a condition, a thing, rather than people and their lived experiences--reproduces the binary by conflating directionality (i.e., male to female) with identity and reifying the notion that we are either a man or women. Furthermore, he relies

on the work of Johns Hopkins researcher John Money, well-known for falsifying research and for viewing “so-called social influences that impact on a person outside of biology” as the equivalent of astrology (Erhardt, 1991, xiii-xiv). The point here is not to engage in a full-on critique of Gergen’s (1991) understanding of the gender systems nor of his decision to reference someone reviled within genderqueer communities; rather, it is to highlight the extent to which naturalizing discourses of gender and sex influence the understanding and perspective of even ardent social constructionists. Further, the point is to illustrate how queer theory, teetering at the edge of constructionist discourse, pushes the theoretical tradition—and the envelope—even further.

Queer theory: Out of the head and into the embodied¹⁴

“I could not not be queer.”—Ruben

Queer theory includes a range of critical practices premised on the post-structuralist notion of non-essentialized identities. Gender and sexual orientation are seen as fluid, contextually and historically contingent, socially constructed variables that shift and change in different contexts and at different times (Butler, 1990a). As a critical practice interested in interrogating the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual desire, queer theory situates these constructs within larger socio-cultural contexts and explores the intersectionality with class and race, as well as the influence of consumer capitalism (Butler, 1990a; Foucault, 1978a; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990). Biological theories of sexual identity are rejected and prevailing assumptions regarding the continuities between anatomical sex, gender identity,

¹⁴ I must acknowledge my (mis)appropriation of Sheila McNamee’s title, “*Out of the head and into the discourse*”

sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice are complicated as the usefulness of sexual and gender categories is questioned (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010).

In order to destabilize the discourses of “truth” and “nature” typically embedded within explanatory theories of gender and sexuality (not to mention within the theories and models promoted for clinical use), queer theorists ask the following questions about identity categories organized by gender and sexuality:

- *Who do these categories serve?*
- *Who do these categories include and whom do they exclude?*
- *Who has the power to define the categories?*
- *How are the categories policed?*
- *How do these categories change over time and across cultures?* (Doty, 1993)

Central to queer theory’s interrogation of these categories is the critique of the very premise of organizing one’s identity based on group membership (McPhail, 2004). While such organization is politically useful at times, it is also problematic. Queer theory suggests that identity categories are limiting in their reductionistic and totalizing effects. Particularly problematic in the production and effects of identity categories are the binary systems of gender and sexuality: female/male, homo/hetero. Butler (1990a) articulated the relationship between these systems of categorization like this: Gender (one’s sense of being a man or women) follows from biological sex (assumed to be determined by primary sex organs); desire then follows “naturally” toward the opposite sex. Thus, Butler, argued, heterosexuality is both compulsory and naturalized, regulated by and reifying of the gender binary system. Queer theory’s challenges to the gender binary system calls into question the specifications of

masculinity and femininity and leads to an unhinging of heterosexuality as the norm.

This kind of destabilization is quite culturally radical and especially so within the fields influenced by psychology. Butler and Byrne (2008) note that traditional psychological theories and practices do not account for the notion of queer. This is because the binary systems described above go unquestioned by the science of psychology, as it assumes them to be internal attributes of individuals. Echoing Foucault (1988), Butler and Byrne go on to state that psychology is “involved in the production of knowledges that have served to reinforce the normalizing of heterosexuality and gender dichotomy and the oppression of other practices and identities” (p.90).

The privatizing and pathologizing discourses of psychology can be challenged by queer theory’s position of “resistance and insubordination” (Hodges, 2008, p. 9) and its opposition to normal (Warner, 1999). Queer itself is “not the affirmation of an alternative identity: it is to be ‘other’” (Butler & Byrne, 2008, p. 94). Thus, in my practice, I am constantly reflecting on how my cultural and professional training may keep me from being insubordinate to cultural specifications and in turn, operating as an agent of social control rather than a witness to meaningful acts of transgression.

For example, I worked with a white, adult cisgender¹⁵ male, Max, who was attracted to cisgender women, had never had a sexual experience with another male, identified as straight, and was tormented by his erotic interest in cross dressing and role playing. He had a girlfriend who also identified as straight and whose only sexual experiences had been with straight men. Kim, also white, was more than happy to participate in sexual play that involved his dressing as a woman and assuming “a passive position.” For her, organizing around the idea of “being a

¹⁵ Cisgender is a term favored by many transgender activists to mark non-trans gender identity.

good partner” had a lot of meaning, and part of that meant “being willing to try things that I am not opposed to for myself, that are enjoyable and exciting for him.” I asked her, “In what ways is being ‘straight’ and being a ‘woman’ significant or not when you think about going along with these activities?” Kim explained first that she saw “no harm, no foul” in Max’s erotic interests, noting that he was always willing to indulge her pleasures. She went on to say that she didn’t “know if being a straight woman really mattered—for me it’s about what are we both OK doing that is sexy for either one of us.”

I was taken by Kim’s freedom from gender specifications and her positive embrace of sex (sex positivity will be discussed at greater length in chapter five). When I asked Kim why she did not feel constrained by ideas of what’s masculine, what’s feminine and what “normal” sex should look like, she stated that she hoped that “a sexual relationship would be one place that the people involved can try whatever they agree to and not have to do what we think we’re supposed to do---I do that all day at work.” She went on to say that, “frankly, being a ‘good girl’ isn’t necessarily always the hottest thing, either.”

Max listened to Kim in utter confusion. “I don’t understand how she can be so cool with this. How can she not think I’m perverted or weird or something?” I asked Max questions that helped to unravel the grip of the gender binary, questions about hegemonic masculinity, and questions about sex and sexuality. Some of these included the following:

- *Who gets to decide what is normal sex, normal for a man and normal for a woman?*
- *What are the effects of these decrees of normal on people? Are all people affected equally by these judgments?*
- *In what ways do certain ideas about being a straight man influence your*

ideas about how to be sexual in your relationship?

- *Can a straight male identity provide all the necessary or desired strategies of how to be the kind of sexual person and partner you'd like to be?*
- *Why do you think you are punished for doing something that brings you and your partner such pleasure and meaning?*
- *In what ways can you be a man that includes so-called female qualities?*
- *In what ways are you a better man because of your ability to role-play being a woman?*
- *If you were to listen to your body instead of the rules of masculinity, how would that effect your sexual relationship?*
- *What do you make of Kim, a woman, being turned on by your role-playing? What does that say about who owns masculinity and who owns femininity?*
- *Is it possible that your body's response to cross-dressing and role-playing is an honorable act of resistance to these limitations of gender and sexuality categories?*

This kind of queer-theory informed interrogation of the gender binary produced some discursive and relational space for Max and Kim to begin to organize their relationship around factors that reflected their values and preferences rather than those of reified prevailing discourses. Freed from the binary prescriptions of gender, they negotiated terms of a fluid gender performance between them—they queered themselves. Furthermore, by challenging normative notions of the binary construction of sexuality, they were able to come into a notion of sexuality as dynamic and fluid. Finally, by locating the problem within the discourses that sustain these binary systems, Max gained some room to consider how he wanted to move

within these systems. This also allowed him to embody the notion that he was acting as a courageous transgressor of limiting cultural regulations. (The ethical and political importance of locating the problem at the level of discourse will be discussed further in chapters four and five.)

As a constructionist project, queer theory is also concerned with language and the discursive effects of terms produced within the gender and sexual systems. Indeed, as previously stated, queer itself is not an identity constitution of its own; it is a resistance to the limiting strictures of so-called descriptive identity categories. As we saw with Max and Kim, stable categories of male and female, and perhaps even gay and straight, were exposed as discursively produced fictions within their gender and sexual performances. (These limitations of language will be discussed further in chapter four.)

Another one of the most significant discursive products of the binary systems is the “coming out” narrative, the critique of which is central to queer theory. While a more thorough discussion of this critique will be provided in chapter four, we can consider the relationship between this critique and social construction at this time. “Coming out” in effect is the declaration and embrace of a fixed and unified identity, an “authentic self,” a practice antithetical to constructionist philosophy.

While we have seen the fixity of these categories loosened through a discussion and application of queer theory, further unhinging of these essentialist constitutions of sexuality and identity is facilitated by an awareness of the history of sexuality as a social construction.

How did we get so queer? A briefly queer history¹⁶

“Sexuality, then, does have a history—though not a very long one.”—Halperin, 1993

“I wanted to participate in this research because it creates a history—I see myself as part of something.”—Courtney

Just as social construction is a philosophical position that emerged in response to the universalizing project of modernity, the notion of “queer” was born out of a response to specific discursive effects of the modernist project: the embrace of fixed gender and sexual identities and the assimilationist politics of the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement (Crimp, 1993; Halperin, 1997; Jagose, 1996; Seidman, 1993; Warner, 1999). Critical to a situated understanding of this history is Foucault’s (1978a) contention that homosexuality¹⁷ as an identity is a recent invention of the modern era. While individuals across time and place have engaged in same-sex activities, classifying people based on those activities, thus rendering an identity category, had never before occurred. Foucault (1978a) dates the invention of homosexuality to an 1870 article by psychiatrist Carl Westphal. About this event Foucault states:

We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized...Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it

¹⁶ I am writing as a white-skinned American and the history I am reporting is that which is commonly embraced in North America. There are a multiplicity of histories of same-sex desire and subjectivities across cultures that could be reported.

¹⁷ Once the homosexual was invented, the invention of the heterosexual as its contingency was necessary.

was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul; the homosexual was now a species (p. 43).

Thus, Foucault explicitly names the productive and constitutive nature of discourse as well as the social construction of an identity. Foucault also noted that this discourse, which started out as a disqualifying medical discourse, eventually was claimed and leveraged by homosexuals as a way to mobilize politically, stating, “homosexuality now began to speak in its own behalf to demand that its legitimacy or naturalness be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (p.101). By employing this *reverse discourse*¹⁸ homosexuals became activists, setting their place at the societal table by “being” the very thing they were oppressed for.

The history of this particular reverse discourse has been a story of history repeating itself. The homophile movement, which included organizations in the United States such as the Mattachine Society (an officially mixed-gender but overwhelmingly male group) and the Daughters of Bilitis (an exclusively female group), started with an agenda of social change rooted in a Marxist analysis of oppression. Over time, these groups developed a more cautious, assimilationist approach, which included disavowal of cruising, the sex-trade, drag queens, butch dykes, and others who transgressed gender specifications (Katz, 1976). The primary message of the homophile movement shifted from a need to change society to a focus on homosexuals being just like everyone—that is, heterosexuals—else.

¹⁸ As a medium for the flow of power, discourse can be reversed by changing the direction of power without changing the foundational ideas on which the discourse relies. In this example, embracing an identity based on sexual partners and practices and developing a pedagogy of liberation based on it, serves not to overturn the discourse, but rather to change the meaning and value placed on it.

Having lost its radical agenda and consequently its more radical membership, the homophile movement gave way to gay liberation. The 1969 Stonewall riots function as the fabled definitional moment of the gay liberation movement, a political effort that stood, again, for a radical agenda of social change. Stonewall did not happen in a vacuum; indeed, the United States in the 1960's and early 1970's was a crucible of progressive social movements, resistance to the authority of the dominant culture, sexual liberation (by virtue of the invention of the pill) and a call for substantive change on the social justice front.

While it is easy to understand that Stonewall has represented gay and lesbian resistance to heterosexist oppression, it is critical to queer understandings and politics to understand what Stonewall meant to the resistance of the increasingly assimilationist position of the aforementioned homophile movement. As these earlier movements became more normative, those gender and sexual outlaws that were pushed to the margins pushed back (Jagose, 1996). Among those usually placed at the epicenter of the riots are African-Americans and Latinos, drag queens, and various gender transgressors.

Central to gay liberation was a prideful embrace of a gay identity. Shunning the embodied shame of the apologist homophile movement that accepted the medical and psychiatric discourse of homosexuality as pathology, gay liberationists targeted the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association (Alinder, 1992). Jagose (1996) asserts that two factors, "the public assumption of gay identity and the discrediting of professional opinion" (p. 38) marked the difference between the liberationist and homophile movements. Central to the liberationist strategy was the importance of "coming out" and the production of the coming out narrative of an authentic, true self (Jagose, 1996).

This successful reverse discourse, resulting in the discursive creation of a stable gay

identity, also resulted in the marginalization of those not accounted for in the binary systems of gender and sexuality. Thus, history repeated itself: the gay liberation movement--conceived out of a radical response to the developing conservatism of the once-radical homophile movement--found itself trafficking more uptown than downtown. Seidman (1993) describes the change in the gay and lesbian movement as moving from a liberationist to an ethnic model. That is, rather than seeking *legitimate space* for a constituency based on their differences, efforts were focused on the establishment of a specific gay identity that was entitled to a *protected space* through the granting of civil rights. The civil rights/ethnic model, based on the notion of “equal but different” (Jagose, 1996, p. 61) required the establishment of a visibly identifiable gay and lesbian constituency in order to grant legitimacy. This process of legitimation of certain kinds of lesbians and gays—read: white, middle class, able-bodied, monogamous, vanilla--meant the marginalization of others, many of whom had found a place in previous iterations of the movement.

Queer theory casts a critical eye on these results of the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement and the ideologies that produce them. Cultural theorist Lisa Duggan (2002) coined the term *homonormativity* to describe this emergent gay cultural standard as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative¹⁹ assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 179). Thus, homonormative gays and lesbians, by abandoning the radicalized mission of the movement that inspired the Stonewall riots (e.g., troubling gender norms and promoting what Rubin [1984]

¹⁹ *Heteronormativity* is the institutionalized assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is inherently superior and preferable to any orientations outside of heterosexuality. The term was coined by Michael Warner.

named sex positivity), “have settled into a fairly bourgeoisie lifestyle—at the expense of those with less age, race, or class privileges, or those for whom this life does not fit” (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010).

Critical to a contextual understanding of this history is the acknowledgement that both the homophile and the gay liberation movements reflected the dominant patriarchal arrangement of American culture. Sharing same-sex desires did not make gay men and lesbians equal or equivalent within the gender system that privileges men and maintains an indifference to struggles of women such as income parity, employment opportunity, and personal safety. As a response to this dominance, lesbian feminism emerged. Key to their agenda was highlighting that a one-size-fits-all political movement didn’t offer women’s sizes; indeed, assuming the umbrella term “gay” had the effect of invisibilizing women and reifying the centrality of men. Furthermore, lesbian feminists argued that organizing around gender was more important than doing so around sexuality. Lesbian feminists’ struggles to have a place and a voice were not limited to the homophile and gay liberation movements where they staged resistance to misogyny; homophobia permeated the emerging women’s liberation movement (Jagose, 1996). Betty Friedan (1963), a founding mother of women’s liberation, infamously dubbed lesbian feminists (and their insistence on inclusion in the larger feminist project) “the lavender menace.”

Recognition of the struggle women had within the homophile and gay liberation movements is necessary in order to avoid reproduction of the sexist assumptions that permeated those movements and have left us with a masculinized image of gay and queer subjectivity. (For a more thorough explication of lesbian feminism, the reader is referred to Abbott & Love, [1973]; Daly, [1973]; Lourde, [1980]; Rich [1986]; Smith, [1977]) The lesbian feminist

critique of gay liberation emerged along with similar analyses from other non-hegemonic subject positions that criticized the movement not only for its male-dominance but also for its assumption of a white subjectivity. I argue for a use of *queer* that centers recognition of the political and material consequences of the effects of identity production and the concomitant power relations. Consequently, consideration of these critiques is paramount for a situated and socially just understanding of the potential use of queer theory.

It's a white thang, right? Intersectionality and becoming visible in the queer sphere

“Queer cannot be discussed in terms of sexuality and gender alone, because it is not through sex and gender alone that we live our lives”—Garber, 2003

“I had a boyfriend who was like, ‘you’re brown—I like brown boys.’ And I’m like, ‘great!’ I don’t see myself as ‘brown’. It was weird. It was fucking annoying when I found that out. It was like part of the pursuit of ME was because of my race. That’s fucking offensive.”—Ruben

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer subjects have historically been white-skinned in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory literature (Garber, 2003; Hammonds, 1997; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Muñoz, 1999; Quiroga, 2003). When organizing around the single identity of “gay” or “lesbian,” sexual orientation effectively became the defining characteristic at the expense of other significant sites of identity production, especially race and ethnicity. This reductionistic and totalizing view of identity made race and ethnicity (class, too, as the white queer subject is increasingly middle class) inconsequential. The relegation of race to that of a footnote in most gay and lesbian and queer histories and literature has the highly consequential effect of not only ignoring, but also of reifying current racialized power relations (Higginbotham, cited in Hammonds, 1997).

Butler (1993) maintains that a conceptualization of power that refuses to configure “racism, homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations” and that considers the ways in which each of these forms of power “require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation” (p. 18) is needed. Challenging the “bifurcation of race and sexuality”(Glick, 2003) some queer theorists of color argue for an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1993) as a way to negotiate the convergence of the multiplicity of identities embodied by individuals. Without such an approach, the specifying and discourse-reifying regimes of normativity “keep subjects from accessing identities” (Munoz, 1999, p. 8) and the complex understanding of power that Butler argues for goes unrealized. As Garber (2003) asserts, “discourses create and limit possibilities and have real-world ramifications for oppressed people the world over” (p. 128).

