

Queer Frameworks and Queer Tendencies

Towards an understanding
of Postmodern Transformations
of Sexuality¹

AF SASHA ROSENEIL

‘an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition’

(Sedgwick 1991, 1)

At the turn of the twenty-first century we are living through a period of intense and profound social change, characterized by many European social theorists as a shift from modernity to postmodernity.² In developing analyses of processes of postmodernization, sociologists have focused on changes in the realms of social life which the discipline has traditionally held to be significant – work and production, nation, politics and the state – and, in the context of the growing influence of feminist sociology, they have also devoted considerable interest to changes in gender and family relations, and the sphere of intimacy.³ Also central to theorizations of recent social change is a new emphasis on the sphere of the cultural, as sociologists identify the increasing importance of the cultural and symbolic, and the aestheticization of everyday life.⁴ The aim of this article is to contribute to sociological understandings of the social changes of postmodernity by focusing on an area – the

realm of sexuality – which has, thus far, largely escaped analysis in terms of processes of postmodernization.⁵ The paper draws on the sociological and historical literature on sexuality which has been developed in the past thirty years, bringing this work into dialogue with more recent contributions from queer theory. It proceeds from the position that an exploration of transformations of sexuality must be central to any theorization of postmodernity. It sets forth an argument about the importance of relations of sexuality in understandings of social change, about how we might seek to analyze these, and puts forward some suggestions about the direction and nature of some of the transformations in the realm of sexuality which are underway in the contemporary world, which might serve as the basis for future research.

My focus is on ‘sexuality’ – the organization of erotic relations – but the sexual social fabric cannot be understood outside wider analyses of social relations, particularly the organization of ‘cathexis’, or intimacy – emotionally charged affective relations which are not necessarily sexual – and, of course, gender relations.⁶ I will not attempt a definition which circumscribes the ‘proper domain’ of sexuality, because what is important about relations of sexuality is that they permeate, sometimes indeed saturate, the entire social formation.⁷ Whilst some of what I will be talking about can be considered under the rubric of change within the sphere, and in cultural meanings, of ‘family’, my frame of reference cross-cuts the public/private divide, and is concerned also with shifts in non-familial and public forms of sociality.

The paper is divided into two main sections. In the first I offer a discussion of recent developments in queer theory which I argue can contribute in significant ways to sociological thinking about sexuality, providing us with new theoretical frameworks. The second part of the paper then traces some of the shifts in the organization of

sexuality in the second half of the twentieth century, discussing the emergence of modern sexual identities, and shifts in the relationship between ‘the homosexual’ and ‘the heterosexual’, as categories, identities and ways of life. I then go on to outline what I conceptualize as the ‘queer tendencies’ which I suggest characterize the post-modern re-organization of relations of sexuality.⁸ Here my focus is very particularly on the sexual culture of contemporary Britain.

QUEER THEORY

It was against the backdrop of AIDS and the American New Right’s virulently anti-homosexual politics of the 1980s, and from within increasingly large, diverse and conflicted lesbian and gay communities, that a new strand of thinking about sexuality emerged within the humanities in the 1990s: queer theory.⁹ Drawing on post-structuralism, particularly Foucault and Derrida, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this rather amorphous body of work shares a critique of the minoritizing epistemology which has underpinned both most academic thinking about homosexuality and the dominant politics within gay communities.¹⁰ This minoritizing view sees ‘homo/heterosexual definition ... as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority’, rather than ‘seeing it ... as an issue of continuing determining importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities’ (Sedgwick 1999, 1). Queer theory identifies the homo/heterosexual binary, and its related opposition, ‘inside/outside’ (Fuss 1991), as a central organizing principle of modern society and culture, and takes this binary as its key problematic and political target.¹¹ In common with other poststructuralist understandings of the exclusionary and regulatory nature of binary identity categories, queer theory rejects the idea of a unified homosexual identity,

and sees the construction of sexual identities around the hierarchically structured binary opposition of homo/heterosexual as inherently unstable. The fracturing and tensions within the category of homosexuality and the fluidities and non-fixity of various homosexualities are thus foregrounded. Differences between lesbians and gay men, to which lesbian feminism had long been pointing, and between the multifarious, and multiple, identifications of those within the 'queer community' – lipstick lesbians, s/m-ers, muscle marys, opera queens, bisexuals, transsexuals, the transgendered, those who identify as black, Asian, Irish, Jewish ... – become theoretically important. Equally, heterosexuality is also problematized and is rendered as much less monolithic and unassailable than earlier theory (feminist and sociological) has tended to regard it, and its construction and maintenance through acts of exclusion vis-a-vis homosexuality are placed on the agenda to be studied.¹²

