Article

SEXUALITIES

Abstract This article analyses the persistence of the heterosexual/homosexual binary in contemporary society, by examining the circulation of knowledge-claims concerning the age at which the 'fixity' of 'sexual orientation' is established. It examines how the 'scientific' claims of medical authorities have been utilized in recent debates in the UK over equalization of the age of consent, and argues that such claims have persisted in influence through debates over repeal of Section 28 and legalization of adoption by same-sex couples. The analysis integrates social constructionist and queer perspectives on sexual identities from sociological and cultural theory, perspectives from political theory on contemporary liberalism, and an analysis of biomedical knowledge in late modernity. It is argued that the increasing assertion of claims for equality, citizenship and recognition of cultural diversity in mainstream politics is occurring largely within a persistent 'rationale of containment' which seeks to minimize the prevalence of homosexuality. This draws attention to particular tensions and dynamics operating in the lives of bisexuals and queers, and especially in the lives of young people.

Keywords gay, liberalism, multiculturalism, public sphere, sexual identity

Matthew Waites
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

The Fixity of Sexual Identities in the Public Sphere: Biomedical Knowledge, Liberalism and the Heterosexual/Homosexual Binary in Late Modernity

Introduction

Since the emergence of the gay liberation movement in the early 1970s, the relationship between recognition of the social formation of sexual

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identities and the determination of political objectives and strategies has been a central analytical problematic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer theorists. This article renews and develops the argument that social perspectives on sexual identities have important implications for political analysis, to address the contemporary UK context. By focusing upon the circulation of knowledge-claims concerning the 'fixity' of sexual identities by a particular age, it develops a distinctive perspective upon the current social organization of sexualities.

The article begins by examining the long-running social constructionist/essentialist debate over sexual identities, and more recent post-structuralist and queer theoretical work seeking to transcend this debate. It then addresses the relationship of these perspectives to politics, and examines the forms of knowledge-claim concerning sexual identities that prevail in mainstream political debates. Examining developments in the UK, the article demonstrates the way in which 'fixity-claims' concerning sexual identities made by medical authorities were strategically mobilized by the lesbian and gay movement to achieve expansions of sexual citizenship during conflicts over equalization of the age of consent, and argues that these continue to have an impact despite repeal of Section 28 and legalization of adoption by same-sex couples. An analysis of the significance of fixity-claims is developed through engagement with theoretical work on biomedical knowledge in late modernity. The analysis links the debate over the political salience of social constructionism to broader discussions in social and political theory over the nature of the public sphere, and to critical perspectives on liberal political discourse. It is argued that the increasing endorsement of 'equality', 'human rights', 'citizenship' and 'cultural diversity' in mainstream politics has been achieved within a formation of discourses embodying a 'rationale of containment', in which the approval of such concepts is conditional upon preventing increases in the prevalence of homosexuality. This perspective allows for an optimistic assessment of prospects for significant advances in the forms of sexual citizenship granted to non-heterosexual adults, yet simultaneously draws attention to enduring structures of inequality, operating especially in the lives of young people.

Social constructionism and queer theory

Since the 1960s social theorists have been challenging the sexual categories inherited from sexology, criticizing the assumption that sexual identities corresponded to shared biological or psychological characteristics. Sociologists challenged existing sexual categories such as homosexuality, producing a body of work which came to be known as 'social constructionism', (McIntosh, 1968; Plummer, 1975; Weeks, 1977; for an overview, see:

Seidman, 1996). Foucault's subsequent work on sexuality suggested similar lines of inquiry (Foucault, 1981). This work both contributed to and drew upon wider sociological critiques of the biomedical and psychological sciences (Turner, 1995).

Social constructionism, in the context of debates over sexual identities, emerged as a complex and amorphous body of work (S. Epstein, 1994). It was a perspective which tended to define itself by a contrast with 'essentialism', challenging theories which regarded identity categories as unproblematically representing aetiological characteristics of persons (Vance, 1989). Yet some social constructionist work, like some subsequent queer theory, also questioned the relevance of debates about aetiology and 'cause' to theoretical and political debates over the future of identity categories. The social constructionist/essentialist debate raged in a variety of directions, as the constructionism/essentialism dichotomy became increasingly inadequate to describe diverse theoretical positions (Vance, 1989; Stein, 1992). A body of work influenced by post-structuralism which emerged in the 1990s became associated with the transcendence or displacement of this dichotomy (Fuss, 1989, 1991; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Such work became known as queer theory (de Lauretis, 1991), although most of the key texts did not employ this label, which was also used in a variety of other ways (S. Epstein, 1994). Whether the term social constructionism retains any analytical utility, and whether post-structuralism and queer theory offer distinctive, coherent and valuable alternative perspectives remain contested issues (for discussion see S. Epstein 1994; Mort, 1994; Seidman, 1996, 1997; Weeks, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Roseneil, 2000, 2002).

It is clear, however, that most contemporary analyses of sexuality informed by social and cultural theory reject crude biologism, of which the 'gay gene' is the latest manifestation (Rose, 1996; Fernbach, 1998). Furthermore, forms of psychoanalysis which propose that subjectivity and desire are profoundly structured in early life in relation to sexual difference have increasingly been criticized – not only by social constructionists influenced by symbolic interactionism who tend to be critical of psychoanalysis per se (Plummer, 1981: 53–75; Weeks, 1985: 127–56), but also by theorists who defend psychoanalysis, emphasizing its potential to reveal the unfixity of sexual categories (Lane, 1997). Hence there is considerable shared scepticism of claims that everybody's sexual identity is fixed in childhood.