An intersectional approach to identity requires that we acknowledge the complex relational and political realities of racially marked constituencies. This also requires a certain reliance on essentialist constitutions of identity. Cultural critics of color (Gopanith, 2005; Manalansan IV, 2003; Munoz, 1999, hooks, 1994) have argued that notions of a socially constructed identity can be easy to theorize and live by from a privileged racial and class position. From marginalized social locations, constructionism is viewed as a luxurious, white enterprise that disallows group membership (i.e., organizing around an identity category such as race or ethnicity). Without an organizing, stable identity, deployment of effective counter movements aimed at the dismantling of racism and other oppressions may be hindered. hooks (1994) argues that a “totalizing critique of ‘subjectivity, essence, identity’ can seem very threatening to marginalized groups, for whom it has been an active gesture of political resistance to name one’s identity as a part of a struggle to challenge domination” (p. 78).

Consequently, theoretical fidelity to social construction or to queer theory is problematic for queers of color.

Additionally, by utilizing the notion of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988) previously discussed, queers of color can operate from a position that neither fully rejects nor endorses social construction and queer theory assertions about identity; rather, they effectively re-work these ideas contingent on the political environment and activist agenda. As a result, the notion of a unified gay and lesbian identity that privileges sexual orientation as the definitive organizing feature of all queer constituencies is abandoned for a more complex and contingent constitution that honors racial and ethnic meanings of identity and social justice demands. Furthermore, as Hammonds (1997) articulates, race and sexuality are also gendered (and gender and sexuality are racialized), pointing out that black feminists have repeatedly critiqued white feminists for failing to put forth a “conception of a racialized sexuality” (p. 137). Thus, the complexities as well as the significance of an intersectional approach are magnified as the multiplicity of social locations an individual occupies are considered.

In putting forward the notion of disidentification Munoz (1999) works through the “white problem” of queer theory in a most effective fashion, one that is compatible with the ideas of intersectionality and strategic essentialism. Disidentification is a way of complicating the homo/hetero binary, allowing queers of color to neither assimilate nor anti-assimilate within the dominant sexual binaried normative culture. Munoz writes:

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the

phantasm of normative citizenship (p. 4).

Disidentification relies on the problematizing of the modernist/constructionist binary of essentialized vs. constructed identity. Munoz asserts that the point where these two concepts of identity meet is a site of meaningful struggle that imbues racial minorities with agency to create an oppositional identity. The disidentificatory subject is a hybrid one, a collection of both subordinate and dominant identities that are brought into conversation at their point of intersection but do not necessarily exist together in a single space.

Consider, for example, Vanay, a South Asian man from India living in the United States. To ask him to “come out” to his family when he knows full well the consequences to his family as well as to himself is imposing a particular identity politic and value system. Many white-skinned American lesbians and gay men (and their straight allies) may accuse such an individual of so-called “internalized homophobia.” Yet, if he were to publicly declare a queer identity and subsequently be disowned by his family and cause them great humiliation, why is it that we don’t accuse him of “internalized ethnophobia”? This is essentially what Vanay experienced from his white American friends who encouraged him to come out and give his family the quintessential queer ultimatum: “I’m here, I’m queer, get used to it.” Quite cognizant of the injustice of homophobia embedded within traditional Indian culture, Vanay did not see any personal or political value in coming out to his family. Such a move felt to him like “having to choose between being queer and being Indian.” Coming out to his family would make it “virtually impossible to visit India” and would cause his parents great distress for naught.

Vanay found support from other queers of color who relied on an intersectional analysis

and a disidentifactory approach. He maintained his position of not coming out to his family while embracing a queer identity within selective circles in the United States. Finally, in an act of disidentifactory social justice, Vanay—embracing his privileged position as a man of economic means--made a large philanthropic donation to an Indian agency that works with youth who have HIV.

Another productive aspect of disidentification is its ability to salvage components of discourses that are both useful and problematic. A disidentifactory subject has the capacity to engage a particular discourse in consideration of its limitations and re-work it to leverage more productive aspects (such as Vanay's financial contribution to a HIV/AIDS organization in India, rather than coming out to his Indian family). Hence, Munoz's notion of disidentification can be used as a political strategy to rearticulate queer theory for queers of color. Rather than abandon queer theory in totality, queers of color can understand how the ideas can be both helpful and hurtful. By reworking rather than discarding queer theory, queers of color can appreciate the political importance of queer theory while concurrently striving to rearticulate the discourse surrounding it.

This kind of transformative reworking can be seen in the critical stance queers of color—as well as in the example of Vanay--often hold toward the privileging of the discourse that has produced the “coming out” narrative within queer circles. As previously discussed, the assumption of a public gay or lesbian identity as declared through the “coming out” process has become a near requirement of the contemporary gay and lesbian political agenda. For many people, this is problematic, as it assumes the primacy of sexual orientation as an organizing factor of identity at the expense of a multiplicity of identities that an individual may affiliate with including: race, ethnicity, nation, gender, ability, religion, and class. Why can we assume

that an African –American queer, an Asian-American transgender woman, a queer who uses a wheelchair, or a queer from an ethnic religious community would identify primarily—and possibly as a result, at the expense of their other social locations—with queerness?

In part, this assumption highlights the discursive effect of the production of the unified queer (or gay or lesbian) identity. It also speaks to a very Western (white) and modernist understanding of *the individual*, someone who can “be” who they are regardless of what that might mean to, or do to, their relational affiliations within the communities that shaped much of their identity.

As clinicians, in what ways are the ideas of intersectionality, strategic essentialism, and disidentification important? To begin with, these theoretical positions may invite new understandings of how people may manage the multiplicity of worlds they traffic in. De-centering the primacy of queer identity honors and makes visible the relational and political realities of racialized identities. Additionally, we can support clients in accessing services, engaging in political action, and affiliating with personally meaningful cultural practices. By partnering with clients in the rejection of the essentialist/constructionist binary of identity constitution, we usher in multiple possibilities for negotiating various contingencies, political agendas, and material realities in ways that are safe, relevant, and meaningful for queer clients who occupy a multiplicity of social locations.

Chapter 3:

Re-search, We-search: De-methodologizing Conversations of Meaning²⁰

“The only thing we can be sure of is that in order to be ethical in our research we have to be badly behaved toward the discipline of psychology”—Parker (2005)

“I think this is a more generative process than if you were to ask us to fill out 15 questionnaires...this has an element of getting something back by sharing the experience.”—
Courtney

In this chapter, I will discuss the inquiry process that anchors this dissertation. It will be the story of what I did, who did it with me, how, where, and why we did it. In part one, I will briefly introduce the principles and practices that guided this inquiry and the rationale for it. In part two, I will tell the story of this project as I experienced it. I tell it in this way because it is the story of this inquiry that I believe will offer the richest, most meaningful description of my experience of the inquiry and the people I got to know along the way. Part 3 will provide an explanation for how the material from the inquiry conversations is featured throughout this document.

²⁰ As part of my commitment to opening the inquiry process beyond traditional Western notions of research and knowledge production, I have not sought in this process to gather "data" nor do I consider the spoken contributions of the youth to be "data" that either proves or disproves anything. Rather, the participation of the youth and their accounts serve to anchor the work in lived experiences and offer an additional perspective to my own and the literature upon which I draw. Because I do not consider my conversations with this particular group of youth as data, but rather as an opportunity to elevate and include their voices, the entire transcript of our multiple hours of conversation (some 150 pages) is not included in this dissertation. Interested readers may contact me at julie@2stories.com for complete transcripts.

Part 1--From Methodology to De-methodologizing

“I think it’s interesting to get ‘data’—or whatever you’re taking away from all of this—in a scenario where we’re not all answering identical questions. And, we’re also present for it...we’ve been able to make connections during the conversation”—Sarah

Ethical Inquiry through Relational Engagement

I came to this research project with a set of values and expectations of myself regarding how to be relationally positioned with ethics and with the participants of the inquiry. At the heart of those values is a refusal to maintain fidelity to any particular “methodology” or protocol. My commitment is to my participants and to the facilitation of a conversational space that would allow them to bring as much of themselves as they wanted to bring to the process. Insisting on adherence to a methodology would undermine the values that I seek to bring to this endeavor. These values include:

- **Accountability to relations of power.** This means treating participants as experts in their lives and insuring space for the performance of these knowledges. My commitment to upholding this value is informed, in part, by Foucault’s (1978a, 1978b) critique of knowledge production based on systems of discipline and punishment. By attending to the power relations inherent in research I am focused on finding ways to produce knowledge that resist disciplinary or confessional practices.
- **Transparency.** This involves including participants in the “in-my-head” conversations with myself as well as situating my ideas and questions. Being transparent by making available to the research participants my ideas, plans, thoughts, and purposes is a practice of accountability.

- **Self-Reflexivity.** What Parker (2005) describes as “enthusiastic self-questioning rather than fanatical certainty” (p.21). This is a contextualization and examination of what’s going on with me so that I may make accountable decisions in the research process and in my relationships with the participants.
- **Responsiveness.** This means that I am providing respectful, relevant, non-tokenizing responses to participants’ comments and concerns.
- **Social Poetics/conversational imagination.** By allowing the process to unfold without the over-imposition of external methodological constraints (that is, constraints embodied within a methodology that is produced prior to and outside of the research conversation itself), the possibilities for a proliferation of identity performances, new knowledges, and emergent meanings gain freedom. In McNamee’s (2000) *“The Social Poetics of Relationally-engaged Research: Research as Conversation”* she states “to talk of the poetic is to give wing to the imaginative” (p. 146).

These principles serve as the ethical guidelines for my therapeutic and research encounters. At the center of these ethics is a de-centering (not a denial) of expert knowledge in order to bring forward knowledge of the participants. McNamee (1994) points out that so-called research “subjects” are chosen because of their expertise in the area of inquiry. By intentionally making space that centers this expertise, I hope to acknowledge “that there are multiple forms of description” (McNamee, 1994, p. 73) as I seek to construct an inquiry process in which the inevitability of my own descriptions are mitigated by the voices of the participants. As Parker (2005) notes, *“others are not the same as us, and there is no reason why they should be”* (p.15, italics in original). Thus, constantly working to construct discursive

space that allows participants to bring the multiplicity of their voices to the conversation is essential to the ethical constitution of the inquiry process.

In addition to the theoretical resources cited above, a variety of areas such as youthwork, liberatory education, narrative therapy, and queer theory have influenced my ideas about this.

For example, my experiences with youth-adult partnerships (Norman, 2001; Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2006; Zeldin, et al., 2001) have informed my position on creating experiences with youth that embody mutuality in learning, leadership, and participation. Positioning myself in partnership with young people on a range of projects has taught me to no longer be surprised at the knowledge, humor, insight, humility, and passion young people possess—I just had to make room for it to emerge. Ideas from liberatory education (Freire, 1999; hooks, 1994) have further fueled my commitment to practices that are transparent, responsive, and reciprocal. Finally, my training in postmodern therapies has also contributed immensely to my resolve to stay reflexively engaged with issues of representation, inclusion, and power. As a primarily narrative therapist, I know that I owe much to pioneers in contemporary cultural anthropology (e.g., Geertz, 1973, 1985; Myerhof, 1978, 1982, 1986; Turner, 1986). Edward Bruner (1986a, 1986b) challenged the distinction between researcher and researched and paved the way for a practice premised on “co-research” (Epston, 1999) that is at the heart of narrative therapy; Clifford Geertz (1973; 1985) suggested that the anthropologist’s task is to bring forward insider knowledges and to help in the creation of “thick descriptions.”²¹

²¹ Geertz, in introducing this term to ethnographic research, credits Ryle (1949) with the original usage. In Geertz’s work that influenced the narrative therapy of White & Epston (1990), “thick description” refers to a situated, contextualized description that extends beyond observation of behavior to one which brings forward the meaning and significance of what is described.

As a therapist/youthworker/educator firmly committed to socially just practices that center client/youth/student voices by creating space for subjugated knowledges to emerge, where was I to turn as a neophyte researcher? While the buffet of qualitative methodologies has much to offer, the idea of abiding by a protocol created outside of the relational process that was the focus of inquiry would mean that I was starting from a place that compromised those principles. Also, while the narrative therapy literature promoted the *metaphor* of co-research (which, in its own right, is a radical shift away from the old “digging deep” archeological metaphors of intra-psychic therapies), there was not an explicit explication of research per se. What this metaphor did provide me was some idea about how to proceed--although I did allow myself to be thrown off for a while, thinking that “Research” with a capital “R” would be altogether different from what I have been doing for almost twenty years.

By specifically discussing research practices that blur the line between therapy and research, McNamee (1988, 1989, 2000) provides a useful link between the two domains. Arguing that therapy, at its best, is a discovery process, and that research at its best, provides a therapeutic experience, McNamee (2000) argues for a research that is free “from the constraints of traditional forms of practice” (p.146). McNamee (2000) envisions a research practice that is relationally engaged, unencumbered by “specific techniques or strategies that will ‘produce valid research’” (p. 148). Research becomes not a search for truth but a conversation through which participants perform multiple truths. A relationally engaged process cannot be contained or constrained by predetermined methods. Both Smith (1999) and Parker (2005) argue for the use of methodologies that originate from and are generated by the communities being researched. In McNamee’s constructionist terms, this involves choosing a discursive frame for our research that is valid to the community we are working with as they constitute “validity.”

This articulation of research as intervention—and, more pointedly that “useful or generative research and useful or generative therapy are more similar to each other...than they are different” (McNamee & Tomm, 1994, p.18) has provided me the conceptual support and validation to engage in this research project in a manner consistent with my preferred ethics.

Queer theory, radical research

Because queer theory serves as the theoretical resource for this dissertation, I wanted to engage in an inquiry process that would be both philosophically consonant with the basic tenets of queer as well as resonant with queer youth lives. This was not merely for purposes of theoretical consistency; it also was very much about wanting to create a process that would be accountable to and inclusive of the queer lives of the youth that I would be working with. This act alone would stand in opposition to standard research practices and, as such, would embrace a queer politics of resisting norms. Similarly, *to queer* something is an emergent process of disrupting expected norms in such a way that, while new possibilities emerge, standard practices--reified through discourse and methodically unquestioned--become open for interrogation.

Halberstam (1998) provides a critical treatment of what a queer methodology might entail in her description of her interdisciplinary research on female masculinity. Queer methodology, according to Halberstam, “attempts to remain supple enough to respond to the various locations of information...and betrays a certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods” (p.10). Halberstam maintains that central to the queerness of such a methodology is its refusal to participate in, and thus reify, conventional methodologies. Furthermore, Halberstam suggests that a “queer methodology...is a scavenger methodology that uses

different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies... Queer methodology...refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence” (p. 13). Halberstam’s articulation reflects both a *queer methodology*—one that embodies fluidity and refusal to be clearly defined in accepted (acceptable?) terms—and a *queering of methodology*: an emergent process of troubling standard practices.

While Halberstam is guided by disciplinary “disloyalty,” as a matter of political resistance, Parker (2005) argues against fidelity to a particular methodology based on a rather resistant and queered version of best practice. Asserting “the best research does not allow itself to be defined by its methodology alone” (p. 11), Parker campaigns for a dialogical (Bakhtin, 1981) process characterized by collective participation. A dialogical methodology invites us to ignore/blur boundaries between different approaches in order to create a process that emerges relationally among co-researchers. Such a process is constituted in the interview process, taking pieces of certain methods that invite conversations that are meaningful to participants and refusing to be limited by maintaining fidelity to one method.

Parker stakes his position, in part, on the same theoretical ground that undergirds queer theory: feminism and the work of Foucault (1978a; 1978b). Noting that feminist theory has provided the most significant innovation in qualitative research, Parker highlights the illumination of power available through feminist analysis. The feminist assertion that “knowledge is different for the powerful than it is for the oppressed” Parker declares is the “key methodological point” (p.2), one with major implications for research. Whose knowledge will be privileged in any given inquiry becomes a political and ethical question. In my inquiry, I

attempted to create a process that would center the knowledges of queer youth, a constituency whose knowledges typically are not privileged.

Parker also points to Foucault's ideas about the production of knowledge, or how we know what we know. Foucault (1978a; 1978b) argues that history is always represented through a contemporary lens. This serves to legitimate what we do and how we think about things. Professional disciplines (e.g., medicine, psychiatry/psychology, and the prison system) and traditional research methodologies function as what Foucault (1977) called "regimes of truth" that circulate knowledge produced by the practices through which they are known. Thus, the production of knowledge becomes even more important than the knowledge itself. The research implication drawn through this Foucauldian analysis of knowledge production is, according to Parker, that it is more critical to focus on the "*process of research rather than the objects we attempt to know*" (p.3, italics in original). Parker's favoring of feminist critique and the work of Foucault points to a radical shift in the power relations of research methodologies.

Part 2: The story of this de-methodology

Background to this inquiry project (Or, How did I get here?)

The inquiry that is part of this dissertation is an extension of some similar work that I did with a group of queer youth (including Sarah and Courtney, part of this inquiry) in 2008. At that time, I had been asked to co-author a chapter for a forthcoming book on queer therapy. I was interested in writing about homonormativity and exploring with self-identified queer youth their experiences with this regulating discourse. This interest emerged from my professional and personal experiences as well as from my interest in queer theory.