QUEERING OUR FRAMEWORKS

Initially queer theory developed within the humanities largely without reference to the thirty years of research and theorizing about sexuality that has taken place within sociology, despite the clear (and unacknowledged) parallels between the two fields' social constructionist understandings of sexuality.¹³ This has led to some unfounded assumptions of novelty, an overly textual orientation, an underdeveloped concept of the social, and a lack of engagement with 'real' material, everyday life and social practices and processes in queer theory, of which social scientists might rightly be critical.¹⁴ However, I would suggest that there is much that is exciting and important in queer theory. Its interrogation of sexual identity categories, and its enactment of a shift in focus from the margins, on the homosexual, to a focus on the constitution of the homo/heterosexual binary represent

important developments in the theorization of sexuality. Moreover, its foundational claim, as expressed by Sedgwick and quoted at the beginning of the paper, that an understanding of sexuality, and in particular, of the homo/heterosexual binary, must be central to any analysis of modern western culture, has significant implications for social and cultural theory in general.

Along with a number of other social scientists, working within a range of disciplines – sociology, geography, socio-legal studies, international relations – I would like to advocate the 'queering' of our analytical frameworks.¹⁵ A queer sociological perspective would bring queer theory's interrogation of identity categories into dialogue with a sociological concern to theorize and historicize social change in the realm of sexuality. It would see relations of sexuality and cathexis as central dynamic forces within society, focusing attention on the homo/heterosexual binary and on heteronormativity – on studying the 'centre', the 'inside', as well as the margins, and the 'outside' (Stein and Plummer 1996). We can learn from the importance queer theory places on culture, placing it within a sociological analysis which recognizes that the postmodern world is characterized by 'economies of signs' (Lash and Urry 1994), by the ever increasing aestheticization of everyday life.¹⁶ But we would combine queer theory's attention to the realm of the cultural with a more sociological analysis of social practices, processes and lived experience. Thus far queer theorists have, true to their poststructuralist roots, tended to favour analyses of structural and discursive regulation over attention to the resistance and creative agency of human actors in the realm of sexuality.¹⁷ Their work has been concerned with analyzing the cultural processes by which the homo/heterosexual binary is upheld, with how heterosexuality is continuously re-naturalized and re-prioritized, and with how heteronormativity operates as a mode of regulation of identities

and cultural and social possibilities.¹⁸ It has also tended to direct its gaze backwards in time, failing to remark upon and engage with contemporary social change.¹⁹ It has not begun to explore how the homo/heterosexual binary and its hierarchical power relations might be undergoing challenge and transformation in the contemporary world. In contrast, a queer sociology, I would suggest, should seek to transcend the limitations of a poststructuralist ontology, reaching for a compromise between post-structuralism and humanism which enables the theorization of human agency within historical, social and cultural contexts.²⁰ It would have a keen eye for tendencies towards social change, for shifts, movement and destabilization in established relations of sexuality and cathexis.

So, in advocating the queering of our analytical framework, I am suggesting much more than just 'adding in' the study of lesbians and gay men. Doing this – making sure that we consider how to research across sexual differences – is just the starting point; we must take seriously non-normative sexualities, and must allow lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and all those whose lives transgress heteronormative assumptions a place in our analyses. There is a tendency amongst liberal-minded social scientists, in the wake of the challenges of the new social movements, to speak of the importance of attention to 'difference', and in recent years sexuality has been added to the list of differences which it is considered necessary to include, alongside gender, race/ ethnicity, and, sometimes, disability. The problem with this is that 'differences' are different from each other, and sexual differences have their own specific difficulties of definition and identification. Sexual difference is not always visible, indeed, as Sedgwick (1991) points out, there is an 'epistemology of the closet', based on secrecy and outings, in twentieth century culture, which constitutes a particular form of domination, unlike others. This means that the act of

speaking of sexual differences is vital, but we must be aware that pinning them down and delineating membership of sexual categories is impossible; sexuality is ambiguous, identifications are fluctuating, strategically performed, yet sometimes also ascribed.

CHANGING RELATIONS OF SEXUALITY THE MODERN REGIME

It is now widely accepted by historians of sexuality that the idea of the existence of 'the homosexual' as a category of person distinct from 'the heterosexual' was born in the second half of the nineteenth century.²¹ By the start of the twentieth century there was in widespread circulation in a proliferation of medical, legal, literary and psychological discourses for which the homo/heterosexual binary was axiomatic. So it was that there came into existence 'a world-mapping by which every person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence' (Sedgwick 1991, 2). In this 'world-mapping' marital heterosexuality occupied the centre, constructed as normal, natural and desirable, with homosexuality as the marginal, perverse, unnatural other, subject to a range of different legal, medical and social sanctions and forms of regulation.