Yet this emphasis on the flexibility of sexual categorizations and identities is in tension with dominant accounts among lesbian and gay people which hold that 'the individual's homosexuality is determined by factors beyond her or his control' (Whisman, 1996: 120). These dominant accounts marginalize those of people who describe experiencing elements of choice or greater fluidity of identification (Whisman, 1996). A critique

of such understandings is required if society's homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy is to be challenged.

Social constructionism, queer theory and politics

The relationship of social constructionism to politics has been one of the central themes of debates over homosexuality in the social sciences, and among lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer activists and intellectuals, since the emergence of gay liberationism. In classic movement literature such as Dennis Altman's *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, which envisaged 'The End of the Homosexual', the tensions between political strategies of collective identification and theoretical problematization of identity categories were already the subject of discussion (Altman, 1971; see also Weeks, 1977). Lesbian and gay theorists subsequently problematized the political implications of 'essentialist' understandings of homosexuality as a uniform condition, by challenging their association with liberal claims for limited forms of privacy such as those used to achieve the partial decriminalization of male homosexuality in the UK (Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, 1957; Weeks, 1977: 166). As Anglo-American lesbian and gay movements placed increasing reliance upon biomedical explanations of homosexuality during the 1980s, this criticism was renewed to apply to more ambitious claims for rights and equality, although theorists such as Epstein simultaneously emphasized the political necessity of utilizing rather than abandoning identity categories (S. Epstein, 1987).

However, during the early 1990s theoretical work on sexuality associated with post-structuralism and queer theory tended more dramatically to de-emphasize the relevance of social constructionist perspectives to the development of political interventions (Fuss, 1989; Sedgwick, 1990). The concept of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak, 1987: 205–7), associated with an emphasis upon pragmatic engagement in specific political contexts was increasingly advanced in debates over sexuality (for discussion, see: Fuss, 1989: 32). Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* attempted to reduce contestations between 'essentialist' and 'constructivist' accounts of gay identity in politics to matters of mere rhetoric or political strategy, arguing that:

> gay-affirmative work does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origins of sexual preference and identity in individuals. (Sedgwick, 1990: 41; see also 26–7, 40–4)

Steven Seidman's subsequent work developing queer theory, also influenced by postmodernism, similarly sought to downplay the direct relevance of constructionist theoretical interventions for political action,

in favour of a more contextualist and pragmatic perspective (Seidman, 1996, 1997). Jeffrey Weeks has also sought to downplay social constructionism's political salience, commenting that 'social constructionism has no political belonging' (Weeks, 1995: 8; see Weeks, 1995: 7–9, 95; Weeks, 1998: 136–7).

Though different kinds of theorists in various respects, the analyses of Sedgwick, Seidman and Weeks share common tendencies which are indicative of broader intellectual currents over the past decade. There is a tendency to underplay the centrality of particular kinds of biomedical narratives to prevailing configurations of mainstream political discourse. But more significantly a rather selective influence of postmodernism is apparent. The insights of social constructionism and its legacies are drawn upon for the social sciences and by the theorists themselves, but there is scepticism about the necessity and/or possibility of introducing these insights into political strategies to influence mainstream public understandings.

Such political positions however, invoking a postmodern pragmatism, tend dangerously towards relativism (for relevant discussion see Squires, 1993). They need to be tempered by a re-engagement with critical perspectives seeking to revitalize emancipatory political dialogue (Habermas, 1987; Benhabib, 1992). Pragmatism has in practice played dangerously into the prevailing postmodern political climate of inertia, apathy and cynicism. Attempts to incrementally advance the ideals of the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s are becoming the preserve of a limited clique of politicians and policy-makers, while overt challenges to dominant cultural forms are abandoned. The possibility of discerning systematic and embedded relationships between elements of biomedical discourse and particular political discourses, and of communicating this analysis to the public sphere, needs to be defended.

Theorists such as Sedgwick, Seidman, and Weeks have tended to optimistically overestimate the potential for new narratives of sexual identity to enter the public sphere in postmodern times, without sufficiently recognizing and analysing the systematic promotion of different perspectives necessary to achieve this. It is significant that while these theorists appear to have limited interest in the importance of advancing social perspectives on sexual identity for interventions in mainstream politics, commentators drawing upon empirically detailed research on contemporary political debates have continued to express a sense of urgency about the need for this. Vigilant observers in the UK have continued to demonstrate lesbian and gay campaigners' reliance upon reductive and homogenizing biomedical understandings of homosexuality in debates over Section 28 in the late 1980s (Evans, 1993: 142–6; Evans, 1995), over human rights in the early 1990s (Jackson, 1998; Rahman, 1998), and in debates over equalization of the age of consent throughout

the 1990s (Waites, 1995, 1999a, 1999b, 2003, 2005; for recent discussion see Rahman, 2000; Evans, 2001). Relatedly, some of these theorists have also called greater attention to the need to utilize political theory to analyse how knowledge-claims circulate specifically in mainstream politics (Waites, 1995; Rahman, 2000: 3–4).

However, these commentaries have struggled to integrate the transcendence of the social-constructionist/essentialist dichotomy into their analyses of specific political contexts. They have continued to criticize the prevalence of 'essentialism' in political debates, implying the continued assumption of a uniform homosexual condition (eg. Evans, 1993, 1995; Waites, 1995; Rahman, 2000). For example, Rahman's recent book *Sexuality and Democracy* focuses on the implications of 'Essentialism as a political strategy', defining essentialism as 'the common cultural understanding of sexuality as an innate and immutable identity', which is 'based on a model of biological sexual drives or instinct' (Rahman, 2000: 4–6). Such analyses, including my own earlier work, are increasingly inadequate in a context where multiple theories of the causation of homosexuality and heterosexuality circulate (genetic, Freudian and so on), and where the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality are no longer conceived as uniform conditions.