I was increasingly personally frustrated with the use of “queer” by people as a sort of umbrella term for the alphabet soup, “LGBTQI” (among the many iterations that exist) understanding it simply as a “taking back” of a pejorative term (as some African-Americans have done with “the N word”.) It was, in part, a selfish frustration—my demand for theoretical integrity and radical political understanding saw such appropriation as an act of fashion rather than a critical point of resistance to normativity and technologies of the self. I desired a more intentional, critical use of the word queer—one that honored its destabilizing discursive potential for fluidity and its critique of identity politics. Such a use of the word queer would also show due respect for the importance that the words gay, lesbian and bisexual have in many peoples’ lives. These are identities that, for many people, have personal and political meaning that plays a significant part in how they move through the world in their preferred way, affording them what many would call, “agency.” Queer does not resonate with nor is it meaningful (in fact, it may be quite distasteful) to many who do prefer to identify with a fixed and stable L/G/B identity. It is a very unqueer ethic to tag someone with something they don’t prefer. I also found my dander getting raised when someone would peg me as lesbian or as queer. I don’t like being told what I am. If I like you, you will know soon enough how I’d like you to talk about me in terms of identity categories and the like.

My professional interest in exploring homonormativity grew in part from my work with queer clients and students. Many, especially younger people, were reporting the effects of not only heteronormativity (e.g., heterosexual privilege and bias, homophobia, the imposition of the gender binary) but also of being policed by other LGBTQI people. Some were told they were “too gay.” Others were told they weren’t “gay enough.” Transgender clients and students that sought to embrace a fluid, genderqueer, androgynous, or otherwise multi-gendered

performance described running into what I've come to call "transnormativity" as they were often challenged by trans individuals that preferred to "pass" as male or female and who found a place for themselves within a binary system. I was hearing implicitly from clients and students ways in which the prevailing discourses of contemporary *gay* culture were specifying and unwelcoming of their identity performances, sexual ethics, gender presentations, and broader political critique of their world.

At the same time, I was aware that the literature²² on working with LGBT/queer clients was informed--at best--by a critical multicultural perspective that included attention to intersectionality. The notion of "LGBT affirmative" practice has entered the professional lexicon. This is certainly useful in communicating that overt heterosexism is not the intended practice and that one's LGBT identity will be embraced, not pathologized or ignored. Yet, the literature and these practices are not always explicitly inclusive of queer identities (accept when using queer as an umbrella term) nor do they tap into the provocative and valuable resource that is queer theory.

Language (Or, What do I call these people that are telling me what to write?)

Rejecting the use of the term "subject" (a misnomer even in traditional research, as subjects really serve as objects of study) for "participant" or "co-researcher" better reflects the collaborative and relational nature of this dissertation project. I came to refer to the group of youth that worked with me as "the research team" as it felt more inclusive and representative of my hopes that collectively, we would all experience the endeavor as something that needed each of us, if not in differing capacities. (This is not to say that I endorse the tired saw of

²² Across disciplines within counselor education, psychology, family therapy, clinical social work, and youthwork.

“there is no ‘I’ in team” and that the youth were positioned equally to me.) I was pretty clear in my head and my gut that they were not objects of study and I fully believed that we all had things to teach to and learn from each other. As the process unfolded, there were ways in which the languaging became more and more cumbersome for the simple yet significant reason that the relationships I was developing were becoming ones that I felt great fondness for. These were the individual relationships I was in with Dylan, Ruben, Mateo, Courtney, and Sarah. And, it was the relationship I had with the collective: who we were as a gathering of six people, embodying the axiom, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

As a result of the connection I had with the group and the five youth who comprised it, I came to refer to the team as “The Q-Squad.” Our mission: *To engage in a queering²³ process that destabilizes traditional understandings of research in order to privilege the knowledges and lived experiences of queer-identified youth in a way that is coherent in its “methodology” with those experiences.* “The Q-Squad” functioned as a signifier for me that captured the wholeness that was produced by our coming together; served as an expression of my affection for the individuals, the group and the process; and added a fitting sense of irony and humor to an endeavor that is typically wrought with inflexibility and self-importance.

The Creation of The Q-Squad (Or, how did all these people end up in my living room?)

An inquiry based on insider knowledges required some insiders to recruit a research team. I borrowed on my relationship with Courtney and Sarah, two queer youth whom I had met previously when I did some pro bono work for a local LGBT summer camp. Sarah was doing an internship at the agency that was operating the camp and I worked with her to recruit,

²³ I think of it as an action, “queering” that is always occurring, never complete nor static, defined nor definitive, rather than as an adjective “queer” that describes a fixed process.

hire, and train camp counselors. Many of the recruits were Sarah's friends or classmates from university. Courtney was among them. Having participated previously with me in the conversation that served as insider consultation for the book chapter I was writing, Sarah and Courtney had a good idea about how I might approach the inquiry for this dissertation and they were very interested in contributing. Courtney had already graduated with her degree in women's and gender studies and Sarah was in her last year of the same program. As such, they brought with them a combination of insider knowledges and academic literacies, the two discursive frames that would inform the dissertation.

I had them over for brunch to talk about moving forward. Of particular interest to them was the focus on homonormativity. Sarah and Courtney both thought that that would bring a critical edge to the conversation and they saw value in bringing forward queer youth resistance to homonormativity as they both live that struggle. Below is an excerpt from my field notes commenting on that part of our conversation:

Finding people (straight and gay) to challenge/fight homophobia and heteronormativity is not that hard; finding people who are willing to acknowledge the specifications and limitations generated within a group is another thing. They seem eager to have a chance to have focused conversations on homonormativity (separate from heteronormativity and oppression from the dominant culture) and how "queer" is produced/constructed by other youth given the increasingly prevalence of homonorms.²⁴

In addition to their interest in the subject matter, Sarah and Courtney were also interested in influencing the process of the inquiry. Together, we identified broad topic areas

²⁴ Field notes, November 14, 2009

of discussion. These would end up guiding the inquiry meetings and serving as the chapters of the dissertation. We also discussed providing ways for the reflections and feedback of the research team members to be written in response to my writing. Both Courtney and Sarah agreed on the spot that they would like to write such responses. For me, including their writing serves as an act of accountability: by asking them to author responses to what I have written, they get the proverbial “last word” which serves as a further privileging of their voices. It also extends the conversation in both content and process, furthering the possibility for generation of ideas. Additionally, the inclusion of research participants’ comments in the final document continues the project of destabilizing traditional notions of research that privilege so-called expert knowledge. And, as such, it’s a pretty queer practice. Here is what Courtney and Sarah wrote about why they wanted to contribute their written responses to this dissertation:

“When Julie approached us to ‘write into’ her dissertation, the two of us, having felt a recent dissidence or disconnection from the world of academia in which we had previously been immersed, both felt a strong sense of connection to the idea of engaging with academic ideas from a new space – we would both like to acknowledge that even our re-telling of lived experience is seen through a particular lens partially created by our academic understandings and privilege.

“We’ve both recently been coming up against spaces in our own lives where there has been palpable tension between our past identities as feminist and present engagement with queer theory. Making our academic understanding applicable and present in our lived experience seemed to be possible through

this work. Participating in this work has helped us to create a space where we see our academic lives and our lived experience interacting.

“Meeting with Julie and the rest of the group, as well as reflecting on this experience and Julie’s writing, has helped the two of us intentionally bring that space forward in a meaningful way.”

During our planning meeting, we also discussed issues of representation and safety in consideration of who to invite to join us. For example, we talked about wanting to include queer youth from a variety of social locations while also being mindful about the experience of “being the only one” in a group. One idea they offered to mediate this was to organize a group of participants who knew each other and who would agree *en masse* to form the team. This way, we speculated, individual participants might find some support and safety already embedded within their relationships with each other. Also, we agreed that, while representation is important in a queer conversation about homonormativity (given that homonormativity embodies a middle-class white, consumer-culture experience), we didn’t want the group to become unwieldy in numbers. We fully realized that there was no such thing as full representation of every possible social location. The focus of the inquiry and its limitation could be named and we still could assemble a group that offered perspectives from various social locations.

One of the considerations that we dealt with in this planning meeting was to define the age range of “youth.” I had already decided that this inquiry would be with individuals over 18 and thus, legally considered to be adults. This was mostly a practical decision: I did not want

to deal with issues of parental consent. Also, I had Sarah and Courtney available and interested—the people they would identify would be from their peer group. In my professional work, I was aware that various jurisdictions throughout North America defined youth differently, often based on economic and political reasons as it related to funding for services. For example, some locales and programs define youth as people between 12 and 21, while other services target individuals up to 23 or 25 for youth services. (The United Nations considers 24 to be the cut-off while the World Bank sets 25 as the ceiling of youth-hood.) Taking advantage of the most generous definition as being inclusive of 25-year-olds still posed a bit of a problem: Courtney was 26 and would turn 27 during the life of this project. Making an executive yet queerly-informed decision, I declared her participation as an elder youth not only a relationally acceptable exception to government-imposed, socially constructed delimiting definitions of “youth” but also theoretically in-line with the ideological underpinnings of my dissertation. Pointing out that Halberstam (2005) discusses the queering of the lines between adolescence and adulthood, I said that Courtney was a queer youth if she said so.

As we talked, ideas about whom they might invite emerged. They contacted three friends who they thought would be interested in participating and who would represent various social locations and queer ways of being. This included a pair of siblings, Mateo and Ruben, and another mutual friend, Dylan, who also happened to be Mateo’s roommate. Sarah and Courtney connected with Mateo, Ruben and Dylan and asked if they would be interested in participating in a research project about queer youth. Everyone was very interested and, much to my surprise, we got together much sooner than later and without the typical fits and starts one might anticipate with the coordination of six people’s schedules.

We met at a popular deli-pub and I bought the house special for everyone, veggie burgers, and a couple of pitchers. I was curious about what Sarah and Courtney said that led them to be willing and interested. For the most part, they were willing because Courtney and Sarah were people they trusted. As for their interests, here are some of their comments excerpted from my field notes of that meeting:

- *Ruben (very excited about talking about his experience) “everyone I know has different experiences, no one is the same”*
- *Dylan—“I don’t see myself represented in a lot of the TV shows and movies about gay people.”*
- *Mateo—“It’s about time”...I asked him what he meant: “It’s about time people had a better grasp of who queer youth are”*
- *Dylan noted, “The stereotype is that we’re defined by the bar. I could never define myself there. I did that more sitting around someone’s living room talking with friends”²⁵*

Surprisingly, they really didn’t have many questions. I worked to create a culture of feedback, inviting questions and ideas. Mostly, they wanted to hear from me about what I was planning on doing. I told them that I would need to tape the meetings so that I would have transcripts of our conversations. I explained that I would prefer to videotape them because the picture helps with sorting out the five voices and they were fine with this. I explained that I would have a consent form (appendix A) for them to sign authorizing the taping and limiting my use of the tapes for the purposes that we discussed. They all readily agreed.

²⁵ Field notes, December 4, 2009

We discussed anonymity. All five participants wanted to have their names associated with the dissertation. They were clear that they felt that “having a voice” also included claiming their voice. I assured them that we would re-visit this before the ink was dry and sent to press.

I also explained that I wanted to compensate them financially. I told them that I would pay each of them \$10/hour (minimum wage is \$9/hour in Manitoba) for the time we spent in conversation. Also, I would feed them each time we met. While I fully believed that “compensation” would be experienced through meaningful change (and the potential for continuing change) for each individual (myself included) and for all of the relationships among and between us as our conversations unfolded, I also knew that I was the one that would walk away with at least two things that carry economic value in our culture: an advanced degree and a document that could be published. It was important to me to respect their time and contributions in a similar way.

I introduced the idea of having them contribute by generating some questions that they would like to speak to and that would help organize the conversations while also noting that most of the conversation would unfold as we went along. They were not particularly interested in generating questions and liked the idea of “just having a conversation.” I also offered the option of having them write reflections or responses to my writing. Again, not really any nibbles on that. We talked about what a “queer methodology” might be and I explained that there really wasn’t much about that articulated in the literature. We agreed that what we would be venturing into together would indeed be queer in method, if for no other reason than “queer doesn’t follow the rules.”²⁶

²⁶ Field notes, December 4, 2009

Setting (Or, how to be sure not to engage in “research”)

At that meeting at the deli, I also checked to see if they would be comfortable meeting at my house and if the location was accessible for them. They were quite comfortable with meeting at my house. As previously stated, feeding them was part of the compensation, but it also served a greater purpose, one that contributed to the setting. Combined with meeting in my comfortable old house, serving food (and beer, wine with pasta), sitting around the living room eating and drinking after we talked (sometimes while we talked, depending on schedules) created a close, fun, friendly feeling that I came to love and will remember with affection. The food became somewhat central to the experience. My partner, Lauri, and I enjoyed thinking about what to either make or order and the team seemed to enjoy hearing what we were planning on serving at each subsequent meeting.

While the video camera stood on a tripod at the entrance of the living room from the dining room, Juno and Presto, my cats, would often lay at the feet of the three team members cozied onto the couch together. Lauri worked the camera providing close-ups to balance the wide-lens view of the entire group. Lauri knew both Courtney and Sarah prior to these gatherings. I asked the entire group before our first inquiry meeting if they would be OK with Lauri doing the taping. Again, they had no hesitations. Lauri, with years of youthwork under her belt, was easily embraced by the Q-Squad as she saw to all of our technical and culinary needs. The barrier between the team and Lauri that I initially tried to impose by asking Lauri to stay silent during the conversations (she was released from that once the tape was turned off and we starting eating and drinking) eroded as the team became increasingly comfortable, engaged, and hilarious. There was no way that Lauri could keep from laughing at some of the

things that were said. In turn, her laughter entered and influenced the team's shared activity. By our third, certainly fourth meeting, it was clear that Lauri was to be seen and heard.

The attention paid to these details—location and setting, food and beverage, family and pets—did not go unnoticed by the team. Below are some of their comments from our fourth meeting.

Julie-- I wanted to ask you guys if you could talk a little bit about describing this process... From the very beginning—Sarah and Courtney, the beginning when we got together and I asked you who might be interested to how we all met at Cousins²⁷ to here we are at our fourth meeting... So, I'm wondering, how would you talk about how we're doing this, what your experience is of this? You can throw out your initial thoughts now, we can revisit it again. Any first thoughts?

Mateo—it's a really relaxed setting, I'm really comfortable.

Dylan—I was thinking about this earlier as I was sitting in a café. If we weren't doing this here, like this, there's probably a lot of things I wouldn't say...

(Group—yeah)

Mateo—I'd probably censor myself, yeah.

Dylan—like if we were sitting in Cousins a lot of this I probably wouldn't want to say out loud, especially when we were talking about sex.

Courtney—or, if we were at the university, doing it more traditionally, or if we were at like, a therapist type setting, right, like all of that can like, change, just the dynamic of

²⁷ Cousins is the deli/pub we met at for our planning meeting

it. The relationship between all of us and the relationship between us and you. I think this is an interesting way to....queer it. Right? Like that's the only word I can think of.

Mateo—it's very personal

Sarah—I think that the way we're doing things makes it feel like it's kind of energizing... I didn't feel like all day, oh my god I have to go and do this thing where I have to sit and talk and blah, blah, blah...I think it's energizing that we're eating and drinking and it makes me feel smarter and I'm happy to be here.

These comments reflect how the relationship between the setting and the “methodology” were mutually influential and supportive of each other: The comfortable, welcoming setting was both facilitated by and facilitative of a conversational space of inquiry that featured a “methodology” reliant upon transparency, shared reflexivity, and a co-constructed dialogical process committed to flexibility and embracing of uncertainty.

Process of inquiry (Or, how to just have a conversation...or a conversation that's just)

“I think the difference is we'll get more from these conversations.”—Courtney

So, what *did* we do? What did we talk about and *how* did we talk about it? For the most part, the six meetings held between December 2009 and March 2010 were guided by the research question and the “topic of the day.” As previously discussed, topics were generated in the preliminary meeting I had with Sarah and Courtney and represent the chapters of this dissertation that are directly related to the research question: 1) Identity construction; 2) Sex; and, 3) Pop culture. I often would reflect before the meeting on some considerations from the literature and experiences that I've had with queer youth to help me come up with a few “jump-

off’ questions.²⁸ Typically, these questions were to invite participants to talk about their experiences with or thoughts about the topic at hand. I would start with these, opening the floor for any one to respond, and usually, a lively conversation ensued. Essentially, this is the dialogical research process mentioned above. This process features:

- Interviewees positioned as co-researchers
 - Interview content and process negotiated with co-researchers
 - Moving from individualized accounts to collective co-participation
 - A process that emerges relationally and is constituted in the interview process
- (Parker, 2005)

Each member of the Q-squad was sent a copy of the transcript to review if they felt so inclined and I began every meeting by asking if there was anything from the previous meeting’s transcript that they wanted to speak to or follow-up on. During the conversations, I would check-in to see how everyone was doing, if the conversation was meaningful, and if we were still on track. At times when I had a particular idea that I wanted to ask about or, if I felt that we had drifted too far afield from the questions that were relevant to the research focus, I would attempt to be transparent and situate my question and comment for the team as I worked our way back. In this way, I attempted to balance co-creation and fluidity with the assertion of leadership and purpose.

²⁸ In Chapter Six a different format is used. The description of the format and its rationale is provided in the chapter.

Impact of the Inquiry Process: (Or, what did they think about this mess?)

“I think that it’s interesting the way that creating intentional space has given us the time to see the differences alongside the similarities”—Sarah

The efforts to de-methodologize the inquiry process were not lost on the members of the Q-squad. In the last two meetings we held, I asked directly about their experience of the process, what stood out for them, and in what ways they saw it contributing to their participation. In the following excerpt from our last meeting, a discussion of safety serves to highlight what stood out for them around the process of this inquiry:

Courtney--I think it’s pretty amazing how safe of a space this has felt, without actually talking about it. To acknowledge that we did have differences that we all came with that we engaged with but we always just sort of felt safe enough to do that and I think that that’s really interesting, that’s what I think.