From the 1910s onwards sexologists began to develop an ideal of the married heterosexual couple bound together by sexual intimacy rather than just economic and social necessity.²² This model of hetero-relationality came to replace the nineteenth century 'separate spheres' ideology which had underpinned the Victorian family and which had allowed, and even encouraged, strong, sometimes passionate, homo-relational ties of love and friendship.²³ Particular emphasis was placed on persuading women

of the importance of fulfilling their emotional and sexual desires through their marital relationship.²⁴ By the 1950s the idea of 'the primarily sexual nature of conjugality' (Weeks 1985, 27) was firmly established in Britain, and the confluence of sexuality and cathexis within the marital heterosexual relationship became established, supported by a panoply of cultural forms ranging from Hollywood cinema to women's magazines, as well as by social, legal and political institutions and their policies. Not least amongst these, of course, was the post-war welfare state, which assumed as its subject the married, heterosexual man and his family.

Under the conditions of the post-war sexual and cathectic regime of hegemonic marital heterosexuality, non-normative relations of sexuality and cathexis were lived at the margins. Seidman (1996) and Adam (1995) suggest that although the 1950s are widely perceived to have been conservative, the seeds of the sexual rebellions of the 1960s were sown by the geographical mobility, prosperity and social liberalization which followed the war, and they point to the emergence of homophile organizations, which began, very tentatively, to claim a public voice for homosexuals, and the cultural interventions of rock music and the beatniks, which offered a challenge to dominant sexual mores. And in Britain 1957 saw the publication of the Wolfenden Report advocating homosexual law reform some 10 years before the passing of the Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized sex between men over 21 in private. Whilst the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s is easily and often overstated, the emergence of the women's liberation movement, lesbian feminism, and gay liberation politics from the New Left, and the growth of visible subcultures of lesbians and gay men in the metropolises began to expand the public space of the non-heterosexual margins.²⁵ The Stonewall riot of 1969, when 'drag queens, dykes, street people and bar boys' respon-

ded to a police raid on a Greenwich Village gay bar 'first with jeers and high camp, and then with a hail of coins, paving stones, and parking meters' (Adam 1995, 81) was an epiphanic moment; it marked the beginnings of gay liberation, which had as its aim 'to free the homosexual in everyone', to overthrow compulsory heterosexuality and thus eventually, the boundaries between the homosexual and the heterosexual (Adam 1995, 84). The radical demands of gay liberation (which were to be echoed in the queer politics of the 1990s) faded by the mid 1970s, giving way to a more assimilationist politics demanding equal rights and protection for lesbians and gay men as a minority group, and the 1970s and 80s saw the growth of self-confident lesbian and gay communities with their own institutions and traditions. The AIDS epidemic, which decimated the population of gay men in the global gay cities, called forth new forms of political activism and self-help welfare organization, and ultimately, at a collective level, strengthened the ties of communality and sociality amongst those who survived.

One of the traditions of lesbian and gay life that took off in the 1970s, post Stonewall, was the 'coming out story'. Plummer's (1995) discussion of the telling of sexual stories identifies the coming out story as an archetypal modernist tale, featuring a linear progression from a period of suffering to the crucial moment of self-discovery, and ending with a satisfactory resolution in the form of the achievement of a secure identity as lesbian or gay amidst a supportive community. But whilst the notion of 'coming out' is firmly rooted in the 'epistemology of the closet' and the modern homo/heterosexual binary, the situation in the late twentieth century in which many tens of thousands of people have 'come out' (including an ever increasing number of public figures), and have made their sexual and cathectic relationships with members of their own sex highly visible,

Queers read this!

June, 1990

WHY QUEER

Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a witty and charming people we don't have to be discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike GAY, doesn't mean MALE. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobic's hands and use against him.

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has actually served to create the context for the postmodernization of the regime of sexuality and cathexis.²⁶ As Seidman, Meeks and Traschen (1999) argue, for many lesbians and gay men today homosexuality has been so normalized that they are effectively 'beyond the closet'.

THE POSTMODERNIZATION OF SEXUALITY, OR QUEER TENDENCIES

Offering support to my contention about the significance of sexuality to understandings of social change, there is now a body of literature theorizing the changes which characterize the contemporary social condition which, unlike classic sociological narratives of the development of modernity, gives a certain prominence to questions of sexuality. This work suggests that there is underway a shift in relations of cathexis. Giddens's (1992) argument about the 'transformation of intimacy' and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) and Beck-Gernsheim's (1999) work on the changing meanings and practices of love and family relationships posit the idea that in the contemporary world processes of individualization and de-traditionalization and increased self-reflexivity are opening up new possibilities and expectations in heterosexual relationships.²⁷ With a (rather cursory) nod in the direction of feminist scholarship and activism, their work recognizes the significance of the shifts in gender relations consequent particularly on the changed consciousness and identities which women have developed in the wake of the women's liberation movement.