By contrast, Henning Bech's analysis in his book *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity* is rare for having integrated social perspectives on sexual identity into an analysis of specific political conflicts and debates, without being over-reliant upon the essentialism/constructionism dichotomy (Bech, 1997). Bech's analysis, which integrates analyses of late modernity and associated transformations in biomedical and psychological knowledges, allows for multiple and conflicting understandings of homosexuality (Bech, 1997: 195–206). Bech discerns processes suggesting 'the disappearance of the modern homosexual', arguing that homogenizing understandings of the homosexual condition are dissipating, and play a diminishing role in underpinning claims for equality and citizenship. Through analysis of debates in Denmark over registered partnerships, Bech argues that the removal of discriminatory legislation and the emergence of the language of equality in political debates reflects the transcendence of the modern categorizations of homosexual and heterosexual. He suggests that homogenizing and essentialist understandings of homosexuality are transcended by the increasingly prevalent language of equality used in public debates over the law, which he interprets as signifying a shift towards recognition of the equal value of homosexuality and heterosexuality (Bech, 1997: 194–217, esp. 201–2).

The analysis that follows reassesses these arguments by examining recent debates in the UK over the age of consent, Section 28 and adoption. By focusing upon how knowledge-claims concerning the fixity of sexual

identities circulate in politics, and by drawing upon both social and political theory, it demonstrates that reductive understandings of sexual identity continue to play a central role in contemporary politics. Though fixity-claims in the public sphere represent only one aspect of the resilience of the heterosexual/homosexual binary in contemporary society, they have a particular significance. Fixity-claims are closely entwined with the concept of 'sexual orientation', which itself has a history of association with assumptions of a clear heterosexual/homosexual binary that works to suppress the existence of bisexuality and queer identities. The articulation of fixity-claims marks and contributes to producing a boundary between what are conceived as homosexual and heterosexual conditions.

Fixed sexual identities in recent UK politics

To understand the continuing impact of particular narratives of sexual identity in political debates requires an appreciation of the specific forms of knowledge-claim which prevail in particular realms of social life – particularly in the 'public sphere'. Habermas' (1989) understanding of the public sphere, in which particular public spaces are presented as corresponding to a particular quality of engaged political dialogue, has been criticized for exaggerating the boundaries between forms and qualities of political dialogue in different social realms (Meehan, 1995; Calhoun, 1992). Nevertheless the concept of the public sphere remains useful even when less clearly identified with particular social spaces and institutions, and a degree of specificity in the forms of knowledge-claim operating in a more diffusely conceived public sphere remains apparent (Fraser, 1995). This is particularly the case with respect to what can be described as the 'official political discourse' through which the politicians and policy-makers who determine the agendas of governmental institutions engage in their public activities – shaped especially by relationships and networks with sections of the media and non-governmental organizations.

My research over the past decade suggests that the specific character of official political discourse has been important in structuring political debates over the age of consent and Section 28 (Waites, 1995, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005). While diverse forms of knowledge-claim concerning sexual identity circulate in all areas of social life, scientific and professional narratives have particular resonance and carry particular authority in the public sphere. 'Fixity-claims' concerning the age at which 'sexual orientation' becomes an unalterable characteristic of a person have been advanced with particular efficacy, because they are underpinned by the expertise-claims of the medical profession. Such theories respond to fears concerning seduction into homosexual lifestyles – what McGhee has termed the fear of 'homosexual spread' (McGhee, 2000).

The importance of fixity-claims in contemporary sexual politics is apparent from analysis of debates over one of the most important issues in lesbian, gay and bisexual politics in recent years: the 'equalization' of the age of consent for sex between men. The fear of seduction into homosexuality was a central issue throughout these debates during the 1990s, until reform was finally achieved in 2000 (Waites, 1995, 1999b, 2003; Epstein et al., 2000: 14–18).[1] Opponents of equality emphasized the threat from predatory seducing older homosexuals, and the gay community's desire to convert young men. For example, in 1994 Home Secretary Michael Howard defended a higher age of 18 for sex between men by maintaining that 'there are likely to be, not all, but a number of young men between the ages of 16 and 18 who do not have a settled sexual orientation' (Hansard HC 21.2.1994: cols. 93–94; Waites, 1995). The threat of seduction remained central in the late 1990s:

> The homosexual community, by its nature, is sterile, and it can survive and grow only by proselytising. There is an agenda to make it easier for that community to grow. (Desmond Swayne MP, Hansard HC 1.3.1999: col. 797)

Yet such arguments were steadily defeated by an apparently definitive medical consensus that sexual identity formation occurs before the age of 16 (Epstein et al., 2000: 17–18), which formed part of what I have elsewhere characterized as a new 'hegemony' in age of consent debates, established by supporters of equality (Waites, 1999b, 2003, 2005). The lesbian and gay lobbying group Stonewall, which played a key role in establishing the case for equality, invoked the Wolfenden committee's conclusion that 'the main sexual pattern is . . . usually fixed in the main outline by the age of sixteen' (CHOP, 1957). Stonewall argued that 'all medical opinion' now corroborated this view, while omitting to address alternative social constructionist arguments (Stonewall, 1998).