Julie--What do you guys feel like contributed to it being safe enough? What did each of you do? What did you notice and appreciate others doing?

Sarah—Hanging out before helped.

Courtney—Yeah

Sarah—Like, instead of just sitting down and getting right to it, even though sometimes that may have been quite frustrating for you. But I think that it wouldn’t have been possible to talk in that way if we had been just sitting down and go, go, go

Courtney—It felt really um...I feel like I can remember points where we all interacted with someone else's comment...instead of someone saying 'this is what I think' and then someone else, 'this is what queer is to me'...it created its own life

Sarah— Points of connection in relation to creating safety

Mateo—I think the fact that we met at your home and you were comfortable enough to have these strange people in your home

Courtney—Time and time again

Mateo—You only met Dylan and Ruben and myself like once or twice before inviting us into your home

Julie--That's interesting. You're again pointing out something we talked specifically about a couple of weeks ago in terms of methodology and now you're reflecting on that again as significant in this idea of being safe enough

Mateo—Yeah, it showed that you're comfortable with us, so I'll be honest with you and I'll share my life...

Dylan—I think Mateo kind of touched on it, but the way that you and Lauri have been very welcoming and down to earth and personable, rather than being like, very closed off, and just like, analyzing things. I think that really helps because it brings a really human level to it.

The team's observations about how safety emerged without a formal discussion of it ²⁹ may be understood in many ways. From my position as the researcher and facilitator in charge of the process, their experience of the inquiry as safe enough is evidence that the efforts to de-

²⁹ Courtney, Sarah and I did discuss safety considerations when we met and talked about the forming of the team. This was previously discussed in this chapter.

methodologize the inquiry process and create a relational, responsive conversational space were successful—not only because of my efforts, but also because of theirs.

Part 3: Use of material from the inquiry process

How have I used the words of my co-researchers in this document? What have I done to ensure that the values and purposes that informed this dissertation from the beginning are reflected in my treatment of the conversations? It was never my intention to collect “data,” analyze it, and render some kind of authoritative interpretation of it. I told the participants from the beginning that my plan was to pepper the dissertation with excerpts from the conversations. By placing their comments alongside the theoretical arguments I was making, I was hoping to bring forward the relationship between theory and lived experience, demonstrating how two discursive frames may articulate similar concepts very differently. Also, I wanted to leverage the participants’ experiences, insider knowledges, and perspectives as important considerations for practitioners to heed. My “interpretation” would take place in my selecting of some excerpts (and not others) and in my use and placement of them in certain sections of the document. I made these decisions primarily by choosing things that stood out for me as particularly poignant, provocative, and/or representative of an idea or perspective that may not be available for many practitioners. Finally, I chose articulations of personal experiences and ideas that made theoretical material more available and “real” and which brought to life the process of relationally engaged identity construction. As previously stated, Sarah and Courtney agreed to provide reflections/closing comments. You will find these at the end of chapters four, five, and six.

Chapter 4:

Queer as Youth: Resisting the Homonormative of Identity Development

“*Gay is the new black.*”—Carson Kressley, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, (2003)

“...one of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”—Sedgwick, (1993, p. 8)

“I think the most damaging part of labels is other people putting it on you and thinking they can understand you like that.”—Courtney

Introduction

Gay-related content, gay imagery, and gay-identified people no longer carry the don’t-ask-don’t-tell patina of recent years in many areas of contemporary American society. As these very words are being written, another state is gearing up to fall in line like a dutiful domino as marriage is legalized. The *American Idol* runner up’s hot and sexy gayness, not to mention his picture, are on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*. And a Los Angeles High School’s 2009 prom queen was a young gay man. As a constituency, people that identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and to a significantly lesser extent, transgender, are at the epicenter of this shifting of cultural plates. While society may be catching up with the need to account for and correct the privileging of heteronormativity, the theories most available to practitioners that inform our work have failed to do so, as they continue to rely on essentialist notions of identity embedded within modernist psychological discourses of development.

This is problematic because, as Langdrige (2008) points out, dominant models

of development “present difficulties when working with...*queer* [italics added] clients” (p.23). It isn’t for a lack of alternative conceptual frameworks; on the contrary, queer theory offers theoretical maps that not only trouble the hegemonic assumptions of modernist thinking, but also pave way for constructions of identity that reflect a queer ethos of subjectivity. From a queer³⁰ perspective, identity is thought of as *constructed*, being constituted in language and relationship. While the queer theory literature reflecting these ideas is ample, it is primarily found in areas not likely to be accessed by the majority of practitioners, such as anthropology, sociology, gender studies, cultural studies, literature, and other interdisciplinary bodies of scholarship (Langdridge, 2008). Queer and critical theories, and clinical practices informed by them, are rarely discussed at length in literature geared to practitioners.

Models of identity development are particularly germane when working with young people, as we have culturally and professionally coalesced around the notion (first introduced by Erickson some fifty plus years ago) that developing a stable identity is their primary task. In this chapter I present queer theory as a relevant alternative to prevailing models of development for those who work with queer youth. A critique of the notion of “identity development” will be made from a queer theory perspective. Guidelines for practice informed by queer theory and inclusive of queer youths’ experiences will be suggested.

³⁰ The term queer is used here intentionally. It serves as a critique of identities, rather than as an identity constitution of its own, and is claimed by many youth in resistance to fixed identity categories. It is not meant to be an umbrella term for GLBT, although authors, especially those from non-critical disciplines, use it this way. Here, it is a signifier that stands against “normal” and is taken up by some individuals who are gender normative and/or who have opposite-sex desires but for whom queer signifies their resistance to other regimes of normativity (see, for example, Thomas’s (2000) *Straight with a Twist*).

Stage one: Resisting hegemony

“Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories.”—Goffman, 1963, p.2

“I feel like sex is a big part of being queer but you don’t lose your queer title because you’re not having sex.”—Dylan

In chapter two, a brief history of the invention of sexuality was discussed as a way to situate our contemporary understandings of current identity categories. As was noted, Foucault (1978a) traces the invention of the homosexual to 1870. While people had been engaging in all kinds of sexual practices with partners of all genders across time, never before had a classification been articulated based on these practices. Foucault (1978a) notes that, while sodomy had been a criminal act, rendering the “perpetrator...nothing more than the juridical subject” (p.43), the 19th century created the homosexual who became “a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology...” (p. 43)

Thus, an *identity*, and a concomitant specifying discourse, was constructed based solely on choice of sexual partners. Without an understanding of the social construction of sexuality, notions of stable, “natural” gender and sexual identities are reified. This fuels the argument that people are “born gay” and perpetuates oppressive binary notions of male/female and hetero/homo. Essentializing specifications (for example, blue for boys, pink for girls; men are rational, women emotional; females are born with vaginas and clitorises and males are born with testes and penises) are produced and maintained through language and discourse (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010.)

Through the reverse discourse that is the embodiment of the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement, naturalized accounts of sexual and gender identity have been leveraged in the name of civil rights for many who claim LGBT identities. From a queer perspective, however, this serves to reify essentialist specifications that are regulating for those whose lived experiences (or whose *preferred* lived experiences) fall outside the male/female, homo/hetero binaries, or for those who construct families and relationships in ways that challenge the dominant and validated constructions of these social institutions (e.g., bisexuals, genderqueers, individuals that are transgender or transsexual, relationships that are “open,” or people in polyamorous relationships).

Foucault (1978a) suggests that claiming a fixed identity as homosexual may be personally liberating but unintentionally privileging of heterosexuality. Cultural theorist Lisa Duggan’s (2002) notion of *homonormativity* (discussed previously in chapter two) is descriptive of this discursive effect as an assimilationist, normative, and privatized political agenda. Consequently, while securing civil rights and carving out identitarian, political, and historical meaning for many sexual and gender minorities, some of the *effects* of the contemporary gay rights movement have pushed others further toward the margins. I consider this, in part³¹, to be the result of the hugely successful reverse discourse of creating a liberatory pedagogy out of the imposed homosexual identity. In this way, homonormativity is exposed as a tactic of heteronormativity.

³¹ I say *in part* because I do not by any means intend to suggest that the marginalization of genderqueers, polyamorous people, transgender or transsexual individuals, bisexuals, queerly constructed families, kinksters, or others who resist normativity is solely the responsibility of the mainstream gay and lesbian community.

Stage two: Undoing development

“I’m stridently against everything that people regularly assume about me—people think they can predict your next move, that they think they know who you are. People are quick to assume around things like your politics or your understanding of what a relationship means. The first thing that happened after I broke up with this guy was that I was out with a friend and two people came up and said, ‘so, are you guys dating?’ And we’re like, ‘NO!’ and they said, ‘well what are you?’ And she said, ‘I’m a dyke’ and I said, ‘I’m queer’ and they’re like, ‘what? Are you bisexual?’ I’m like ‘no, this is what I said’ and they’re like, ‘what are you, what are you, what are you??’ So, then I’m like, ‘well, I don’t think that’s an appropriate question’ because it was a question on their terms to help them feel comfortable, not a question to understand me on my terms.”--Sarah

“Life histories are histories of becoming, and categories can sometimes act to freeze that process.”—Butler, 2006, p.278

For clinicians and youth workers, the practice literature is abundant with conceptual and practice guidelines for working with gay, lesbian, bisexual and to a lesser degree, transgender youth³², including Savin-Williams’s 2005 APA Distinguished Book Award-winning, *The New Gay Teenager*. Much of the body of work (e.g., Bell & Pepper, 2008; D’Augelli, 2001, 1994; Mallon, 2009, 2001; Morrow, 2004; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1990,1998, 2001, 2005; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996) focuses on the identity development of LGBT youth, specifically, the emergence, acceptance and integration of a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender identity. This process, variously referred to as, “identity formation” (Cass, 1979,

³² Terminology in much of the current literature on LGBT youth development reflects a certain theoretical conflation. Often, “queer” is used as an umbrella term for the constantly morphing acronym, LGBT, inserting it where the authors mean “gay” but are striving for inclusivity. This divorces “queer” from its politics, fails to recognize its deployment as a critique of identity categories, and invisibilizes the multiplicity of identities it signifies. Also, it ignores the large body of queer theory scholarship generated in the interdisciplinary fields.

1984), “identity acquisition” (Troiden, 1979), “identity development” (Coleman, 1981-82) and “differential developmental trajectories” (Savin-Williams, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1997) are all informed to varying degrees by prevailing discourses of psychological development. The influence of these modernist and specifying theoretical models is extant if for no other reason than the existing models of homosexual identity formation are reliant upon the notion of identity *development*. Furthermore, all are inextricably and uncritically linked to—if not, indeed, *productive of*-- the “coming out” narrative.

From a queer theory perspective, the notion of identity “development” is problematic from the outset, as the implication is that there exists some essential, core constituent that in fact, *can develop*. Butler (1990a) challenged the assumption of a unified identity—homo- or heterosexual. This assumption effectively delimits unknown possible identities from emerging, for, as Lesko (2000) asserts, the developmental narrative created for queer youth is one for which adults know what the “correct” ending is. Also, Talbert (2004) points out that developmental models treat homosexual identity development as “natural” in order to avoid pathologizing sexual minorities. While understandable in their historical context and admirable in intentions, discourses that naturalize aspects of identity run the risk of prescribing identity more than describing it. Furthermore, youth are viewed as passive actors in a developmental design pre-drawn by adults (Patton, 1996, Lesko, 2000), again a problematic assumption from a queer theory perspective as individual subjectivity is understood to be contextually contingent, constituted through relationship and discourse and one in which individuals have agency.

Finally, even the more recent models created specifically for youth and that attempt to account for contextual variables such as culture, class, race, etc (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1998; 2005) continue to rely on modernist notions of a stable identity at the expense of

understandings that allow for a proliferation of identity performances (Langdridge, 2008). While Savin-Williams (2005), for example, successfully demonstrates the need not to conflate identity with desire and sexual practice with his insistence in using the identifier, “same-sex attracted youth,” he is similarly adamant in asserting his belief that all youth experience some manner of developmental process through which they become who they are. Furthermore, Savin-Williams summarily dismisses “queer,” going as far as to state that queer was a “flash” in the 1990’s. This seems to reflect a personal bias against queer. Kuban & Grinnell (2008) write a smart and pithy critique of Savin-Williams’ notion of the so-called “new gay teenager,” underscoring how his celebration of assimilation is a “calling for the erasure of the multiplicity of queer identities” (p.78). For every youth that Savin-Williams claims to have found who recoils at the use of the word queer as a signifier, there are many practitioners that know countless queer-identified youth.

Any model of development, even one which claims that there is no monolithic way to develop and that each individual’s course will look different (e.g., Savin-Williams, 2005), still carries with it at least one absent but implicit question: what does it mean for someone who *doesn’t* “develop” in the way described by the model? Does this render some youth as developmentally dis-abled if they fail to achieve developmentally in the prescribed ways? Butler (1990a) notes that socially constructed norms gain status as “developmental law,” thus ignoring that “the gendered body is *performative* [italics added]” (Butler, 1990a, p.173). For queer youth who see identity as something they *do* rather than something they *are*, adherence to notions of development can constitute a kind of spiritual violence, an experience of colonization into a way of being that does not fit with their own subjectivity and relational ethic. Consider, for example, Courtney’s story of her experience with a therapist:

Courtney—When I was dating someone that identified as trans...(the therapist) had a really big problem with that in relation to my identity, feeling like I was purposely seeking out someone who didn't have a solid identity because I was uncomfortable with creating a solid identity for myself, and, maybe she was right. But it felt more like she didn't understand where that person was coming from. She was using something that was real in my life to try to illustrate what she deemed as my problem.

Julie--I'm wondering, what effects did that have on you when she seemed to be promoting or insisting that the goal was a solid identity?

Courtney—It was met with a lot of resistance a lot of the time and there was a lot of back and forth.

Julie--You were trying to resist that?

Courtney—Yeah! Maybe that's why I ended up feeling so crappy after therapy most of the time...there was that constant navigating, trying to come to concrete things that I thought I should do, and it just didn't fit.

A critique of developmental models may be read in Halberstam's (2005) notion of "queer temporality" which is, in part, a disruption of the youth/adult binary. This binary, Halberstam states, is supported by "a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood" (p.153) a prevailing discourse implicitly produced and reified through notions of identity development. If we consider that temporality is contingent as a cultural artifact, then queer youth's disruption of developmental timelines and trajectories may be viewed as cultural. Halberstam suggests that queer identity performances often include an extended period of

youth, one that troubles the notion of moving through a period of adolescent development toward a stable adult identity.

Consideration of developmental models from a queer theory perspective reminds us that it is critical to recognize that it is not only various *models* of gay youth identity development that are informed by discourses that inhabit particular sites of cultural power and influence, but it is also the very construct of *development* that is produced by and maintains those discourses. Butler and Byrne (2008) assert that “queer ...cannot be easily accommodated in most psychological models” (p.90). A key aspect of this consideration is the privileged narrative of “coming out” which I will discuss in the following section.

Stage three: Coming in from coming out

“I don’t think that queer has to do with sex. I think that queer has to do with being completely crazy.”—Ruben

“...queer gets its political edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual.”—Warner, 1993, p.xxvi

Theories of identity development organize around and are productive of the “coming out” narrative. As noted in the previous chapter, compulsory coming out can be problematic for many individuals. Yet, the coming out narrative serves as the primary text guiding work with clients. For example, LGBT, queer, and straight therapists alike routinely coach their clients to “come out,” lest they be found guilty of harboring “internalized homophobia,” being “in denial” of their “true self,” or even of being dishonest. As a queer theory-informed therapist, I find this problematic on several counts.

To begin with, so-called internalized homophobia “perpetuates the injustice of privatizing

socio-cultural problems, in this case, homophobia and heterosexism” (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010). It reifies the modernist practice of dislocating individual narratives from the cultural narratives that create meaningful context, perpetuating what Madigan (2008) calls the “burden of individualism.” Alternatively, by utilizing externalization (White and Epston, 1990)—a narrative therapy practice of separating the person from the problem--problems are located in their cultural context, thus creating discursive space for people to reflect on their relationship with problems as well as to protest the problems’ effects on their lives.

Another concern with these privatized accounts is their reliance on modernist notions of a “true” or “authentic” self. Requiring people to embrace their “true self” relies on essentialist constructions which ultimately lead to thin and rigid identity conclusions while implying the presence of the binary: “true self/false self.” Wilchins (2002) underscores that binaries “don’t give us much information” (p.43) and the authentic/inauthentic discourse disqualifies those who construct and perform a multiplicity of identities.

Further, there is an implication that not to “come out” would be dishonest. Indeed, discourses of honesty are often invoked when well-meaning helpers encourage clients to “be honest about who you are.” Foucault (1988) noted how these discourses lead individuals to engage in “truth games,” a self-subjugating and regulatory practice that becomes difficult to distinguish from the policing and domination of others. Foucault considered therapy to be a practice that encouraged both these “technologies of the self” and “technologies of the domination of others” (p.161).