Giddens considers the transformation of intimacy which he sees as currently in train to be of 'great, and generalizable, importance' (1992, 2). He charts the changes in the nature of marriage which are constituted by the emergence of the 'pure relationship', a relationship of sexual and emotional equality between men and women, and links this with the development of 'plastic

sexuality', which is freed from 'the needs of reproduction' (1991, 2). He identifies lesbians and gay men as 'pioneers' in the pure relationship and plastic sexuality, and hence at the forefront of processes of individualization and de-traditionalization.²⁸

Whilst there are undoubtedly criticisms to be made of this body of work (e.g. Jamieson 1998), this literature offers important insights into, or at least raises questions about, contemporary social change. But I now wish to extend this analysis to consider the constitution of the sexual more generally. Giddens's idea that lesbians and gay men are forging new paths for heterosexuals as well as for themselves is developed by Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy who suggest that 'one of the most remarkable features of domestic change over recent years is ... the emergence of common patterns in both homosexual and heterosexual ways of life as a result of these long-term shifts in relationship patterns' (1999, 85).²⁹ In other words, changes in the organization of intimacy are impacting upon the wider organization of sexuality.

It is my argument that we are currently witnessing a significant destabilization of the hetero/homosexual binary. The hierarchical relationship between the two sides of the binary, and its mapping onto an inside/out opposition is undergoing intense challenge, and the 'normativity and naturalness of both heterosexuality and heterorelationality have come into question.'³⁰ In addition to the yearning for a 'pure relationship' which is increasingly shared by those on either side of the homo/heterosexual binary, there are, I would suggest, a number of 'queer tendencies' at work, and play, in the postmodern world. I choose to speak of 'tendencies' to suggest the still provisional nature of these social changes, and with the existence of countervailing tendencies (see Conclusion) in mind.³¹

QUEER AUTO-CRITIQUE

The first of these 'queer tendencies' is that underway within lesbian and gay communities themselves: the tendency to auto-critique at both the individual and collective level which is producing a fracturing of the modern homosexual identity. 'Queer theory' may be an elite academic practice, but queer theorizing, and the questioning of the regulatory aspects of lesbian and gay identity and community, is an everyday activity for many within contemporary lesbian and gay communities. Recent years have seen an upsurge of discussion within public forums of communities about a range of issues which challenge the assumed coherence and constituency of lesbian and gay communities and fixity of sexual practice; for instance, lesbians having sex with men, and gay men having sex with women are openly discussed, and bisexuality and transgender are on the agenda. It is the era of 'post-gay' (Sinfield 1996), or 'anti-gay' (Simpson 1996), of queer, postmodern stories 'in the making, which shun unities and uniformities; reject naturalism and determinacies; seek out immanences and ironies; and ultimately find pastiche, complexities and shifting perspectives' (Plummer, 1995, 133).³²

THE DECENTRING OF HETERORELATIONS

Much has been written in recent years about the meaning of the dramatic rise in divorce rates over the past 30 years³³, about the increase in the number of births outside marriage³⁴ (and to a lesser extent outside any lasting heterosexual relationship – births to mothers who are 'single by choice'), about the rise in the proportion of children being brought up by a lone parent³⁵, about the growing proportion of households that are composed of one person³⁶, and the climbing proportion of women who are not having children. However, this commentary has tended to focus

on the meaning of these changes in terms of gender relations and the family; it has not addressed their implications with respect to the established organization of sexuality. This is surprising because it seems to me that these changes speak of a significant decentring of heterorelations, as the heterosexual couple, and particularly the married, co-resident heterosexual couple with children, no longer occupies the centre-ground of British society, and cannot be taken for granted as the basic unit in society. Processes of individualization and detraditionalization are releasing individuals from traditional heterosexual scripts and from the patterns of heterorelationality which accompany them. By 1995-6 only 23% of all households in the UK comprised a married couple with dependent children (Social Trends 1997).

Postmodern living arrangements are diverse, fluid and unresolved, constantly chosen and re-chosen, and heterorelations are no longer as hegemonic as once they were. It could be said that we are experiencing the 'queering of the family' (Stacey 1996), as meanings of family undergo radical challenge, and more and more kinship groups have to come to terms with the diverse sexual practices and living arrangements chosen by their own family members. At the start of the twenty first century there can be few families which do not include at least some members who diverge from traditional heterorelational practices, whether as divorcees, unmarried mothers, lesbians, gay men or bisexuals.