Stonewall emphasized in particular the evidence of the British Medical Association (BMA), which adopted a policy supporting a reduction to 16 prior to the 1994 debate (BMA, 1994). The association's report *Age of Consent for Homosexual Men: A Scientific and Medical Perspective* stated that: 'the "causes" of homosexuality remain poorly understood and are almost certainly multifactorial', noting theories emphasizing 'neuroanatomic variations' ('gay brain' theories), 'genetic linkage' ('gay gene' theories), and 'psychological influences during childhood . . . in particular the nature of the mother–child relationship' (BMA, 1994: 5). It concluded (without a clear explanation or references to indicate why) that: 'A common feature of these factors is that they operate at a much earlier age than 16' (BMA, 1994: 5). The BMA's authority was repeatedly invoked by MPs in parliamentary debates.

The authority of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) was also invoked in favour of equality arguments by Stonewall (1998) and others. Labour MP Mike Watson argued that 'the Royal College of Psychiatrists has considered the matter in detail' and had 'stated that sexual orientation is not capable of major realignment after the early teens' (Hansard 21.2.1994: col. 107). Yet the RCP had only given a brief commentary on sexual identity-formation which made no such absolutist claims (RCP, 1976). The medical authority of the RCP and the BMA was thus appropriated by supporters of equality to convince the public of the fixity of sexual identities prior to the age of 16.

An emphasis upon the 'natural' status of homosexuality, implying a view of homosexuality as a distinct, homogenous and stable condition, was particularly evident in the discourse of many heterosexuals positioned in the centre-ground of the debate, seeking a rationale to support equality. Arguments such as that of Tony Blair suggested an emphasis upon the fixity of sexual orientation in early life, and the embeddedness of gayness: 'It is not against the nature of gay people to be gay; it is in fact their nature. It is what they are' (Hansard HC 21.2.1994: col. 98). Neil Kinnock MP, a crucial voice in winning support from Labour traditionalists, was influenced in this way (Hansard HC 21.2.1994: cols. 82–6), as was John Bercow MP, a Conservative who declared that he had changed sides in the debate (Hansard HC 10.2.2000: cols. 457–8). The European Commission's ruling in favour of an equal age of consent similarly emphasized that medical opinion regarded sexual orientation to be fixed by 16 (European Commission of Human Rights, 1997).

More fluid understandings of sexual subjectivities and identities were extremely rare in public debates. A comprehensive survey of mainstream national press coverage surrounding the 1994 debate revealed a tiny number of public interventions challenging an emphasis on the fixity of sexual identities (Waites, 1995, 2003). Though a somewhat lesser emphasis on fixity was evident during 1998–2000, fixity narratives remained influential (Epstein et al., 2000: 17; Waites, 1999b: 270–6, 2003). Alternative perspectives showed little sign of permeating the political mainstream. Strikingly, many of the new generation of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs were also the most confident in asserting the fixity of sexual identities. For example, gay Labour MP Ben Bradshaw vehemently denied that anyone ever regarded their sexual orientation as 'a matter of choice' (Hansard HC 10.2.2000: col. 440; for further evidence see: Waites, 2003: 646–7). This rationale also underpinned proposals emerging from the Home Office review of sex offences initiated in 1999, subsequently included in the Sexual Offences Act 2003, in which the age of consent of 16 acts as a baseline for various reforms including the removal of laws discriminating against same-sex behaviour (Home Office, 2000; Waites, 2005).

If the centrality of fixity-claims in the age of consent debates is accepted, it might nevertheless be believed that more recent debates over Section 28 and same-sex adoption suggest new patterns of discourse which transcend a previous 'rationale of containment'. But such objections can be demonstrated to be ill-founded through analysis of conflicts over these issues.

Section 28 refers to a part of the Local Government Act 1988, which stated that: 'A local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Attempts to repeal this during Labour's first term in government provoked extensive opposition, and were defeated in England and Wales by the House of Lords, despite eventual success in Scotland (Wise, 2000; Moran, 2001; Waites, 2001). But repeal was eventually achieved in England and Wales via an amendment to the Local Government Act 2003.

Various theorists have criticized the role of essentialist arguments in opposition to Section 28 when the law was created (Stacey, 1991; Evans, 1993, 1995; Waites, 2000). But although Joe Moran has commented in his analysis of the post-1997 period that the role of arguments about the fixity of sexual orientation was 'a crucial element of the debate about Section 28' (Moran, 2001: 82), no commentator has examined the role of fixity arguments in the recent repeal debates in detail. The fact that abolition of Section 28 has been achieved demands analysis of fixity-claims in a new context.

Calls for the repeal of Section 28 trespassed further into the dangerous territory of childhood than calls for an equal age of consent. Because Section 28 spoke of 'promotion' and addressed representation of homosexuality to children of all ages, calls for its repeal raised the threat of 'causing homosexuality' in ways which lowering the age of consent for sex between men to 16 did not. Hence it might appear that Section 28's repeal marks a profound advance, demonstrating the transcendence of concerns about the fixity of sexual identities.

However, support for repeal requires careful interpretation. There has been little public (or legal) consensus on the meaning of this peculiar piece of legislation, or on where it could be situated within the spectrum of forms of citizenship which structures political imaginaries. Section 28 was explicitly discriminatory, but was interpreted by many of the public as a law intended to prevent 'promotion' of homosexuality specifically in the realm of childhood. Sufficient public support to make repeal viable has been won because the legislation is out of step with moves towards tolerance of cultural diversity. But many of those in the political mainstream who accept repeal have not necessarily foregone their concerns about the fixity of sexual identities and belief in the preferable status of heterosexuality.