From a contextualized queer theory perspective, what is in fact “dishonest” is the binary system that ignores the lived experiences of those outside of it. Wilchins (2002) notes, “if the model and the body disagree, it is the body that must give way” (p.41). When we insist our

clients come out based on ideas of “honesty,” we are participating in the maintenance of the invisible insidiousness of cultural gender norms on the backs of our clients. Coming out can become another standard obligation of a homonormative culture, where policing from within the community is as strident as from without. Finally, “coming out or being out, is not an equal opportunity endeavor” (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010, p. 98). People from various social locations remind us that issues of intersectionality must be considered in order to account for the differing consequences for coming out in different communities. Indeed, when working with youth, we must always attend to their lived experience *as youth*, and consider the ramifications of being out at school, at home, in their religious community, and all the environments they traffic in.

But what do we do about issues of visibility, political voice, and access to appropriate services? How do we reconcile the tension between queer theory’s rejection of identity claims and the lived reality of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons who find coming out as a necessary personal and political response to an oppressive socio-political climate? Perhaps Halberstam’s (2005) ideas are again useful here. Halberstam suggests that coming out and embracing a homosexual identity may be a *starting* point rather than an ending point, a suggestion which again, disrupts conventional notions of development. This is in contrast to most of the models of gay youth identity development that mark various “coming-outs” (e.g., out to self, out to others, out as an offspring, etc.) as the final steps in integrating a unified and fixed identity. For instance, I have consulted many youth who transgress sexual and gender norms and become less invested in expert-produced categories and more interested in fluid sexual vernaculars and the categories produced through local queer subcultures. Examples include: genderqueers who embrace being “chicks with dicks;” young women who identify as

queer rather than lesbian as a statement against essentializing second wave feminist discourses; and transmen who desire other transmen and identify as “fags.”

In summary, by acknowledging both the problematic and productive aspects of the coming out discourse, an important constructionist lesson is learned: the guiding question to consider is not, “what is the ‘right’ discourse?” No discourse is The Right Discourse. Rather, we may ask: “what discourse helps us construct an understanding that allows us to move forward in meaningful ways?” Thus, while we may embrace coming out as politically necessary in our cultural economy of identitarian politics and personally liberating within heteronormativity, we can also work to resist the discursive limitations and the reification of norms that such a claim makes. This is the social justice potential of social construction and the liberatory possibilities of queer theory.

Stage four: Theory and praxis—queering therapy

“This therapist was insisting that I am bisexual...or, that I’ve just not come out ‘fully’ yet, whatever that means. I had to spend so much time trying to tell her, a) I’m queer, b) that’s cool with me, and I’m as ‘fully out’ as anyone can be, c) you should probably know something about this so you can quit telling your clients what the fuck they ‘are’ and, d) that’s not why I’m here anyway.”—Sarah

“The judges of normality are everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker -judge.”-- Foucault, 1978b, p.304

Discourse considered

As a practitioner committed to structuring safety and creating what Bird (2000) terms “safe enough” spaces³³ for people to engage a proliferation of identities, I am interested in developing a practice that challenges the discursive limitations and specifications of binary-based, essentialized accounts of identity, heteronormativity and homonormativity. With youth, this means, in part, freeing myself from the prevailing developmental notions and coming-out prescriptions in order to make space for individual preferences and meaningful unique outcomes. Queer theory provides a conceptual foundation for such a practice, one in which I can “listen outside the box.” Privileging the personal accounts of those I consult helps me avoid over-theorizing at the expense of peoples’ lived experiences and the material political realities of the contexts they live in.

Furthermore, rejection of essentialist notions of identity and the developmental theories that support them shifts the gaze and dialogue of therapy from an intra-psychic, individual endeavor to the contextualized level of discourse. Individual identity narratives can then be considered in relationship to the larger cultural narratives that influence them. Hence, issues of power and oppression produced in a heteronormative society and regulated through therapy practices born out of heteronormative and homonormative assumptions are illuminated.

For example, on several occasions, young clients have struggled against pressures that stipulate they must claim a fixed identity, come-out, or otherwise constitute their identity based on their sexual desires. In such situations, I shift the gaze to the discursive context that produces these pressures by asking questions such as:

³³ I embrace the ideas of Vikki Reynolds (in press) that “safety” is perpetually being constituted and never completed (hence, the active verb ‘structuring’) and that safety is not a binary proposition of ‘safe/unsafe’ (hence, ‘safe enough’)

- *What did you do to stand up to the heterosexist assumptions to let yourself be attracted to him?*
- *What do the 'straight police' say about these things? 'The gay police'?*
- *What might your own experience say about these categories and rules?*
- *Who would you like to have come into your world rather than you coming-out to someone else's?*
- *Where do some of these rules come from—home, school, media, religion, other places?*

By focusing on the specifying discourses of normativity, therapeutic conversations informed by queer theory can avoid identity constructions based on the idea of a natural or authentic sexual identity against which individuals can measure and justify their existence. These conversations can help reduce fears of being categorized and disciplined by normalizing gazes. Moreover, youth come to appreciate their own stand against normativity when their personal narrative is located within an honorable politics of resistance rather than pathologizing views of adolescent opposition, internalized homophobia, or developmental difficulties.

Watch your language

"I came out as a lesbian first. Then I dated a guy. Telling my mom that I was dating a guy was horrendous. She's like, 'you're a lesbian! What are you doing?' I said, 'I like him, he's my friend now we're dating-it shouldn't be that complicated.' You start questioning yourself. You thought you knew yourself. What is this? Am I a lesbian—is it I just like him? What do I do

with myself? Where do I belong? Trying to grasp onto something so you can relate to anybody. That's why queer works for me."—Mateo

There are queer youth performances of identity that are not readily accounted for by the categories afforded us by language (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010). "Queer" itself is often understood to be a critique of identities rather than a distinctive category of its own. This leaves us to wonder, is it possible for us to capture in language identities that are fluid by definition, a kind of 'who you meet today may not be who you meet tomorrow' moving target? This is not an inconsequential matter of linguistic gymnastics, as labeling is a discursive practice that has significant bearing on how something is understood (Wilchins, 2004). Indeed, this can stir up a great deal of dialogical perturbation in our modernist, binary-based culture of certainty. "Queer" represents for all those people for whom labels don't or won't.

As therapists, what then, do we do? Because our work depends on conversation and we exist in a language-based cultural economy, we may respond to this dilemma by taking up a position that privileges queer youth knowledges and lived experiences over expert-produced models and delimiting specifications. Also, two further assumptions informed by queer theory and social construction invite us to this repositioning: first, that language is productive and not simply descriptive; and, secondly, that identities are fluid performances that are discursively produced rather than natural and stable.

Tilsen and Nylund (2010) offer the following questions to help guide practice:

- *How can we use language and discourse in ways that invite a proliferation of possible identity conclusions and performances rather than discourses that mandate and regulate identities?*
- *What discursive positioning will allow queer youth's individual identity claims and lived experiences to be legible as acts of resistance to delimiting discursive power relationships that demand stable, fixed, and binary identities?*
- *How can we structure safety and create discursive space that allows queer youth to bring all of themselves to therapy?*
- *How can we account for therapy practices that are not in solidarity with queer youths' preferred ways of being?*
- *How can we position ourselves at the level of discourse in order to consider the effects of prevailing discourses on important people (e.g., parents, family members, other support figures) in the youth's life?*
- *What is the relationship between broader cultural narratives and the individual narratives of the people involved with the youth? (p.99).*

These questions and others like them, help practitioners engage with clients in the deconstruction of internalized and decontextualized understandings that people may have about themselves. By assuming a position of radical doubt toward naturalized accounts of identity, we may enter into meaning-making conversations with queer youth that are generative and honoring of unique identity performances. Key to this positioning is allowing youth the discursive and relational space necessary to describe their preferred identities in their terms. Queer theory, Hodges (2008) asserts, “provides a warning about investing too much in identity

categories” (p.18). The potential problematic consequences of such an investment during the therapy process proved to be a central point of conversation during one of the q-squad’s inquiry meetings. Below is an excerpt from the conversation:

Dylan—Do you feel like you would have an easier time with a therapist who was part of the community?

Sarah—I feel like I would have an easier time with someone who used inclusive language. Regardless of whether or not they were actually queer.

Mateo—Yeah, as long as they were open and they shared that they didn’t necessarily know what I was talking about but they were willing to do the research and not expect me to explain it to them.

Sarah—Totally! Like that one therapist wanted me to educate her.

Mateo—You’re the patient, that’s not your job.

Sarah—Like saying something like, ‘I’ve never actually had a client that identifies as queer but I’m going to do the best I can to understand where you’re coming from and if I don’t understand then I’m going to do the best I can to figure it out.’

Courtney—Isn’t it just about asking questions because when do we ever really know where someone’s coming from just because they use a word?

(Group—yeah, yeah)

Sarah—I feel like it would be hilariously misguided to assume that because someone was part of the community they would necessarily understand my experience as a queer-identified person...

Stage queer: The end is never near—proliferating possibilities and resisting normativities

“Queer is an umbrella term. You’re sexual. There’s no definition of whether you like guys or girls specifically. You are willing to work with what happens, whatever comes your way. You don’t limit yourself.”—Dylan

“What matters, I think, is how aware a person is of the options. How sad for a person to be missing out on some expressions of identity, just for not knowing there are options.”—

Bornstein, 1994, p.51

Recently, I was talking with an 18 year old queer man, Nick. He had cut his previously mid-back length hair to just above his ears, a clean version of the hipster faux-hawk hairstyle. “Now,” Nick said waggishly, “I just might have to be a boy for awhile. I don’t know. We’ll see what the girls think of that.” When I asked him what kind of boy he was imagining being, he replied, “I guess that all depends on where I am and who shows interest. Who knows—maybe someone’ll want me to be a tomboy. Could be fun.”

Nick’s impish attitude implied what Halberstam (1998) noted as “identity...as a process with multiple sites for becoming and being” (p.21). These multiple sites are not only fluid and flexible (“I just might have to be a boy for awhile.”), but they are also discursively produced and constituted in relationship (“...that all depends on where I am and who shows interest...”). Cutting his hair as a cue for some potential “fun” also indicates the performative nature of these just-to-be-imagined, yet-to- be-constructed identities.

And, as for the person with the long hair left in the salon chair, what happened to that version of Nick? “Oh, he’ll probably be back, in some shape or form, with or maybe without the hair. It’s never quite the same, though. It’s important to me to mix it up...keeps people on their toes, you know.”

Nick's embodiment of performed sexual and gender identities, ways of being that can be constructed, deconstructed, constituted and reconstituted in a multiplicity of ways, is representative of what Butler (1990a) called "a perpetual displacement...a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (p.176) that effectively "denaturalizes" hegemonic meanings of gender and sexual identity. His lived experience of an embodied queer identity reveals both its constructed and performative nature and stands outside the lines drawn by models of gay youth identity development.

Queer theory offers a conceptual framework that is consistent with the experiences of youth such as Nick. Practice informed by queer theory can open up possibilities for those queer youth for whom the notion of development proves specifying and rigid, and thus disqualifying of their identity constitutions. While models of gay youth identity development have evolved to account for some contextual factors and allow for the option of not identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, they continue to rely on the metaphor of development, itself a limiting essentialist construction which reifies certain notions of normativity. As queer is by definition a stand against normativity, this is problematic for queer youth and the practitioners that work with them. Alternatively, practitioners who are informed by queer theory and the queerly constructed lived experiences of queer youth, can stand alongside their young clients in resistance to specifying discourses of hetero- and homonormativity, taking part in the creative dance that is queer identity performance.

Reflections on Chapter 4 by Sarah Dack & Courtney Slobogian

While reading your ideas about the difference between identity development vs. identity construction we started thinking about how the concept of "queer identity

development” suggest that it is an unfolding of an identity already constituted or “in place” as opposed to the idea of an identity constructed either consciously or as a result of social interaction. It seems like an important distinction given that it again restores agency to youth and acknowledges the ways that identity is constructed.

This idea may work to eradicate any ageist assumptions and interactions that shape the power balance between care-providers and youth. The switch from an understanding of “identity development” to identity construction actively debunks the potential for assumptions about the trajectory of a youth’s “queer lifestyle” or “queer timeline.” One such assumption includes care providers’ belief that youth should “come out” or “be out to their friends” or label themselves. Another example would be making assumptions about a youth’s personal identification based on who they’re interested in sexually. This highlights the way that mainstream notions about identity development are sort of formulaic and exist in a way that means people can fail or succeed. For example, popular assumptions about development may include “a woman interested in women = lesbian, a woman interested in women and men = bisexual” without any exceptions. These assumptions intercept the care-provider’s ability to be truly supportive of someone’s process of identity construction.

Basically, we’re super impressed with this distinction between identity development and identity construction as an alternative mode of understanding queer youth experiences and the way this distinction can be potentially important to care providers.

Chapter 5:

Bringing Sexy Back: Sex Positivity and the Rejection of Erotophobia

“I think the most important thing that queerness has helped me with in terms of pleasure and desirability is recognizing that if I find someone attractive who has a body similar to mine it forces me to recognize that I’m OK. That’s one of the most amazing things that desire and queer sex has shown me about myself.”—Sarah,

Two girls doing it: What my 10-year-old niece always knew

Several years ago my partner Lauri and I were at home waiting eagerly for my brother and then 10-year-old niece to deliver our annual supply of Girl Scout Thin Mint cookies. We wanted those cookies. And, we were looking forward to a visit with my brother and niece, the latter who affectionately referred to Lauri as “bug” and to me as “alien.” We were her favorites. We knew it and so did the rest of the family.

My brother pulled his truck up in front of our house. I got up to pour the milk in anticipation of dunking those sweet babies until they reached the perfect saturation point before crumbling into the glass. No knock. No doorbell. No 10-year-old energy blasting through our door with my Thin Mint order. We looked outside and saw the two of them sitting in the truck. They sat and we watched from inside. For twenty minutes they sat and we watched. Somewhere in there, I put the milk back in the refrigerator.

My brother came to the door with the cookies but without his daughter. As we let him in, we saw the frustration, sadness, and helplessness on his face.

“She was so looking forward to seeing you guys and then we pulled up and she said, ‘they have a rainbow flag! Ewww!’” The flag had always flown from our front stoop. This was not her first time coming over to our rainbowed house.

After lingering awhile with the perplexity that had come over him, my brother continued. “So, I asked her, ‘Well, what do you think that means?’ and she says, ‘they’re lesbians!’ And I asked her, ‘Well, what does that mean?’ And she said... ‘Two girls doing it!’”

A chapter on sex in a treatise about identity may seem to be a misstep if approached without a perspicacious grasp of queer politics and the purpose of its attendant declaration of righteous erotic entitlement. The contemporary gay rights movement has relied on essentialist notions of identity coupled with the apologist position of homonormative politics to suck the sex out of its quest for equal rights (not the least of which is marriage, a direct invitation to the state to endorse the activities of one’s bedroom). Queer theorist Michael Warner (1999) has called the movement a “PG gay movement” (p.42), accusing it of being founded on erotophobia. Warner asserts that at the core of queer ethics and culture is “dignity in shame,” a lack of pretense about being “above the indignity of sex” (p.35). Dignity in shame calls for a political movement that goes beyond the parameters of sex or the identity politics of sexuality, a movement that recognizes that homophobia effects people other than gays, including those who engage in gender performances that stand outside of the binary specifications of masculinity and femininity. Such a movement recognizes that being heterosexual is not protection for people that transgress—even a little—gender specifications or the highly delimiting code of morally approved sex practices. This is the ethic that inspired the Stonewall riots.

Protection of sexual freedom, economic justice, and the liberation of pleasure have historically been at the center of gay and lesbian politics. These protections and their historical significance have been abandoned for a neo-liberal gay rights agenda that privileges consumer rights over human rights and fosters economic and political mobility (Chasin, 2000; Duggin, 2002). Sex-positive and queer critics contest this philosophy and its historical amnesia, asserting that capitalism sabotages the potential for radical social change originally connected to identity-based movements (Chasin, 2000).

de Vries (2008), writing as a self-identified “femme dyke as nelly fag” youth (p.142), provides an insightful insider’s critique of the effect homonormativity has on youth and sex education provided in American schools:

I despise the way the mainstream gay movement has ignored the issues surrounding sex education in the United States. In-school activism, when spearheaded by gay adults, does not reflect the needs of queer youth, and often sidesteps the issue of sex education altogether (not to mention issues of age and ageism, dis/ability, race, class, and sexualities and genders that aren’t strictly “male” or “female” and “straight” and “gay”)...creating a safe school environment also means creating curricula that are inclusive of queer issues, including...sex ed curricula. (pp. 144-145).

de Vries goes further by insisting that queer activism should reform sex education and “not just insinuate ourselves into already sorely lacking” curricula (p. 146). Citing the helpfulness of the safer-sex workshops she attended at queer youth centers and conferences, she underscores the fundamental shift that facilitated her learning and her feeling encouraged to

participate: where traditional sex education is founded on abstinence and the view that sex is a “risk factor” to be averted, the safer-sex education de Vries participated in “took for granted that youth were interested in, and perhaps having, sex” (p. 143).

Further, it is critical to challenge the naturalization of the construction, “sex.” Foucault (1978a) is credited with the idea that sexuality is not an immutable, “natural” quality of human beings; rather, it is culturally and historically contingent, produced through language and discourse. Foucault asserted that the Victorian age was not defined by the sexual repression (which was to be lifted only by the sexual revolution of the 20th century) typically associated with it. Because he rejects the very notion of the essentialized quality, *sexuality*, there is nothing that can be repressed and then subsequently liberated at different periods of time. Instead, Foucault maintains that sexual *discourse*, dynamically influenced by time and place, incites potential for changes in human behavior, meaning and experience. As such, what contemporary Americans recognize and mark as sexuality “would be quite unrecognizable to people living in different civilizations” (Tiefer, 2004, p.17). For example, Foucault (1985) demonstrates the contingency of the contemporary identity markers of “homosexuality” and “bisexuality” as they impose modern Western meanings at the expense of the particular local meanings of that time.