This social decentring of heterorelations finds its expression and reflection in popular culture. Consider, for example, the television programmes, particularly the dramas and sitcoms, which have achieved particular popularity recently in Britain (and many also in the United States and Australia): 'Friends', 'This Life', 'Absolutely Fabulous', 'Ellen', 'Frasier', 'Grace Under Fire', 'Seinfeld', 'Men Behaving Badly'. All of these television programmes are fundamen-

tally post-heterorelational in their thematic concerns and narrative drive. Unlike the generation of situation comedies that preceded them, which were almost exclusively focused on co-resident, heterosexual families, these programmes are concerned with the embeddness of friends in daily life. They offer images of the warmth and affection provided by networks of friends in an age of insecure and/or transitory sexual relationships; friends, in the words of the theme song to the show, “are there for you”, in the bustling big city life of the postmodern world, in which individuals have to carve out lives for themselves.³⁷

And in popular music, the enormous success of The Spice Girls can be read as an example of the cultural decentring of heterorelations amongst a teen and pre-teenage female audience which, from the 1950s onwards, has directed the emotional and erotic energy of its fandom towards male popstars and boy bands. The Spice Girls have not just offered their fans a range of models of contemporary femininity with which to identify, which includes one – Sporty – which clearly draws on lesbian street style, but also, more radically and uniquely they have captured a generation of girls’ passion outside the framework of heterorelationality and heterosexuality. The question ‘who is your favourite Spice Girl?’, is as much about which Spice Girl is desired, as about which one is identified with. Moreover, The Spice Girls’ ‘philosophy’ of ‘girlpower’ is a reworking of basic feminist principles about the importance of female friendship, seeking to inspire girls to respect and value themselves and their girlfriends, mothers, and sisters, and challenging the cultural prioritization of masculinity and male needs and desires. It is certainly no accident that each concert in the 1998 Spice World Tour included in it a cover of Annie Lennox’s ‘Sisters are Doing it For Themselves’ and ended with a rendition of the gay anthem first popularized by Sister Sledge, ‘We are Family’.

THE EMERGENCE OF HETERO-REFLEXIVITY

Another facet of the destabilization of the homo/heterosexual binary is that heterosexuality is increasingly a conscious state which has to be produced, self-monitored and thought about in relation to its other, in a way that was not necessary when heteronormativity was more secure and lesbian and gay alternatives were less visible and self-confident.³⁸ It used to be that it was homosexuality that had to be produced and thought-out, with heterosexuality the unreflexive inside that did not have to consider its position. But in recent years, from ‘backlash’ anxieties about political correctness and the ‘threatened’ position of the white, heterosexual male and his normal family, as exemplified in Section 28 of the Local Government Act, to the ever growing number of personal ads placed in newspapers by heterosexuals forced to name themselves as such, heterosexuality has become de-naturalized and reflexive.³⁹ Even women’s magazines, once the arch-promoters of a naturalized, normative heterosexuality, are now encouraging their readers to engage in the reflexive consideration of their sexual desires by means of the self-administered questionnaire, which at the end, when scores are added up, refuses to locate readers in clearly demarcated sexual identity categories, but rather valorizes self-awareness and sexual openness.⁴⁰

THE CULTURAL VALORIZING OF THE QUEER

If, as exhorted by queer theory, we take seriously the realm of culture in our attempts to understand shifts in relations of sexuality, contemporary developments in popular culture become significant indicators of the zeitgeist. It would be sociologically naive to assume that changes in popular culture necessarily give rise to or reflect transformations in people’s everyday beliefs and practices, or to assume that people always behave

in consistent ways (so that liking Ellen or Julian Clary also constitutes a rejection of homophobia); but I would like to propose that the ideas and images of the sexual which permeate our everyday world through popular culture are of considerable importance in framing the cultural imaginaries within which people lead their lives and construct their identities and relationships. It is my suggestion that there is underway, particularly in Britain, a queering of popular culture, a valorizing of the sexually ambiguous, and of that which transgresses rigid boundaries of gender. Whilst sexual and gender ambiguity are not new in popular culture, having moved out of the exclusive province of a culturally elite avant-garde in the 1970s with David Bowie, Patti Smith, Marc Bolan, and in the early 1980s, Boy George and the 'new romantics', the 1990s' desire to confuse and transgress the homo/heterosexual binary is of a different order. Whereas the gender-benders of the 1970s and early 1980s had something of a freak-show about them, and were a safe distance from their fans, whose normality was perhaps reconstituted in contrast with the stars' allowable excesses, the cultural valorizing of the queer at the end of the 1990s is far more participatory and closer to everyday life. This can be seen in three areas of popular culture: dance culture, fashion magazines and television.

Dance culture is one of the most significant cultural movements of recent years. As it moved from underground raves into the mainstream, clubbing has become a leisure pursuit for millions of young people, and the fashions, imagery and ideals of dance culture have become the fashions, imagery and ideals of a generation (as the category of 'youth' expands both upwards and downwards this is large generation). Dance culture has its roots in the house music born in black gay clubs in New York, Chicago and Detroit, in which boundaries of sexuality developed a fluidity, and to which men and women of a range of sexual and