Given that public and parliamentary debates over the age of consent and Section 28 were taking place simultaneously until November 2000, it is clear that claims being advanced in the age of consent debates formed part of the general context in which arguments for repeal of Section 28 were formulated. But fixity-claims also operated in specific ways in the Section 28 debates. Direct assertions of authoritative medical expertise were less common, because the BMA's evidence that sexual identities are fixed 'at a much earlier age than 16' (BMA, 1994: 5) did not have such clear implications for the Section 28 debate. Perhaps partly for this reason the leading lesbian and gay organization Stonewall did not explicitly invoke medical authority to the same extent, or perhaps in response to previous criticism, or adapting to an improved political climate (Stonewall, 2000b). But pro-repeal MPs, including gay MPs, continued to make assertions emphasizing the fixity of sexual identities.

This is apparent in exchanges during the final Report stage of the Local Government Bill's passage through the House of Commons, between pro-repeal Labour backbench MP Chris Bryant (Rhondda constituency), a gay MP elected in 2001, and Conservative opponents Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire constituency) and Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald):

> Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful contribution, but does he accept that the sexual orientation of young children can be influenced, and that sex education can play a part in that?
>
> Mr. Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is tending towards the argument that homosexuality is an illness that can be caught. From experience, I know that the pressures of modern society are so strong that nobody would choose to be homosexual unless they felt that it was absolutely inevitable, that being homosexual was an integral part of who they were, and that they could do no other . . .
>
> Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and the Weald): I want to press the hon. Gentleman on the point that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordhire (Andrew Selous). Does the hon. Gentleman accept that teaching a child encompasses an element of influence? Is it not therefore important, when teaching children, that a way of life that – as the hon. Gentleman has just admitted – can cause problems in adult life should not be promoted?
>
> Mr. Bryant: . . . The right hon. Lady makes a common mistake. She believes that the influence that can be brought to bear on a young person can so transform their sexual leanings that they will become homosexuals. From my experience as a youth worker in the Church of England, when I assisted youth organisations all round the diocese of Peterborough, I know that this is not the case. If it were possible for somebody to catch homosexuality or to be influenced into becoming homosexual, I think that Oscar Wilde's children would have been gay. They were not. (Hansard HC 10.2003.03: col. 62)

These opposing arguments are characteristic of those mobilized by supporters and opponents of repeal more generally. The exchanges demonstrate that concern about the impact on sexual identities remained central even as debates over repeal reached their conclusion. This is also apparent to an extent in Stonewall's campaigning literature:

> They [referring to the Christian Institute] say (yet again) . . . that homosexuality is just a phase and that 'homosexual proselytism seeks to manipulate young people into seeing homosexuality as an acceptable and morally right lifestyle'. We say . . . we are what we are. Nobody can 'make' young people be lesbian or gay, and nobody wants to. (Stonewall, 2000a: 2)

Hence fixity-claims continued to be made in the Section 28 debates, but were vaguer in scope with reference to particular age groups, and typically made with less overt reference to medical authorities.

An important feature of prevailing discourses needs to be grasped to contextualize these claims. This is the extent to which emphasis was placed by supporters of repeal upon the impossibility of representations of same-sex relationships having an impact on sexual-identity-formation when occurring specifically within a school setting, in the context of teaching and education. This is suggested by the exchanges between MPs quoted earlier, and is apparent in the debates more broadly. Such claims were successful in the context of the 'mainstreaming of gayness' in the media (McNair, 2002: 129–48), since given the far greater likely impact of wider cultural contexts upon identity-formation, arguments about images used in school sex education lessons became increasingly redundant.

The implication of this is that arguments for the repeal of Section 28 in the political mainstream were formulated in ways which side-stepped some questions over whether sexual identities are fixed early in childhood – both broad questions about the effects of the media and cultural change in society as a whole, and specific questions about the effects of sexual behaviour. Hence repeal of Section 28 cannot be interpreted as implying the dissolution of concerns about the formation of sexual identities.

A slightly different analysis emerges in relation to debates over the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which legalized adoptions by same-sex couples in England and Wales. The issue of adoption has historically been one of the most difficult areas of legal discrimination in which to achieve change, because of deep-rooted prejudice against lesbian and gay parenting, and has presented an enormous threat to those who believe heterosexual identities need to be secured for children. Yet the passage of amendments to the Adoption and Children Act 2002, legalizing adoption for unmarried couples including same-sex couples, occurred with a clear majority among MPs (288 to 133, Hansard HC 16.05.2002: col. 1004)

and support from leading children's organizations such as the NSPCC, the Children's Society and Barnardo's.

Fixity-claims were a considerably less significant feature of public and parliamentary debates over adoption than they were in relation to Section 28. Indicative of this is the fact that the main debate on the issue in the House of Commons, during the Adoption and Children Bill's report stage, included no comments concerning the effects of same-sex parenting upon children's sexual identity-formation (Hansard HC 16.05.2002: cols. 967–1007). Debate concerning same-sex couples instead focused largely upon two issues: (i) the 'stability' of same-sex relationships; and (ii) the desirability of having both a male and a female parent for good parenting. The latter issue was typically discussed with reference to ill-specified benefits of different male and female gender roles, but without reference to effects upon sexual identity-formation.

However, as with Section 28, the change in the law on adoption need not be interpreted as evidence that all concerns about sexual identity-formation have dissipated. There is now widespread acceptance that heterosexual parents are unable to influence whether their children become gay. Hence the corresponding logical conclusion about homosexual parents carried considerable weight in debates over adoption by same-sex couples. But mainstream acceptance that gay and lesbian parenting does not influence sexual identities does not imply a dissipation of concerns about sexual identity formation per se.