While *sexuality* (as in, a capacity for sexual desire and expression, as opposed to identity, i.e., “sexual orientation”) is *of* sex, but is not sex, we can extrapolate from this constructionist/Foucaultian analysis that *sex*, that is, particular sex acts, are also constitutive and contingent as well. I am not the first to ask how an Oxford and Yale educated Rhodes Scholar could claim that he did not have sex with the intern that gave him a blow job. *That* this

claim was even available to him was due in part to the constructed nature of what constitutes sex. (The meaning is in the context of the aroused, perhaps?)

A queer re-visioning of sexuality rejects the modernist notion of a universalized “inner drive” in favor of a constructionist view of sexuality that is constituted in relationship, dialogically negotiated among people, and performative in nature. Further, it opens up the possibility that sexuality, as something produced through discourse, can resist specifications and regulating regimes, and be constructed in ways that are liberating rather than controlling. Warner (1999) notes that acts of resistance to sexual regulations change in response to the shifts in sexual culture, citing, for example, the women’s and the gay rights movements as liberatory projects that emerged out of different needs at different times. Further underscoring the constructed nature of sexuality, historical and anthropological inquires (e.g., Weeks, 1981; Ortner and Whitehead, 1981; Padgug, 1979) into sexuality since the constructionist turn have exposed the unstable and contingent quality of language and meaning, as well as the ever shifting attitudes that define a cultural moment (Tiefer, 2004).

To *not* address sex and sexual justice, then, would result in the commitment of several crimes against queer. Within a culture that breeds sexual shame, whose sexual curiosity is motivated by erotophobia rather than a celebration of pleasure (Warner, 1999) and which continues to legislate sexual morality, constructing a queer identity very much involves sex, albeit a sex founded on an ethic of justice, inclusivity and shared meaning, rather than sex shrouded in stigma and shame, embedded within the pervasive insidiousness of moralism. Claiming a queer identity informed by a queer political ethic is in part defined by taking a position on sex and sexual justice, creating a counter-hegemonic morality that stands in

resistance to the prevailing cultural interdiction against sex and the pleasures it affords. Thus, a chapter on sex is more than warranted when queer matters are at the fore.

Teach the children well

*“It was so scienc-y—like Star Wars—watching the sperm going into the egg”—Mateo,
Julie--Did it make you want to do it?*

Group-- “NOOOOO!!!!”

But de Vries is not only writing from her subject position as a queer person, she is also speaking as a youth. A search for “adolescent sex/sexuality,” “teen sex,” “gay youth sex,” “queer youth sex,” “psychotherapy/counseling, youth, sex,” and related terms on relevant databases does much to expose the dominating discourse that informs how we think and work with all youth around sexual matters. The overwhelming majority of search results are about “risk” factors, pregnancy, and sexual offenses. These results reveal the far-reaching influence of the cultural proscription against non-medicalized, non-pathologizing, educative and affirming conversations about youth sexuality. In addition, it points to the dearth of practical and sex-affirming material available to help clinicians assist queer youth in matters relating to sex.

Review of practice-based literature focused on clinical work with queer youth exposes the crucible of identity politics, homonormativity, and erotophobia where sex is seen as a risk to be “managed.” Practice-based texts take great pains to ensure that the hallmark of gay identity politics--the separation of sexual identity from sexual activities--is clear. For example, in *Nurturing Queer Youth: Family Therapy Transformed*, Fish and Harvey (2005) lament that because “sexual identity and sexual practice are falsely merged, identity is rarely explored in

family therapy practice” (p. 25). By taking up the discourse of “sexual identity” while disembodied it from erotic sexual practice (the discursive artifact of the reverse discourse that is the contemporary gay rights movement), these clinician-authors successfully reify erotophobic homonormativity and perpetuate the de-sexualization of queer youth. While this tactic may make queer youth safer and more accepted (acceptable?) through the process of “normalization,” it does so without addressing the lack of social and sexual justice in the broader context upon which such a maneuver relies. Where the authors do take up sexual practice, it is limited in discussion to inquiries about the gender of sexual partners. Nowhere is there discussion of pleasure or eroticism, much less an inclusive and affirming deliberation on the nitty-gritty of sex.

The index of the award-winning *Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling* (Ryan and Futterman 1998) is revealing as well. Reading past the several pages allotted to “sexual abuse and assault,” I am met with entries for “sexual history” (a bio-psycho-social risk assessment); “sexual intercourse” (sub-entries that follow: “early and unprotected; as HIV transmission route; postponing”; and “sexually transmitted diseases” [multiple sub-entries]). There is an entry for “sexual readiness assessment,” a half page of text coaching practitioners on how to counsel gay and lesbian youth to “postpone sexual activity” (p.84). There is no mention of pleasure or eroticism.

“You have no idea what a radical idea you are proposing, to incorporate talk of pleasure into sex education for youth,” states Emily Scribner-O’Pray, a 20+-year veteran of youthwork in Minneapolis with an emphasis on sexual health (personal communication, October 11, 2009). Scribner-O’Pray concurred that educational, medical, and psychotherapy literature about queer youth sexuality in the United States focuses entirely on sex as a risk factor.

“Pleasure and eroticism are strictly off—capital ‘O’, limits—capital ‘L’ when doing sex ed,” Scribner-O’Pray continued. “We are very scared of the idea of pleasure.” She stated that in individual meetings with a young person she would refer them to a book about sexual pleasure “if they ask a specific question and are already sexually active. I would never hold the book up in a class and say, ‘this is good—check it out!’” Scribner-O’Pray agreed that clinicians who are interested in taking up a more affirming position with queer youth would have to look outside of their professional bodies of literature. Such resources would be found in more progressive youth-centered youth work organizations.

Sex, then, where young people are concerned, is either a moral public health issue or invisible and to be avoided in the bulk of professional literature. Indeed, Rubin (1984) asserts that “sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent” while Levine (2002) underscores that this is even more so when sex involves youth. Perel (2006) provides some cultural context. Noting that it is a particularly American position to view sex as “deeply dangerous” (p.92) to young people, she contrasts this to the European perspective that sex is normal and healthy, a point that Scribner-O’Pray also highlighted during our interview. Evoking a queer ethos, Perel states that the European tradition holds that “sex is not a problem; being irresponsible about sex is” (p.92).

Thus, queer youth, doubly marked as “queer” and “youth,” have two prevailing discourses to contend with where the construction of identity meets sex and sexuality: homonormativity and erotophobia. As has been argued throughout, identity is a political matter. Where sexuality is so central to identity, the politics are amplified, for, as Rubin (1984) states, “sex is always political” (p. 267).

Rubin also highlights that there are historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated. In as much as the homonormative politics of today lobby for normalization through privatization and domesticity (e.g., gay marriage, commoditization of gay identity), I would argue that *queer* contests this invisibilized constitution of sex and sexuality, and that queer youth are on the forefront of this contestation by embodying a visible, politicized subject position that problematizes the regressive notions of de-eroticizing young people. With these arguments in support of the relevance of this chapter, I will proceed with a discussion of queer sexual politics, sex positivity, and implications for practice.

Shame-less Justice For All: From Sex Negativity to Sex Positivity

“In my lesbian experiences of sex it was given and taken like this commodity almost, this thing that could be given and taken. Like I’m having sex with you but I might like her and I might take it away from you and give it to her. Like this moveable thing that isn’t shared all the time. I think that queer makes it possible to start breaking that open.”—Courtney

Warner (1999) discusses the sexual shame that accompanies the reverse discourse that is the contemporary gay rights movement. Maintaining that gay culture is marked by shame (one need look no further than the ubiquitousness of the “Pride” metaphor in the gay community to discover the inherent double description), Warner (1999) states that desires are legitimated (i.e., free from shame) only when proven to be “immutable, natural, and innate” (p.9). This embrace of the essential gay identity (the reverse discourse) allowed gay activists to traffic in the moral economy of the culture by putting distance between their now naturalized

homosexual identity and the sexual behaviors previously deemed morally reprehensible. The prevailing moralistic discourses produce the belief that sex is only acceptable if “unlearned, prereflective, present before history, and isolated from the public circulation of culture” (Warner, 1999, p.9). In short, sex is made out to be a natural act: how you “do it” is because of who you “are.” That gays and lesbians have found more and more seats at the socio-political table is because of the increasing acceptance of this “fact” (bisexuals, however, often are forced to sit at the kids’ table for their challenge to the immutability clause). Being just like everyone else (i.e., heterosexuals) has meant to a fair degree, going sexually unmarked—just as heterosexuals do.

From a queer constructionist perspective this delimiting naturalization of sex is problematic. To begin with, sorting out the immutable from the mutable aspects of desire and sex serves a particular moral/political agenda. This meting out has resulted in societal acceptance and legal protection for some forms of desire and not others. The consequences on sexual justice of this are very real; although homosexual identities have gained cultural cachet, *this victory has happened on the backs of those whose desires and practices sit outside the margins of sexual normativity* (whether they identify as straight, gay, queer, or otherwise), creating a list of victimless crimes that consenting people can, and routinely do, commit. Gaining liberation at the expense of those furthest from the societal center (indeed, contributing to the production and construction of that center!) is no kind of liberation. In order to become “normal” a deviant contingency must be articulated. Warner (1999) is unequivocal in stating that the refusal to vilify and renounce “sex or...people who have it... (is) the tacit or explicit ethos...of queer culture” and serves as “the antithesis of identity politics” (p.75). Noting that it is difficult “to assert any dignity when you stand exposed as a sexual being” (p.21), Warner’s

critique implies that, while “gay” may seek the protection that homonormativity offers, “queer” puts right out there the sexual being-ness of those that claim it.

Upon whose backs have post-Stonewall, homonormative gays benefited? By embracing a naturalized identity, thus securing access to the ranks of “normal,” who has been disqualified, pathologized, and made to be “un-normal” as the necessary contingent against which this normal may stand?

Rubin (1984) addresses this in *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*. In this oft-cited, seminal work, Rubin identifies a “sexual hierarchy” that privileges marital, reproductive, heterosexual sex and that pathologizes other sexual practices as abnormal, inferior, shameful. She also notes that there is a special stigma surrounding masturbation that, despite the increase of sexual health education campaigns, persists. This special seat of shame is worth noting for those that work with queer youth; masturbation is often the first, if not temporarily the only, available sexual practice for young people. Unearned privilege is conferred about those engaged in practices that fall within “the charmed circle.” The charmed circle embraces “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” (p.281) and includes practices such as:

- Heterosexual sex
- Performed within marriage
- Monogamous
- Procreative
- Non-commercial
- In pairs
- In a relationship

- Same generation
- In private
- No pornography
- Bodies only
- Vanilla

Outside the charmed circle, taking up residence on the “outer limits,” Rubin locates the sexual activities that she identifies as “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality”:

- Homosexual
- Unmarried
- Promiscuous
- Non-procreative
- Commercial
- Alone or in groups
- Casual
- Cross-generational
- In public
- Pornography
- With manufactured objects
- Sadomasochistic

All of this adds up to what Rubin calls sex negativity.

Given the alarmist and protectionist cultural attitude taken toward the idea of youth sexual activity, adding “sex while young” to the compendium of taboos hardly proves to be a stretch. This deeply entrenched attitude is most apparent in two institutions that wield great

authority in the lives of young people: the law and education. The law not only dictates when someone is old enough to consent to sexual activity, it also does not hesitate to criminalize and punish what most experts on child and adolescent health deem to be normal, natural, and healthy sexual exploration (Levine, 2002). As for education, sex education, as previously discussed, has been an anatomy lesson embedded within a Puritanism that considers “comprehensive sex education...a danger to moral development (Tiefer, 2004). Education focused on “prevention” (of pregnancy, HIV and STIs and of sexual activity itself) exposes the fundamental societal belief that teen sexuality is deviant behavior (Perel, 2006) and by extension, that sexually active teens are deviants. And that’s even if you’re not queer.

Rubin compares these “hierarchies of sexual value” to other systems of injustice and oppression, noting how all such systems serve to justify the welfare, rights, and happiness of the privileged while rationalizing the hardships of the underclass, in this case, the “sexual rabble” (p. 280). What’s in and what’s out is not a fixed, permanent target, however. Sexual practices previously solidly located in the bad “outer limits” have gained social sanction, albeit, not without conflict. Homonormative gays and lesbians, for example, benefit from the embrace of a lifestyle that reflects the repudiation of sexual freedom for a sanitized and privatized version situated within neo-liberal capitalist domesticity---straight-looking gay relationships. This is not at all to say that homophobia, heterosexism and their most violent iterations are not alive and real; rather, it is to point out that what is also real, is the increased acceptance, legal recognition and protection, and increased economic mobility of gays that embrace a more normative identity *at the expense of queers and sexual outlaws that don’t*.

Moreover, the signature middle class lifestyle of contemporary gay life is marked by whiteness and driven by the ability to participate in the throwaway consumer culture. As gays

gain further societal acceptance—in part by distancing themselves from their deviant sex acts—this acceptance is typically reliant on unearned privileges from other social realms, such as race, class, ability, nation, and age (Jindal, 2008; Munoz, 1999; Sycamore, 2008). The intersection of these other critical markers of social location with a gay identity often renders a person doubly queer, as they fail to meet societal measures of normativity in two (or more) identity areas. (For a more thorough analysis of intersectionality and analysis from a queer people of color perspective, the reader is referred to Sycamore, 2008.)

In resistance to the erotophobia and injustice of sex negativity, Rubin calls for “a radical theory of sex” (p. 275) which is founded on a constructionist alternative to essentialist accounts of sex. Through this lens, sex is understood to be historically and culturally contingent and constituted through relationship rather than biologically determined. Biology is a requisite aspect of human sexuality, but while necessary it is not sufficient. The body, Rubin asserts, is never unmediated by culture.

The move from an essentialist position of sex negativity to a constructionist embrace of sex positivity advocates for a sexual morality that “judge(s) sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide” (Rubin, 1984, p.283). Such a relational ethic stands in stark contrast to the “sexual stratification and erotic persecution” (p.288) legislated and enforced by the state, a level of governmental involvement Rubin states would not be tolerated in other domains of private life. But perhaps the most striking shift from sex negativity to sex positivity is found in the re-working of our understanding of and approach to children’s and youth’s sexuality.

Dirty Dialogics: Sex Positivity in Practice

“I’m a trusting person when it comes to professionals, so when I brought it up to him I realized a lot of people dislike trans people...That was a big eye opener for me that professionals aren’t necessarily professionals.”—Mateo

Like the flight attendant who admonishes passengers to administer to their own safety before helping others³⁴, practicing sex positivity in work with queer youth requires taking up a reflexive position about one’s own attitudes toward sex more than it is about doing something in a specific way. The ethical and theoretical shift incumbent with a sex positive platform will lead to a re-positioning with young queer clients that, by definition, makes room for discussion of sex and pleasure. Just as taking up (or not) a constructionist, dialogical approach is a political, ethical choice, so is embracing (or not) a sex positive approach. A sex positive platform acknowledges that all sex is constructed, be it sex that is legitimated or sex that is pathologized or criminalized (Rubin, 1984).

What does this positioning look like in practice? First and foremost, a sex positive practitioner, by definition, responds unfazed by, yet respectfully curious about, matters of sex. On more than one occasion, queer youth have told me that engaging with their thoughts and questions about sex without hesitation or judgment has been a difference maker for them. Sadly, many speak of experiences with professionals in which they felt at best ignored and at worst, exoticized or judged.

³⁴ I credit Ken Hardy with introducing some 15 years ago the flight attendant metaphor as a way to talk about therapists needing to address their own reactions to difficult material before doing so with clients.

Taking up this position of engaged, respectful curiosity is central to a queer, constructionist relational ethic. It is a stance that facilitates the creation of a discursive space that can consider anything that enters it by utilizing a variety of conversational resources. Practice informed by queer theory and social construction is a performance of these conversational resources.

These resources include the following:

- **Self-Reflexive practice:** In traditional family therapy terms, this would be considered part of “self-of-the-therapist” work, and involves a situated examination of one’s own ideas, values, attitudes, feelings, etc. about sex, youth sex, queer youth sex, and related concerns. This examination can involve deconstruction, discourse analysis, and meaning making around the general question of “what’s going on with me?” Some more specific questions one might consider include:
 - *How do my reactions to/attitudes about queer youth sex reflect my cultural and professional training?*
 - *What discourses are influencing my attitudes?*
 - *What have been some of the messages about queer youth and sex that I have received from the media/pop culture, my culture and religion, my professional training, my family, etc.?*
 - *What values and relational ethic do my attitudes seem to be in support of? Is this the ethic that I want to embrace? Why or why not?*
- **Relational-reflexivity:** This is an accountability practice that involves engaging clients directly, sincerely, and consistently throughout each therapeutic conversation by asking them:

- *How is this conversation going for you?*
 - *Are we talking about what you want to talk about?*
 - *How is it making a difference for you, what are you taking from it?*
 - *Is there something we haven't talked about that you'd like to, something I haven't asked about that you wish I would?*
 - *What can we do to make this conversation more meaningful, productive, or useful for you?*
- **Focus on possibility and meaning-making rather than certainty:** Invite reflection rather than certitude by embracing rather than “fixing” uncertainty. Also, allow for the flexibility of uncertainty where options have previously been limited. Uncertainty is full of potential as it assists us in unhinging the specifications of prevailing discourses. Discourses such as patriarchy and empiricism privilege decisiveness, essentialism, and universal truth claims. Understood within these discursive contexts, uncertainty can be a vehicle for a proliferation of possible meanings. In regards to conversations about sex and sexuality, making and keeping a discursive space of flexibility is especially important as it facilitates an inclusive and affirming position, as opposed to one of judgment and shame.
 - **Situated understanding of individual narratives:** Remember that all individual narratives all located within the discursive context of larger cultural narratives. Ignoring the influences of cultural narratives on peoples' stories decontextualizes their lives, thus rendering significantly different meanings about their lived experiences, meanings that can lead to thin conclusions. Further, such disconnect from cultural narratives runs the risk of privatizing social problems, an act that

would be particularly problematic with a marginalized group such as queer youth and in regards to a culturally proscribed topic such as sex.