gender identifications were welcomed. Travelling across the Atlantic, via Ibiza, in tandem with the drug Ecstasy, house music spawned a new era of nightclubbing in Britain in the 1990s. Pharmacologically energized and 'loved up', what mattered in the early house music clubs was the warmth and intensity of the sociality between those in the club.⁴¹ In Britain, as in the US, the clubs where new dance music is tested and hits break, the clubs which lead fashion in music, clothing and attitude, have in recent years been queer clubs: not exclusively gay, but emerging from a gay/lesbian community and identity, usually established and run by gay or lesbian promoters, and destabilizing sexual identity categories by welcoming anyone with a queer enough attitude.⁴² It is not sexual identity or sexual practice that matters in gaining admission to the coolest clubs, but rather a way of thinking and an attitude of openness and fluidity: those seeking admission to Vague in Leeds, for instance, being required by the transsexual 'door whore' to kiss anyone she demanded. The ideals of celebrating diversity and granting respect are often spelt out on club flyers, on posters, banners inside the club, and by bouncers on the door. 'Queer' has become, in British popular culture, an attitude and a stance which rocks the homo/heterosexual binary, and is one to which a generation aspires.⁴³

Further evidence of the aspirational status of the queer is to be found in advertising in a range of media, and in editorial imagery in fashion magazines. Over the past decade there has been an upsurge in the presentation of queer imagery in the mainstream media, in which sexual and gender ambiguity is foregrounded through the use of non-conventionally heterosexual models and through playful cross-dressing, and homo-erotic desire is regularly explicitly represented or more subtly implied.⁴⁴ A large number of companies which clearly wish to be perceived as at the cutting edge of fashion have run advertising campaigns in ma-

gazines, on television and free postcards, which are decidedly queer – promoting the fashion houses Calvin Klein, Christian Dior, Jean Paul Gaultier and Versace, alcoholic drinks such as Black Bush Whiskey and Kronenberg 1664, toiletries (Impulse deodorant), electronic goods and services (On Digital, BT Cellnet, Siemens mobile telephones, mail2web email), airlines (Aer Lingus), furniture (Habitat) and cars (Rover 200) through adverts which play with same-sex sexual possibilities and challenging the heteronormative gaze and its expectations. Some of the images and messages in these advertisements are more open to a range of possible readings than others, but in most the attribution of a positive value to non-heterosexual bodies, desires and lifestyles is clearly presented to the viewer. In the context of much greater public discussion of lesbian and gay experiences, and the appearance of lesbian and gay characters in soap operas, and dramas in British television, the present moment is one at which readings which recognize the non-heteronormativity of the images in these campaigns are more available than ever before.

Finally, television has also in recent years brought a queer sensibility into millions of living rooms. In sharp contrast to the tradition of laughing at homosexual men's gender performances in classic British comedies such as 'Are You Being Served?', and 'Carry On' films, I would identify 'All Rise for Julian Clary' as marking a significant moment in the sexual history of British television culture. Broadcast at prime time on Saturday night on BBC1, "All Rise" enacts a queer reversal of traditional anti-gay humour, and directs attention to the humour inherent in the heterosexuality and traditional renditions of masculinity of the audience. Julian Clary, a highly politicized, 'out' gay man, makes constant, extremely sexually explicit, reference to his own homosexuality, but the show revolves equally around laughing at, and pointing out the absurdity of normal heterosexual masculinity,

particularly that of the police and the military. Clary plays the role of judge and adjudicates according to his own set of queer, camp values on a range of matters brought to him by the audience. Thus the privileging of heteronormative behaviour is reversed and the queer valorized.

A pessimistic critique of the tendencies which I identify as the cultural valorizing of the queer would see them as evidence of the extension of commodity culture into previously uncommodified subcultures, and of the ability of capitalism to colonize and utilize lesbian and gay identities in its relentless search for profit, exploiting their otherness whilst maintaining mainstream heterosexual positionality.⁴⁵ Whilst there is undoubtedly some purchase in this analysis, it is my opinion that such an argument neglects the recontextualizations that are possible within commodity culture, and fails to see how capital might be running to catch up with transformations which are already underway in the ways in which sexuality is lived and imagined. It is surely interesting that at this historical moment queer has become trendy, not just in relatively closed metropolitan networks, but in mainstream popular culture, and in the context of a history of the minoritizing of the non-heterosexual, and of the cultural shame associated with homosexuality, this represents a shift of considerable sociological interest and further attention.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have suggested that understandings of the social changes of postmodernity are incomplete without attention to transformations in the realm of sexuality, and that queer theory and sociological work on sexuality have not yet acknowledged the significance of these social and cultural changes. The queer tendencies that I have identified are posing, I have argued, a significant cultural challenge to heteronormativity, questioning the normativity and

naturalness of heterosexuality, re-configuring the hierarchical inside/outside relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and destabilizing the binary opposition between the two categories. Whilst these queer tendencies are undoubtedly impacting upon the general population unevenly – they are largely urban phenomena, and they particularly affect a younger generation that has the sub-cultural capital to partake of them⁴⁶ – I am not just talking of a queer avant-garde. Reflexive heterosexual identities are becoming increasingly widespread, and heterorelations can be seen as having a slightly less sure hold on the general population in an era of postmodern relations of cathexis.