The debates over Section 28 and adoption have both side-stepped arguments about the fixity of sexual identities in important ways. Mainstream (heterosexual) support for 'equality' in these contexts has been won via arguments that encounters with lesbian and gay people in the contexts of education and parenting do not influence sexual-identity formation. The debates leave an uncomfortable vacuum in public debate over the potential effects upon sexual identity and subjectivity of the mainstreaming of lesbian and gay identities in the media and popular culture (McNair, 2002). But they also leave in place more specific and focused concerns over the capacity of sexual behaviour to influence the sexual identities of under-16s, including the perceived threat of 'seduction' into homosexuality so apparent in the age of consent debates. Debates over Section 28 and adoption have not confronted these concerns, and hence a reliance on fixity-claims remains.

The completion of debates over the equalization of the age of consent has led to a decline in the overt articulation of fixity-claims invoking biomedical authorities in the public sphere. But fixity-claims remain significant for the analysis of contemporary conditions, and have not simply dissipated because the age of consent has been equalized. The legacy of the age of consent debates is that the belief that sexual identity

is established by the age of 16, repeatedly articulated in the public sphere over the past decade, has become an embedded part of popular common sense – a resource for argument when gay rights are at issue (for empirical evidence on this from youth research, see this article's final section). Fixity-claims and a rationale of containment associated with the persistence of a homosexual/heterosexual binary continue to operate. The next section analyses how the resilience of fixity-claims can be understood in the context of contemporary social and political theory.

Biomedical expertise and liberal equality in the public sphere

To understand the resilient role of fixity-claims concerning sexual identity in the public sphere requires that they be examined in the context of analyses of postmodernity and late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1992; Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994; Seidman, 1994), and of contemporary liberalism, developed in political theory (Brown, 1995; Kymlicka, 1995).

Fixity-claims derive their authority by originating with medical professionals, and are instances of wider patterns of biomedical knowledge production in modernity (Turner, 1995). Epistemological transformations occurring in late modernity have challenged the hierarchical and exclusionary forms of medical and psychological expertise (Turner, 1995), which increasingly appear to be characterized by greater 'reflexivity' (Giddens, 1991), responding in part to challenges from critical social science and radical social movements (Seidman, 1994). Medical knowledge paradigms informing debates over homosexuality therefore need to be understood as internally dynamic and heterogeneous.

To understand the implications of late modern transformations in biomedical knowledge for debates over sexuality, a crucial distinction needs to be drawn between the absence of consensus within the medical profession, and the ways in which medical professionals have maintained a uniform and powerful public voice in public debates. Neither the British Medical Association nor the Royal College of Psychiatrists offered any systematic account of how processes of sexual identity-formation might be relevant to determining appropriate sexual behaviour, or age of consent laws (RCP, 1976; BMA, 1994). Given the deeply contested nature of gay brain and gay gene theories within medical science (Rose, 1996), and profound differences between developmental psychologists and psychoanalytic theorists over the formation of sexual identities (Lane, 1997), it is apparent that profound dispute exists within the medical and psychological sciences over the aetiology of homosexuality. But it is also clear that

while there are new forms of reductionism such as in evolutionary psychology (Segal, 1999: 78–115), the concept of homosexuality as a uniform condition is also beginning to be questioned by other medical scientists and practitioners engaging with social science perspectives. While overt engagement with social constructionism and queer theory is lacking, cultural changes leading to the representation of more diverse forms of same-sex behaviour and lifestyle tend to disaggregate understandings of homosexuality. While most medical and psychological professionals retain a conception of sexual orientation as an inherent condition or characteristic of a person, for many such a conception is increasingly abstracted from any definitive or straightforward understanding of what constitutes, for example, gay or lesbian sexual behaviour or a gay or lesbian 'lifestyle'. Though S. Epstein (2003: 158–61) in his analysis of US health politics notes tendencies in health policy to reify sexual identity categories, he argues that these are sustained by lesbian and gay advocates of lesbian and gay health rather than straightforwardly imposed.

In its interventions in the age of consent debates in the UK the medical profession disclaimed knowledge of any specific theory of the causation of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Yet it nevertheless continued to authoritatively assert that 'sexual orientation' is established by the age of 16 (BMA, 1994). The BMA, eager to preserve its powerful status as 'voice of the medical profession', was content to facilitate its expertise being invoked by others (BMA, 1994: 3). Equality campaigners strategically appropriated such medical knowledge-claims, despite widespread scepticism among those activists influenced by gay liberationism. The medical profession, though explicitly disclaiming some of its own capacity for expertise, was thus nonetheless re-positioned as authoritative.

Giddens' optimistic analysis of late modernity tends to suggest growing reflexivity in all areas of social life (Giddens, 1991), but recent responses such as that of Adkins (2002) emphasize that reflexivity can have complex effects, depending on its form and context. In this vein, analysis of recent debates over homosexuality suggests that reflexivity has more complex and situated effects, deriving from the interaction between different paradigms of knowledge and social groups. Though a degree of increased reflexivity is apparent within medical paradigms and institutions, the generalized public uncertainty and doubt associated with late modernity can in some contexts lead to a persistence of faith in scientific and professional knowledge-claims in the absence of alternatives. At its extreme, this demand for certainty in late modernity has affinities to what Brown describes as 'reactionary foundationalism', characterized as reactionary by 'its truncated, instrumental link to a foundational narrative; it is rooted not in a coherent tradition but in a fetishized, de-contextualized fragment or icon of such a narrative' (Brown, 1995: 35–6).

In debates over sexual identity in the UK, medical knowledge has been revalidated in the public sphere. Medical and psychological expertise concerning 'homosexuality' is sought by politicians and the public, but does not offer authoritative certainties. Yet the public status of such expertise is nevertheless maintained through an uneasy alliance between professional interests, public demand for authoritative 'scientific' answers, and social movements willing to appropriate dominant expertise. Though different late modern responses to science and medical authority may be evident in other areas of policy and public debate, similar dynamics have been identified, for example, in White's analysis of the power of the psychological sciences in child welfare policy and legal practice (White, 1998).