- **Multiple perspectives:** Invite a multiplicity of perspectives (polyvocality) to encourage a diversity of understandings. These perspectives can include family (however that is constituted), friends, mentors, people real or imagined, dead or alive. Entertaining multiple perspectives is another way to invite possibilities, and challenge specifications. Further, by inviting meaningful and appreciative others into the conversation (either physically or conversationally through the use of the imaginary), sex can be discussed openly in liberatory ways.
- **Storied embodiment of experience:** Be sure to invite stories and not simply “facts” so that peoples’ accounts of themselves are rich, situated, and contextualized. In conversations about sex, it will be important to do this with sophistication and sensitivity so as to avoid a voyeuristic quality. Asking about meanings, reflections, preferences, and hopes facilitates stories that can be told with dignity and heard with respect.
- **Attention to temporal dimension:** Facilitate conversations that travel fluidly through past, present, and future (imaginary) temporal domains, and that seek to locate and articulate how new meanings, preferences, or actions have taken (or may take) place across time. Youth’s desires and the meanings they make of them can change and *that* they change may be as significant as the stuff of the change.

These conversational resources serve as practices that reflect the ethic of sex positivity and the theoretical tenets of queer theory and social construction. They are practices that are

not limited to conversations about sex, however. Indeed, they are practices that can serve to arouse interest, whet relational appetites, and satisfy the conversational desires regardless of the topic. It's not what you talk about; it's what you do with the talk.

Reflections on Chapter 5 by Sarah Dack & Courtney Slobogian

In this section you say, “Thus, queer youth, doubly marked as ‘queer’ and ‘youth,’ have two prevailing discourses to contend with where the construction of identity meets sex and sexuality: homonormativity and erotophobia. As has been argued throughout, identity is a political matter. Where sexuality is so central to identity, the politics are amplified, for, as Rubin (1984) states, ‘sex is always political’ (p. 267).” After reading this quote we began to discuss the different ways we find our queer identity intersecting with our political identities and notions of desire. Desire exists within a grey area, where it can be political but also tactile. The idea of desire and pleasure existing in relation to politics needs to be considered as a moveable construction that can exist dialectically and simultaneously within overlapping spaces. One of the things the two of us are most interested in is exploring the connections between desire, theory and sexuality. This is based on our experience as queer youth engaged with theory concerned with sexuality and identity politics.

One of the spaces that we find resistance to this culture of ‘erotophobia’ is in our ability to find pleasure and desire within theory. For example, we can’t count on our hands how often we’ve engaged in a conversation laden with desirable excitement when talking about theorists or theoretical concepts we’ve come to know through our experiences in gender studies. This experience highlights the interaction between our queer identity, political identity and desire, which to us creates a space or energy that is neither strictly political, academic or erotic. This energy created in theoretical conversations translates into a particular kind of desire, one

specific to the experience of looking up during a seminar presentation to be met with the exceptionally flirty eyes of the girl sitting across the room.

This gaze and point of erotic connection can be experienced as implicitly different than the kind of connection you might make looking across the bar at someone and experiencing desire in that context. The difference exists within the experience of valuing someone's ideas, politics and identity in a more multi-faceted way than the exchange that happens at a gay bar. Your point of connection at a bar can often be based on assumed similar experience of identity. This may be a one dimensional assumption about identification based on physical attraction and shared space. The first exchange we name is more about desire engaging with identity in a cohesive and complicated way. Our point in discussing this is to draw attention to the fact that desire is not separate from politics but can engage with politics in many different ways outside of being distinctly linked to identity.

Chapter 6:

iQueer: Pop Culture's Shaping of Identity/Youth's Queering of Media Texts

Introduction to inquiry process for chapter 6

A different inquiry process was used for chapter six. At the time of this writing, Sarah was completing her undergraduate degree in gender and women's studies. She has an infectious interest in pop culture. Sarah's expertise in this area was publicly acknowledged when she was the recipient of the 2009 Canadian Women Studies Association's Undergraduate Essay Prize. Sarah's paper, *Dancing with Ellen: Queer Moments and Acceptable Queer Aesthetic*, involved a queer theory analysis of "queer moments" in the popular talk show, *Ellen*.

For the purposes of this chapter, the team and I structured the inquiry in two stages: first, Sarah and I had a conversation about her interest in and experiences with pop culture, both as a queer youth consumer and as an emerging gender studies scholar; second, we opened up the inquiry conversation for all of the participants to respond to the first conversation and generate further reflections on their engagement with pop culture. This structuring provided a unique scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1986) of the conversation, as Sarah's knowledge of media analysis and her relationships with the other participants provided a bridge between discursive spaces that supported reflection and the accessing of their own insider knowledges about pop culture.

Section 1.0: I am what I own

“I take a lot of inspiration and expressing my queerness through fashion and media... It’s a creative outlet. I love to shock people.”—Ruben

As I write this, I am typing on my Mac laptop, keyboard illuminated by a desk lamp with Apple, Incorporated’s logo affixed to the lamp’s base. (You wouldn’t catch me owning a PC in a million years. Eww.) I am comfortable in my hoodie and vintage ringer T-shirt, feet warm in the silly Simpsons sox I was gifted. (My students think the shirt is cool.) The Americano I picked up on the way home from the anarchist-run coffee shop is about gone now, having spilled a few ounces as I hip-checked closed the door to my MINI Cooper. (Who WAS I before I had this car???) My cats, Presto and Juno (named respectively, for the Pixar short that accompanied WALL-E and the film starring Ellen Page) begin tearing the cover of the latest issue of Rolling Stone that I left on the floor. Ushering them out of the room, I close the door to keep out the sound of the TV from distracting me. (Damn! She’s watching Ellen. I never have time to watch that anymore.) I close Skype so I’m not distracted by anyone looking to visit me while I try to work. (I’ve kept Facebook open, knowing that the possibility that someone may pop up in a chat box is pretty good.) I clear the clutter from my desk: iPod, cell phone, and drawings of ideas for my next tattoo. (It’s been over a year since I had new ink...I’m itching for ink!) I was right. My next-door neighbor opens a chat box and wants to know if we want to come over tomorrow night, order take-out and watch Glee with them. (Wouldn’t miss it.)

Section 2.0-- Don't shoot your TV—OR--Why this stuff (material) matters

“I feel very close and personal to my music. When I share it with people and they don't enjoy it, it can feel very offensive. I feel like that's a very close thing to me and if you don't like that, then, do you like me?”—Dylan

Popular and media culture have assumed hegemonic status in contemporary North American society (Nylund, 2007; Tilsen & Nylund, 2009). Therapists and counselor educators Monk, Winslade & Sinclair (2008) argue that media culture is “perhaps the most powerful cultural force shaping cultural identity today” (p.243). Consequently, any treatment of identity and therapeutic practice would be remiss in the failure to consider the influence—both problematic and productive—of popular culture in peoples' lives. In this chapter, I am not taking up the project of critiquing specific popular culture representations from a queer theory perspective³⁵; rather, my focus is on 1) discussing the significance of pop culture to identity construction; 2) introducing cultural studies methods as a theoretical ally to queer theory and narrative therapy practice (Nylund, 2007); and, 3) exploring ways in which pop culture has influenced the lives of my research partners and how these youth influence the texts by “queering” them.

Television, YouTube, social networking sites (e.g., MySpace and Facebook), film, fashion, music, print media, electronic must-haves, and advertisements flood us with multiple ideas about what to buy and who to be. As Gauntlett (2008) opines, “it is highly unlikely that these ideas would have no impact on our own sense of identity” (p. 1). Barker (2000) is less

³⁵ Excellent critical applications toward this end include: Battles & Hilton-Morrow (2002); Manuel, (2009); and Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, (2006). Gauntlett's (2008) *Media, Gender & Identity* and his website (theory.org.uk) provide helpful and accessible introductions to the study of media and identity.

tentative, asserting that the industries that produce and disseminate culture provide the very stuff that individuals use to construct identities. The dominance of the culture industries³⁶ creates a world that is saturated by corporate-sponsored messages, both implicit and explicit. Thus, people's notions about their identities become entangled with these very messages. Dimensions of identity such as gender, race, class, nationality, sexuality and ethnicity do not escape the influence of popular culture (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009). Indeed, Monk, et al. suggest that--for contemporary youth--the messages and values of mass media culture have eclipsed those traditionally provided by families and cultural communities. This observation points to the growing prominence of horizontal culture (circulated by peer groups) and the waning influence of vertical culture (passed on through multiple family generations)³⁷. These powerfully ubiquitous messages often persuade individuals to adopt some of the values and practices promoted by popular culture as people come to identify with the dominant discourses both reflected in and produced by it (Miller, 2001). Examples of these discourses include:

- Capitalism/Consumerism
- Beauty/body specifications
- Patriarchy
- Hegemonic masculinity
- Whiteness
- Ableism
- Heteronormativity

Queer youth, embedded within the dominant culture, have all of these discourses to contend with, just as people from other social locations do. Increasingly, they are also faced

³⁶ Horkheimer & Adorno (1979) introduced "culture industry" to refer to mass media.

³⁷ The notion of vertical and horizontal culture was introduced by Maalouf (2000).

with popular culture's propagation of homonormative messages and images. For example, shows such as *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, *Will and Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* appear to challenge heteronormative discourses by bringing gay men and lesbians into people's living rooms without limiting them to their traditional roles of comic relief, sexual psychopath, or social misfit. Gay and lesbian characters occupy starring roles and in some shows, they are permitted to be in sexual relationships. Yet, by relying on tired stereotypes, presenting an overwhelmingly white, middle class, consumption-oriented image of "queer" people, and maintaining the status quo of the homo/hetero binary, ultimately, these shows are in service of heteronormativity and homonormativity. In fact, from the queer perspective presented and argued for in this dissertation, calling these shows and their characters "queer" is a misnomer, as the representations are anchored within the normative systems of apolitical domesticity and consumption that Duggan (2003) defined as homonormativity.

Given the pervasive influence that media and popular culture maintain in peoples' lives and its constitutive power in the construction of identity, I am interested in exploring how queer youth experience pop culture's presence in their lives, as well as how they mediate those effects in order to reach preferred meanings.

Section 3.0-- Meaning, Inc.: A cultural studies-informed practice

"I think it's super harmful when you don't analyze pop culture."—Ruben

The relationship consumers have with the culture industries has changed as technology (both a driving force and central product of popular culture) has changed. This is especially true for young people, who interact with technology like no generation before (Gauntlett,

2008). This change is primarily organized around the shift from *audience* to *user* or *participant*, although Gauntlett smartly suggests that the notion of audience now “incorporates a level of interactivity” (p.2).

The defining question about this interactivity centers around power and influence: Does pop culture wield unchallenged influence over people or do people ultimately maintain power over the texts it produces? The former position is best articulated by Horkheimer & Adorno (1979) and Adorno (1991) who argue that the culture industries exert ultimate power over people who remain passive in their uncritical consumption of mass-produced images. The latter argument is represented by Fiske (1989a; 1989b) who asserts that popular culture is not only something consumed by people, but that they also produce it. That is, the audience, in its interactive capacity, holds the power of interpretation. It is this interpretive agency *situated within a person's relationship with media texts* that undergirds the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. It is this process of situated activity that I am interested in within the scope of my inquiry as well as in my work as a therapist and youthworker.

Fiske argues that, because people construct individual, fluid meanings about the cultural texts they interact with, a homogenous constituency—“the consumers”—is not meaningful. Rather, people interact with these texts as they do with many things in their lives: in complex, dynamic ways that reflect the uniqueness and multiplicity of their identities and the social locations they occupy. Consequently, while artifacts of pop culture may contain a text (or texts) intended by their original producers, they “also offer possibilities for consumers to create their own alternative or resistant readings” (Gauntlett, 2008. p. 28). Hall (1997)—upon whose work Fiske's has expanded—also points to the connection between representations (cultural products) and audiences (meanings made) by theorizing “identity as constituted, not

outside, but within representation” (p.58). Proposing that popular culture provides the materials from which we may construct our identities, Hall suggests that in doing so we may recreate ourselves in multiple and new ways, thus occupying new positions “from which to speak” (1997, p. 58). This speaking can even include a resistant voice to the influence of mass media and consumer culture, one that I hope to invite into therapeutic conversations as an ally for clients’ preferred selves.

In what ways does the field of cultural studies provide resources for creating these kinds of conversations with young people? As a critical field of inquiry informed by multicultural and constructionist ideas, cultural studies provides a conceptual framework for reading media texts from a variety of perspectives (Kellner, 1995). Of particular interest is developing media literacy skills to shed light on how dominant values and power relations are encoded within the texts of pop culture. Illumination of these prevailing discourses and the ways in which the culture industries work to manipulate consumers “can empower individuals to negotiate the dominant meanings in media cultural products and to produce their own meanings” (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009, p. 7).

Thus, critique, contradiction, and resistance may be developed and leveraged toward pursuit of a more critical and intentional relationship with media culture. This “reading against the grain” allows people to negotiate their own meanings for their own purposes. For example, the production and wearing of clothes specifically marketed to young African-American men may be read as a way to contest white, middle-class values of appropriateness by constructing identity through fashion and economic solidarity. Another example includes young queers who perform gender representations in ways that contest compulsory heteronormativity through fashion and body art. In both examples, the fashion industry—a cultural site heavy with texts

reinforcing white, middle-class, heteronormative consumer values—is used as a way to challenge dominant texts and produce situated counter-texts that account for power relations by seeing political agency in the consumer-audience. These counter-texts become visible when we assume the cultural studies perspective that media texts are polysemic.

Specifically, cultural studies involve analysis in three domains of popular textual production (Ang, 1996). These texts include: “political economy,” an analysis of the production and distribution of popular culture; textual analysis of the messages encoded within media texts; and, the meanings that audiences make of the popular culture texts (researched with audience reception studies). As areas of inquiry within a dialogically responsive therapeutic conversation, these three domains are meant to be suggestions to help conceptually shape the conversation. There is no “formula” for asking them in a particular order. What is asked, when it is asked, and how it is asked about (if it is asked at all) relies on the situated activity that is the therapeutic conversation. Because these areas of analysis facilitate exposure of the influence of dominant values, encourage a Foucauldian view of power relations, and focus on issues of identity and representation, they serve as theoretical allies to queer theory and narrative therapy (Nylund, 2007).³⁸

In practice, for example, I may work with queer youth grappling with homonormative images by asking them questions such as the following to conduct an investigation of political economy:

- *Who do you imagine is responsible for creating these images of happy heterosexual couples?*

³⁸ Doty’s (1993) *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* is an example of utilizing a queer cultural studies methodology with popular culture texts.

- *What companies own the TV shows that depict gays and lesbians within the male/female, homo/hetero binaries?*
- *If you were a consultant to these companies what kinds of changes in these images would you advise?*

Of course, youth are not likely to know (off the top of their heads) who owns the production company for *Grey's Anatomy*, for example. That is not entirely the point of this line of inquiry. While this kind of conversation often does inspire youth to research these things, the idea in the moment is to open space for the consideration that the images consumed reflect particular values and, importantly, that as a consumer, one can exercise agency over those values.

Textual analysis comprises the second focus of a cultural-studies informed practice. Examples of questions that invite discussion about the values and messages encoded within media texts may include:

- *What kinds of relationships seem to be approved of or celebrated in these ads?*
- *According to this film how many ways are there to be a man or a woman?*
- *What are the rules of manhood and womanhood that one must follow?*
- *What do these shows imply about who you are and how you prefer to be?*

Again, these questions serve simply as abstract examples, disembodied from the people and the conversational context that gives them meaning, purpose, and traction toward a generative line of inquiry. Finally, possible questions to open discursive space for individual meaning-making and potential transgressive readings of media texts include:

- *Despite these homonormative messages, what is it about the show that you like?*
What keeps you watching?

- *Have you inserted yourself into the story or otherwise come up with some different versions of the story?*³⁹
- *What are some experiences in your life that may influence how you think about this?*
- *What are some things you've learned from the characters in this book?*

Examples in the practice literature of therapists exploring clients' relationships with pop culture include: Nylund's (2007) account of a gay 17-year-old who sought anti-homophobic inspiration and support from *Harry Potter*; Tilsen & Nylund (2009) who provide accounts of therapeutic conversations with children and teens interacting with violent video games, tattoos, and again, *Harry Potter*; Boucher's (2003) examination of the meaning of tattoos; Sullivan's (2008) work utilizing comic strips with young children experiencing night terrors; and Rubin (2008) who explores popular culture as a therapeutic resource for self-expression.