It might be thought that the argument of this article grants too great a significance to the transitory, ephemeral world of popular culture, and that its overall tone is overly optimistic. I would readily acknowledge that there are, of course, countervailing tendencies, in the form of various expressions of sexual and gender fundamentalism, which are particularly strong in the United States,⁴⁷ but which have also recently been seen in the United Kingdom in public debates about the repeal of Section 28.⁴⁸ Homophobia continues to exist, particularly in schools, and violence against lesbians and gay men remains a serious problem.⁴⁹ Moreover, lesbians and gay men do not appear ready to collectively cede their hard-won sexual identities, and many are firm believers in their difference (variously conceived as cultural, biological, psychological and/ or genetic) from heterosexuals.⁵⁰ But it is not my argument that we have moved into a post-lesbian and gay era, and nor am I positing a straightforward narrative of sexual liberation, revolution or the demise of homophobia. Rather I have sought to highlight certain queer tendencies – movements towards the postmodernization of relations of sexuality – and to suggest a research agenda which might be of interest to sociologists in the future.

NOTER

1. This paper was first published in *Sociological Research Online*, December 2000, 78:2. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) is gratefully acknowledged; time for the further development of the paper was part the programme of the ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) (award M564281001) at the University of Leeds <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cava>.
2. I use the designation 'postmodernity' to refer to the contemporary social formation, fully cognisant of the debate between those who prefer to speak of 'late modernity' (e.g. Giddens 1991, 1992, 1995; Plummer 1995) and those who prefer the term 'postmodernity' (e.g. Bauman 1992; Lash and Urry 1994).
3. See Rosenneil (1995) for an assessment of the state of feminist sociology, and, on changes in families and intimate life, see for example: Giddens (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), Irwin (1999), Jamieson (1998), Seymour and Bagguley (1999), Silva and Smart (1999), Smart and Neale (1999) and Stacey (1996).
4. Jameson (1984), Crook et al (1992), Lash and Urry (1994).
5. A notable exception who has explicitly written of "postmodern sexualities" and "the postmodernization of sexuality" is Simon (1996). Plummer (1995) is concerned with shifts in the form of "sexual stories", but conceptualizes contemporary sexual stories as "late modernist" rather than "postmodern".
6. In referring to the wide-range of close personal affective bonds between individuals, I prefer the term "cathexis" to the more widely used "intimacy", which I feel is better reserved for speaking of a very particular type of emotional relationship, one of mutual disclosure in which people participate as equal.
7. There is a parallel here with the feminist insight that categories of gender, and gendered oppressions, extend beyond that which appears explicitly gendered.
8. My gaze here rests primarily on the UK, and the examples I use to illustrate my argument are British. Similar 'queer tendencies' are undoubtedly to be seen in other western, postmodernizing countries, but a discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper.
9. Texts which have come to assume foundational status within queer theory include: Sedgwick (1991), Butler (1991), de Lauretis (1991), Fuss (1991) and Warner (1991).
10. For a clear discussion of the influences of post-

structuralism on queer theory see Namaste (1996).

11. Fuss (1991) draws on psychoanalytic understandings of processes of alienation, splitting and identification, which produce a self and an other, an interiority and an exteriority.

12. See particularly Butler (1991).

13. This point is made by Seidman (1996), Stein and Plummer (1996) and Jackson (1999).

14. These criticisms are made by, inter alia, Warner (1993), Seidman (1996) and Stein and Plummer (1996).

15. On queering sociology, see contributors to Seidman (1996), geography, Ingram et al (1997), socio-legal studies, Stychin (1995) and international relations, Weber (1999).

16. On processes of 'culturalization' and the aestheticization of everyday life see Lash (1994) and Crook et al (1990).

17. For instance, in developing an argument for a queer sociology, Namaste wholeheartedly embraces poststructuralism, but fails to consider the problems which sociologists might encounter in the abandonment of all vestiges of a humanist ontology. I have argued elsewhere (Roseneil 1995) for the importance of transcending the humanist/poststructuralist binary. See also Barrett (1990).

18. See contributions to Seidman (1996).

19. A recent article by Seidman et al (1999) is an exception to this.

20. Structuration theory still, in my mind, offers the best solution to the agency/structure conundrum (See Giddens 1984).

21. The terms appear to have been coined by Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1868, though there were not used in print until 1869 (homosexuality) and 1880 (heterosexuality), according to Katz (1995). See also McIntosh (1968), Plummer (1981), Weeks (1977, 1981, 1985), Katz (1983, 1995), Foucault (1978).

22. For histories of marriage see Stone (1979, 1993) and Gillis (1985), and on marriage in the immediate post-war period, see Finch and Summerfield (1991) and Morgan (1991).