What needs to be grasped is the existence of increasing internal dispute and conflict among biomedical authorities over the causes and meaning of 'sexual orientation', occurring simultaneously and in tension with the inclination of the medical profession to maintain its public status, and the willingness of others to endorse this authority. There is extensive conflict over the 'causes' and nature of 'sexual orientation', and conceptions of a homosexual condition are disaggregating, yet fixity-claims remain as important markers of the persistence of a homosexual/heterosexual binary. The claim that sexual identities are established by the age of 16 remains significant in the UK, a remnant of a particular history of debates over the age of consent since the Wolfenden Report. It is a 'fetishised, decontextualized fragment' of the 'foundational narrative' of modern scientific discourse (Brown, 1995: 36), which has been utilized to sustain boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The uncertainties threatened by increasingly reflexive biomedical knowledge-paradigms, offering a more diffuse conception of homosexuality that is less distinct from heterosexuality, produced a demand for certain boundaries to manage the emergence of new social relationships between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Fixity-claims were rescued from the past and rearticulated because they fulfilled this requirement. The claim that sexual identities are established by the age of 16 consequently became embedded as popular knowledge.

This analysis links debates over the relationship between social constructionism and sexual politics to wider debates over the forms of knowledge-claim which prevail in the public sphere. Theorists of reflexive modernization have focused attention on how the uncertain social conditions of late modernity demand political dialogue which acknowledges and manages contexts of uncertainty (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994). Beck and Giddens tend to suggest that the reflexivity of late modernity will undermine outdated forms of knowledge. Such perspectives appear to sustain the confidence of some of the originators of social constructionism that their social perspectives upon sexual identities

will eventually enter the realms of mainstream political debate. The recent work of Weeks, for example, emphasizes 'a profound shift in the locus of sexual knowledge construction: from the scientific expert to the politicized grass roots', such that 'those who were talked about in the pioneering works of sexologists are now speaking for themselves' (Weeks, 2000: 8; see also: Plummer, 1995: 81–96). Yet the dynamics identified here question such faith in late modernity, drawing attention to the resilience of the homosexual/heterosexual binary.

Recent debates do not show social movement knowledge replacing medical knowledge. Hence in relation to contemporary social theory they do not confirm the vision of new social movements as cauldrons of creativity, generating new knowledges to replace the old, echoed in Weeks' comments quoted earlier (Touraine, 1984; Melucci, 1996). Such analyses tend to overstate the homogeneity and creativity of movements, underplaying their mutually sustaining interplay with dominant knowledge paradigms, and the strategic accommodations and compromises made by movement leaders and organizations.

But neither do recent debates show evidence of biomedical knowledge maintaining its authority impervious to challenges from social movements. Analysis of the British Medical Association's interventions (BMA, 1994) suggests a degree of willingness to disclaim authority in relation to homosexuality. 'Fixity-claims' maintain their influence because they are supported by an alliance between the medical and psychological professions and lesbian and gay organizations. This suggests that the lesbian and gay movement has greater power, and greater potential for agency, in contemporary conditions. Yet it is only dominant representatives of 'the lesbian and gay movement' for whom this is the case.

This analysis can be clarified with reference to existing studies of 'the lesbian and gay movement' in social movement theory. Social movement theory has been impeded by a tendency to exaggerate the internal homogeneity of movements, and the distinctness of their knowledge-claims from established knowledge paradigms (e.g. Melucci, 1996). Relatedly, it has been hampered by attempts to distinguish analytically between instrumental, externally oriented and internally 'identity-oriented' movements and forms of movement action (Duyvendak and Giugni, 1995; for critique see Bernstein, 1997: 533). Most social movement theory has therefore been inadequate to grasp the fact that, far from 'biomedical knowledge' and 'lesbian and gay movement knowledge' of homosexuality being distinct and opposing, since the emergence of sexology in the 19th century they have been overlapping, deeply intertwined and mutually sustaining to a considerable degree. The representation of homosexuality as a fixed and discrete condition by the mainstream lesbian and gay movement through the 20th century, notwithstanding challenges by gay liberationists

to this, has drawn upon and sustained the authority of biomedicine. This was apparent in the appropriation of sexology by liberals from the late 19th century; in the Wolfenden Report (CHOP, 1957) and subsequent campaigns for the decriminalization of homosexuality in the 1960s; and remains apparent in recent debates, as I have shown. Characterizing the lesbian and gay movement as being 'identity-oriented' and expressive (Duyvendak and Giugni, 1995), or exaggerating its distinctiveness as a 'New Social Movement' characterized by 'cultural challenges' and cultural innovation (Melucci, 1996: 6) makes it difficult to grasp that its articulation of political claims for citizenship simultaneously involves drawing upon biomedicine to produce and sustain dominant narratives of sexual identity and subjectivity, and that this is to an extent a matter of strategy for movement leaders rather than a straightforward representation of the movement as a pre-existing whole.

If consideration of bisexuality, queer sexualities, and diverse same-sex sexualities is used to problematize the boundaries of 'the lesbian and gay movement', and if insights from bisexual politics and theory (e.g. Eadie, 1993) and queer politics and theory (e.g. Warner, 1993) are drawn upon, then what much social movement theory has not grasped becomes apparent. The persistent invocation of biomedical and psychological knowledge-claims in the process of making claims for citizenship continues to involve the centering of some identities and marginalization and exclusion of others. Key campaigns for changes in state policy have been indistinguishable from defining whom the movement is for, whom it represents and who is a member. Recent work by Bernstein (1997), critically engaging with social movement theory, has thankfully begun to explore strategies of identity-deployment by the lesbian and gay movement; but the implications of such work need to be considered in the context of a broader social analysis.