Section 3.1: Consumer Advisory: Explicit Corporate Blatancy

"What do you do with that experience of not feeling yourself represented? A lot of that can be unhealthy, self-destructive behaviors. Courtney

Engaging with queer youth in conversations about their relationship with the culture industries is not meant to be tacit approval of every product sold to and consumed by young people. Nor is it meant to suggest that consumers are immune to the pressures and values of Madison Avenue. Hall (1980) urges caution against over estimating consumers' capacity for

³⁹ "Textual poaching" is an active reading of mass media texts, sometimes by inserting oneself into the text, that allows for individual and fluid interpretation. This practice invites subversive interpretations and opens space for counter-hegemonic practices, although all alternative readings are not automatically transgressive of or resistant to dominant ideologies.

resistant meaning making in the face of the powerful capitalist machine. Indeed, I hold great concern about the targeting of youth as a special market, about the values of violence, consumption, and competition that are pervasive in mass media, and about the racialized, gendered, and sexualized qualities of popular culture products and images.

But what I am most concerned about (and where I feel I can have immediate, day-to-day, conversation-to-conversation impact in youths' lives) is the binary construction of the typical discourse around popular culture. One response is a moral panic that implies that youth are hollow dupes "incapable of negotiating meaning, lacking the capacity for critical discernment, and destined to be forever negatively affected by the things they consume" (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009, p.5). This panic is largely the result of traditional "effects" studies of media influence on young consumers. These studies, critiqued by Gauntlett (2008) for imposing deterministic and universalized conclusions and utilizing simplistic, linear research designs, isolate a single media text (e.g., song lyric) and conclude that it is harmful to all young people irrespective of contextual and individual factors. The second common response is a "kids will be kids" position that is dismissive of youth's interests and critical capacity while also rendering adults as uninterested, unengaged, and unaccountable in their relationships with youth. I do not believe these are the whole stories, or the only stories, about youth, the adults in their lives, and their relationships with popular culture.

As a therapist, I remain firm that "*not condemning something is not the same as endorsing it*" (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009, p.5, italics in original). In order to invite individuals into conversations where they may think critically and consider new possibilities, I attempt to embrace the complexities presented by acknowledging both the problematic and productive potentials of youth's engagement with popular culture. Social construction, queer theory, and

cultural studies together provide a conceptual footing and relational positioning that allows for the contradictions, complexities, and possibilities posed by queer youth's engagement with popular culture. As I've said in the past: *Break binaries, not TVs.*

Section 4.0: And now for something from our sponsors: Reflections on Chapter 6 by Sarah Dack & Courtney Slobogian

"Because Queer as Folk chose to use the word queer instead of gay it gave 'queer' a particular meaning within a popular culture context, which in turn reaches more people and which in turn gives more people an idea of what they think queer should mean, which ultimately, is just playing up on a bunch of gay men stereotypes and not at all about what we're talking about queer is to be."--Courtney

We can agree that it could be an important therapeutic practice to critically think about popculture in relation to queer youth identity construction. We appreciate the articulation of the dialectical relationship between media and audience as a way of giving agency to queer youth as consumers of pop culture.

One of the things we've held onto after reading this chapter is the way that in western media and society the body has come to stand in as somewhat of a surrogate for certain aspects of identity, as described by Julie in the introduction to this chapter. The idea that consumption of media/products can come to represent identity and queerness creates space for intention. Once we recognize that our bodies are being seen as a site of representation for certain aspects of our identity we can take control of that representation and begin to consciously shape it in ways that resist hegemonic norms. This process of using our bodies to queer media representation will be an ongoing endeavor as media continues to be informed by the ways we

attempt to queer it; it's a completely dialectical relationship, one in which we maintain the ability to resist norms and shape representation.

Participating in this work has helped us to realize that to a certain degree our "critical lenses" are intensely steeped in academia. What this means is that we have to work at pulling things apart in a different way. In a sense, we're working our way back from the centre. We're constantly working at seeing the value in popular media themes outside of that theoretical lens because we can take it to a certain point where it's impossible to enjoy consuming pop culture. There is a space to inhabit where our critical lens still allows us to access pop culture in a manageable way. We have both started to move in a direction where we are becoming more able to engage with pop culture in an enjoyable way without feeling like we are necessarily compromising our critical understandings of it. Nothing articulates this point more clearly than the fact that we have both recently opened Twitter accounts so as to be able to follow Justin Bieber. This activity was propelled by the discovery of a blog entitled "Lesbians Who Look Like Justin Bieber." This example articulates the experience of finding ways to navigate things as they are and being able to find pleasure in them without constantly feeling the need to defend or resist as though our lives (identities?) depended upon it.

Having the awareness that there is an expectation that our engagement and involvement in pop culture does say something to those around us about our identities means that we're never quite able to completely enjoy something without considering how it contributes to the construction of our identity. Despite the fact that we look like excited 14 year olds when we spot Justin Bieber on the front of a People magazine in Safeway, we can still explain to you the radical notion of being interested in a 16 year old pop singer who embodies some sort of queer female sensibility...whether he intends it or not.

Chapter 7:

Resisting Conclusions: Performing an Ethic of Praxis and Humility

Sarah---If you're really invested in your identity as a lesbian woman and you're listening to someone talk about being queer... I feel like that's where you have to be good at what you do or you could really fuck someone up.

Julie--Yeah. So, a therapist could be really organized around and be anchored in a lesbian identity and it may or may not be a problem, it's if they're good at what they do?

Sarah—Totally, that's what it comes down to. It's about practice. You could be equally invested in the categories gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender as a straight person just because it would be easy for you to understand, so I feel like it would be more about practice than the way they personally identify and about your understanding of identity categories and what it means...it always destabilizes what you believe about yourself.

Courtney—I imagine as a therapist you have to stay pretty up on your self-work.

Breaking the right/wrong binary

After ten hours of queer talk with the q-squad, what am I walking away with? What has the talking and the writing left me with that I didn't have before? I began this project resolute in my position that this was very much *not* about finding and subsequently recommending “answers” for doing responsive, respectful work with queer youth (indeed, this entire dissertation should serve as a polemic against such exercise of expertise). This position has

been confirmed and fortified through my conversations with Sarah, Dylan, Ruben, Mateo, and Courtney. Time and time again they reminded me, explicitly or implicitly, that not only is the map of their identities not yet drawn up, but the territory is often yet to be created as well. When it is, it's likely to look quite different youth to youth, and even then, the map has been written in pencil as it's bound to shift and change. As long as I stay close to the experiences of those I consult and cast a critical eye toward the products of modern psychology that pass as universal truths (e.g., models of identity development, prescriptive stages for coming out, treatment strategies and techniques, insistence on a stable constitution of self), I will have the opportunity to witness and participate in the creation of meaningful possibilities.

Indeed, if there is one thing that shouts out from nearly every one of the 150-something pages of transcript, it's that there is no "right" answer, no definitive conclusions to be drawn. But that doesn't mean it's not possible to get it wrong. Every member of the q-squad had some story to tell of someone—whether a clinician, family member, friend, acquaintance, or lover—who got it wrong by making assumptions, insisting that they were something they were not, ignoring a critical dimension of identity, or reductively totalizing them around another. These acts, ranging from annoying imposition to spiritual violence, were committed by people irrespective of their gender or sexual identity. We all experience having assumptions made about and aspects of our identities ignored. It is important to acknowledge when working with queer youth that they walk in a discursive world of wrong assumptions and blind disregard. The courage, integrity, humor, and grace that the q-squad members displayed in resistance to the effects of these wrongs are both humbling and inspiring.

How can we minimize the chance of doing wrong without trying to be right? One possibility can be found in the relationship of the two discursive frames expounded in this

dissertation: insider knowledges and academic literacies. I entered this project interested in exploring the relationship between these two frames. How do queer youth live the ideas articulated in queer theory? In what ways is queer theory brought to life and made more real and accessible by these lives? Throughout my conversations with the q-squad, I took note of the recursive and productive relationship between queer theory and their lived experiences. This, I believe, can serve as a relational/ethical resource for practice that can help guide us away from wrong and right and toward the productive generation of meaning. By engaging reflexively with both theory and lived experiences (ours and our clients') we move toward Freire's (1999) notion of *praxis*--action and reflection for the purpose of transforming the world. In practice, this involves constant personal reflection in an effort to deconstruct discourses and situate contextually what influences our ideas and informs our actions. It also involves asking questions of clients that allow them to do the same. This process of reflection informs what we *do*—how and what we talk about and what actions come from this talk. Moving from talk to action is a critical aspect of praxis and crucial to the larger project of social justice.

And if we need any inspiration, anyone to blaze the trail of praxis toward a queerly responsive, socially just practice of conversation and reflection, theory and action, we need look no further than the Q-squad. In the final meeting of the Q-squad, evidence that the inquiry process had invited the members to engage in praxis was present in many ways. Members of the team were identifying not only ways they were thinking and talking about things differently, but also ways in which these differences were taking shape as action within their relationships and community involvement. Below are excerpts from this conversation:

- *Ruben—I want to say that the talking about this stuff has been really great and really fulfilling. It's really sad that it's our last gathering. Mateo and I are actually working on releasing an art-heavy queer culture zine for Winnipeg's queer community.*

Julie--Cool! I'm wondering, what things from these conversations and your experience here, Ruben, may be something you see as contributing to this project, or maybe something you might want to carry forward to your zine?

Ruben—I don't think we would've created a queer, art-heavy zine. Whenever I would leave one of these things I'd feel really fulfilled and my creative juices were flowing and I'd go write things down. This will be great for the project.

- Julie--What are some other ways people feel like they'll be taking this with them, or what you'd like to do having had this experience?

Dylan—Now when I come across someone who feels like they aren't so sure where their sexual orientation may be leaning towards, I like to give them ideas or explain a little about queer theory so that they can have an idea of what's out there...I think for me I've become more inquisitive of people.

Sarah—I feel like for me something I'm going to take away...knowing that it makes a difference to intentionally create space to hear other people's opinions and not assume.

Recursion not only occurs in the mutual influence between theory and lived experience, or reflection and action; it also occurs in the mutual influence between therapist and client.

hooks (1994) writes about this mutuality within liberatory education and I find it a compelling notion, one quite compatible with the philosophical and ethical positions of social construction and narrative practice. A notion which, when cast against the backdrop of the prevailing discourses that dictate professional behavior and practices, is rather queer in its resistance to authority and in its emergent, constitutive qualities.

Central to this commitment to reflexivity and mutuality is humility. By this I don't mean shame, timidity, or self-abasement; rather, a practice of humility is marked by a lack of pretense and the firm belief that I know no more than others. Humility allows me to allow those I work with to bring their knowledges to our conversations. It keeps me out of the way, yet it doesn't render me out of the process. In fact, without humility, I would not be able to engage in the practices discussed throughout this work: asking questions from a position of curiosity, avoiding assessment or judgment, being ready to be surprised, all require the humility to be open to possibilities that I have yet to consider. As the inquiry process unfolded over time, I felt my humility increasing as I experienced the uncommon wisdom of the team. At times, I struggled to keep humility close as I entertained ideas about the need to control the process more. When this happened, the conversation tended to be less generative and engaging. A lesson in humility to be sure.⁴⁰

Questions, questions, still more questions

After ten hours of queer talk, what's left to ask? The q-squad inquiry meetings (the Queer Summit?) were ended because I needed to put a wrap on this dissertation, not because

⁴⁰ Interestingly, one criticism of the embrace of humility as a virtue comes from Nietzsche who saw humility as a weakness in part because it was incompatible with his privileging of individualism.

we were tired of meeting and found ourselves staring at our toes with nothing to say. Indeed, there continued to be much energy and interest in talking, and as previously noted, the team members experienced the talking as both generative and invigorating, with each conversation inspiring the desire for more.

For me, there are a few specific areas that I would be interested in further inquiry. Also, as I have attempted to do in this dissertation, I would like to see the body of scholarship generated within queer theory, women and gender studies, cultural studies, and other interdisciplinary areas made more available as theoretical resources to practitioners. These areas are related to this dissertation but, because of scope, were not directly explored. My interests in these dimensions of queer life, outlined below, are piqued not only by my commitment to relational therapy, queer theory, and constructionist practice, but also very much by the conversations I had with the q-squad. For every question answered and idea thoroughly explored, new questions were raised and emerging complexities illuminated, suggesting paths to unending conversations.

1. *Family relationships:* As a family/relational therapist, it is of particular importance to me to work with people within their important relationships. For youth, this most often will involve family (however that is constituted), including parents. I would be interested in an inquiry process with queer youth and their parents⁴¹ in exploration of how the prevailing discourses of the gender binary, heteronormativity, and homonormativity impact all individuals involved and their relationships with each other. Bringing forward the stories of the relationships and tapping into the knowledges

⁴¹ The parents themselves may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual and as cisgender, transgender, or other.

of parents and youth together would offer therapists an important, contextualized perspective to inform their practice.

2. *Intersecting identities*: Ideas I would like to see made more available to therapists include those discussed previously: strategic essentialism, disidentification, and intersectionality. Generating practice-based literature that makes these theoretical ideas applicable as resources for therapists would raise the bar dramatically in the call for “culturally competent” practice. Research with queer-identified people of color that explores how they negotiate the tensions between their multiple identities could illuminate further the complexities and risks with which they live.
3. *Queer theory and straight folks*: In *Straight with a Twist* Calvin Thomas (2000) asks, “What would it mean for straights really to understand (and not just theoretically toy with) the queer argument that the normative regimens they inhabit and embody are ideological fictions rather than natural inevitabilities, performatives rather than constatives?” (p.13). Again, bringing these ideas from queer theory to therapists in order to inform practice would, in my opinion, contribute in a dramatic way toward encouraging practices that open up space for new possibilities of liberatory experience. Inquiry with queer-identified straight people (people who maintain a stable gender identity and desire for opposite-sex partners but who resist normativity in other ways and who acknowledge the constructed and performative qualities of gender and sexuality) would contribute to the body of social construction work in new and provocative ways.
4. *Transgender*: As more and more youth and adults alike transition and embody gender identities other than the one assigned them at birth, training and literature available for

practitioners seeking to provide respectful and effective services for trans-identified people continues to move slowly from the margins. I would be interested in research projects that investigate the impact of *transnormativity* on individuals who would prefer a more genderqueer identity.

5. *Homonormativity's influence on therapists:* Therapists do not hold special powers that allow them immunity to cultural discourses. As I've attempted to demonstrate in this dissertation, in fact, the sites of knowledge production that therapists rely on are largely responsible for the construction of these discourses. I would be very interested in exploring with therapists that identify as allies to and/or affirming of LGBT clients how homonormativity plays a part in the shaping of their ideas.

While these are the areas of interest that initially capture my attention, I also asked the Q-squad what they thought would be interesting and useful areas for further inquiry. Sarah suggested, and the team concurred, that what holds promise as a meaningful area for further inquiry and writing centers around ways of doing therapy that are respectful and inclusive of queer youth. Below are excerpts from our final meeting where we discussed this idea.

Sarah-- ...having you talk about ways of being a therapist that can be queer in ways that are outside of traditional practitioner style...seemed super important and interesting. Like when you asked us 'what are some ways that you feel that therapists could approach working with queer youth that could be respectful and important and useful and meaningful,' ...that feels like a really hopeful conversation to have.

Julie--Are you suggesting more conversations where queer youth can serve as advisors?

Sarah—Yeah, because that to me seems like such a good way of doing things... Because I think that specifically with therapy, people have shitty experiences, and you're like, 'well that was a fucking shitty experience' and you don't do anything with it. To actually have something done with your shitty fucking experience is helpful. To know that there are ways of doing productive things with your shitty experiences that could potentially change the experiences of other people I think that's really important. And really important for me to know that that could make someone re-think the way that they talk to youth, that's pretty important.

"...that that could make someone re-think the way that they talk to youth, that's pretty important." Yes, indeed, that has been what I have maintained all along. That is what compelled me to write this dissertation: the idea that we ought to re-think the way that we talk to/with/about youth, and specifically for my purposes, queer youth. Sarah's comments--endorsed and echoed by the members of the Q-squad over the course of three months, six gatherings, and ten hours of discussion—would suggest that to do anything else, would be an enormous failure to listen, reflect, and respond in just and ethical ways. It is my hope that you join me in their hope that they will be taken seriously.

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Appendix A

Release and Permission to Tape Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in conversations about queer youth identity. Your participation in these conversations represents important and meaningful contributions to the body of knowledge available to helping professionals. I am very grateful for your willingness to share your knowledge and experience with me.

In order to tape our conversations (which is necessary in order to ensure that I capture exactly what you say so that I may precisely document it in my writings) I need your signed consent to do so.

There is also the possibility that, with your permission, I may use the tape in the education of professionals (youthworkers, therapists, educators, etc.) or professionals-in-training for the purpose of helping them understand and appreciate queer youth’s experience and ideas about identity. I will not show tapes of you within 100-miles of where you live. I also will not show any tape that you do not agree to have shown.

I, the undersigned, do consent to the video taping of my participation in conversations with Julie Tilsen about queer youth identity. I understand that I may request the tape to be turned off or erased at any time during the conversation or any time there after. I acknowledge that the purpose of taping has been fully explained to me and that my consent to such taping is given freely and voluntarily. Furthermore, I agree that Julie Tilsen may show the tape for educational purposes as described above.

Name Date

Witness Date