23. See Smith Rosenberg (1975), Weeks (1985), Fadermann (1981) and Jeffreys (1985).

24. See Jeffreys (1985).

25. On the rise of the lesbian and gay movement see Adam (1995) and d'Emilio (1983).

26. A trickle of voluntary 'outings' amongst public figures, which began in Britain with Michael Cashman and Ian McKellan at the end of the 1980s in response to the passing of Section 28, had become something of a deluge by the end of the 1990s, as kd lang, Ellen de Generes, Chris Smith, Angela

Eagle, and even Michael Portillo declared their homosexuality to a decreasingly surprised public.

27. The research of Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1993) on family obligations suggests that family ties are now understood less in terms of obligations constituted by fixed ties of blood, and more in terms of negotiated commitments, which are less clearly differentiated from other relationships.

28. In this acknowledgement of non-heterosexual identities and practices Giddens's work differs from that of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim whose discussion fails to acknowledge its exclusive concern with heterosexuality.

29. Bech (1997, 1999) makes a similar argument.

30. Watney (1988) and Fuss (1991) made early suggestions that such a process was underway.

31. For this notion I owe a particular debt to Sedgwick (1994).

32. Plummer is more sceptical than I am about the existence of such stories. Other examples of queer auto-critique: Bristow and Wilson (1993), Hemmings (1993), Stein (1993), Doan (1994), Bi-Academic Intervention (1997), Munt (1998), Prosser (1998), and Halberstam (1998).

33. UK statistics: between 1971 and 1994 the number of divorces doubled; 37% of recent marriages are predicted to end in divorce (OPCS Marriage and Divorce Statistics, 1991).

34. By 1992 31% of live births in the UK were outside marriage (Population Trends, 1993).

35. In 1991 lone parent families were almost 20% of all families with dependent children (GHS, 1991).

36. In 1961 this was 4%, by 1995-6 it was 13%.

37. For a discussion of the importance of friendship in contemporary social relations see Roseneil (2000).

38. I am hereby disagreeing with Smart who argues that 'the immense verbosity around heterosexual acts has not produced the heterosexual' (1996, 228).

39. See Stacey (1996) for a discussion of the relationship between Section 28 and feminist/lesbian theories of sexuality, and Wise (2000) and Waites (2000) on recent debates about repeal of the Section.

40. For instance, Company, July 1996.

41. On the role of Ecstasy in breaking down social barriers within contemporary dance culture see Wright (1999) and Collin (1997).

42. In London, the highly fashionable DTPM (more recently ADTPM) and Fiction identify themselves as 'polysexual'. Outside London Flesh in Manchester and Vague in Leeds pioneered queer clubbing in the early to mid 1990s.

43. My argument here parallels Back's (1996) argument about the emergence of a new hybrid ethnicity characterized by high degrees of egalitarianism and anti-racism amongst young people through popular culture's mixing of black and white cultural codes and styles.
44. See Lewis (1997) on lesbian imagery in women's magazines and Simpson (1996) on men's magazines. Also Clark's (1993) discussion of lesbians and advertising.
45. For positions which interpret the cultural valorizing of the queer differently, see Hennessy (1995, 2000), Jackson (1999) and Chasin (2000).
46. The notion of 'sub-cultural capital' is coined by Thornton (1995) in her discussion of club cultures.
47. See Witt and McCorkle (1997) and National Lesbian and Gay Task Force website for further information about recent anti-gay developments in the United States: <http://www.ngltf.org>.
48. On recent debates about Section 28 see Wise (2000) and Waites (2000), and the Stonewall website (<http://www.stonewall.org.uk>). It should be noted that public opinion on Section 28 seems to favour repeal (NOP poll commissioned for Channel 4, December 1999). <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/template.asp?Level=2&Level2=22&Level3=438&UserType=>
49. On homophobic bullying in schools, see Douglas et al (1998) and Duncan (1999), Mason and Palmer (1996) on queer bashing, and Snape et al (1995) on discrimination against lesbians and gay men in the UK.
50. See for example Rahman and Jackson (1997) on the persistence of essentialism within lesbian and gay claims for rights.

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SUMMARY

This article aims to extend the theorization of postmodernity to consider social changes in the realm of sexuality. It offers a discussion of recent developments in queer theory, which, it is argued, can contribute significant new theoretical frameworks for the analysis of

sexuality. It then traces some of the shifts in the organization of sexuality in the second half of the twentieth century, the emergence of modern sexual identities, and the changing relationships between 'the homosexual' and 'the heterosexual', as categories, identities and ways of life. The article then outlines what are conceptualized as the 'queer tendencies' of postmodernity, which it is suggested characterize the contemporary re-organization of relations of sexuality. These queer tendencies are: queer auto-critique, the de-centring of heterorelations, the emergence of hetero-reflexivity, and the cultural valorizing of the queer.

Sasha Roseneil, professor
 Director for the
 Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies
 University of Leeds