To summarize, I am arguing that the complex interplay between biomedical knowledge and the lesbian and gay movement cannot be captured by an analytical schema which regards the two as distinct, and asserts either the persistent authority of biomedicine, or a shift of power to a creative 'lesbian and gay movement'. The starting point must be that the two are deeply interwoven, and work together to sustain particular culturally dominant narratives about sexualities, excluding others from, or marginalizing them within the 'lesbian and gay movement' itself – such as bisexuals, queer sexualities and so on. From this latter perspective however, it remains possible to discern in recent debates a shift of power and authority from biomedicine to the lesbian and gay movement.

What makes the analysis presented in this article distinctive is that it allows simultaneous recognition of: (i) change within biomedical knowledge concerning homosexuality, including a questioning of the idea that

homosexuality and heterosexuality are uniform conditions; (ii) recognition of the persistent and central role of biomedical knowledge claims concerning the fixity of sexual identities in recent public debates; (iii) a shift of power and potential for agency from biomedicine and the psychological sciences to the lesbian and gay movement.

The analysis can be developed further in relation to contemporary political theory. Resilient biomedical knowledge-claims find a mutually sustaining relationship with particular complimentary configurations of liberal political discourse in the public sphere that endorse equality. Mainstream politics is structured by forms of liberal discourse which increasingly address oppressed and marginalized groups and individuals as deserving of formally equal treatment from the state, yet while retaining normative assumptions of the superiority of particular mainstream ways of living. Liberalism grants formally equal citizenship via law and social policy to social groups which remain subject to social forces producing inequality. By sustaining an impermeable heterosexual/homosexual binary (for adults), fixity-claims contribute to producing discrete social groups which can be addressed by liberalism in the language of equality, while the need to address underlying inequalities is evaded.

More specifically, contemporary liberal political discourse has taken a particular character which, drawing upon Hall's identification of 'pluralist multiculturalism' (Hall, 2000: 210), can be described as 'liberal pluralist multiculturalism'. Adapting to cultural shifts, mainstream political discourse including that of New Labour has witnessed expansions in the scope and definition of citizenship to encompass differences of ethnicity and culture. Attempts to articulate 'multicultural citizenship' have increasingly sought to address ethnic and cultural diversity by recognizing minority group rights, rather than only individual rights (Kymlicka, 1995; see also debates in the new journal *Ethnicities*). Yet the articulation of new forms of liberalism has tended to evade explicit confrontation or dialogue with radical critiques of mainstream culture. Liberal pluralist multiculturalism therefore embodies no more than an ethos of tolerance, offering rights and formal equality to marginalized communities because it is believed possible to do so without undermining mainstream ways of living. As critics have argued, the understandings of multiculturalism which predominate in the political mainstream have been underpinned by notions of discrete and bounded communities in ways which conceal persistent cultural hierarchies (Hall, 2000: 210; Alleyne, 2002). An emphasis on the fixity of adult sexual identities can similarly be seen as associated with the operation of liberal rationales of containment, which assume the unthreatened status of heterosexuality.

Social groups are constituted, unequally, through processes of differentiation which include the articulation of political identities in the public

sphere (see Squires, 1999: 124–39). Wendy Brown, criticizing the tendency of identity politics to assume pre-defined subjects, emphasizes the necessity of investigating how liberal political discourse is interwoven with forms of subjectification which produce hierarchically organized identities (Brown, 1995: 52–76, esp. p. 55; cf. Foucault, 1982). In this light, prevailing forms of liberal political discourse and the heterosexual/homosexual binary can be seen as mutually sustaining and complimentary, with the articulation of fixity-claims concerning sexual orientation in the public sphere acting as an important element in processes of subjectification producing young people's sexualities.

It is the intersection between the renewal of biomedical knowledge-claims concerning sexual identity and the particular form of liberal pluralist multiculturalism now prevailing in the public sphere that shapes a specific contemporary political configuration. Biomedical knowledge-claims concerning sexual identity have been appropriated to assure mainstream public opinion that the containment of homosexuality can be combined with the granting of (most forms of) legal equality. The resilience of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, particularly in the lives of young people, has important implications.

Implications for the politics of sexuality

The analysis presented here reorients the way in which we imagine the history of homosexuality in the UK since the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967. This history is often imagined as involving an initial step into a limited space of privacy governed by principles of containment, transcended by the gay liberationist claim for equality. The subsequent emergence of state policies favouring equality and social diversity are seen as embodying the transcendence of principles of containment. From this perspective, evident in some recent academic work (Rayside, 1998) the ascendance of languages of equality, diversity, citizenship and rights reflects the establishment of the neutrality of the state and mainstream public opinion; the primary problem which remains is the residual homophobia of a minority of the population. But the alternative view suggested here is that what has occurred is the steady occupation of a realm of adult citizenship defined by a consistent and renewed boundary, marked by the claim first expressed in the Wolfenden Report that sexual identity becomes fixed by the age of 16. Campaigns for equality have succeeded largely within the terms of a liberal rationale of containment, of which we have now reached the outer limits.

A hierarchical normative distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality continues to exist alongside increasingly successful claims for equality, human rights, citizenship and recognition of cultural diversity.

Contemporary extensions of citizenship, such as acceptance of gays and lesbians in the military and moves towards legal rights for same-sex partnerships, do not directly question the assumed containment of homosexuality. This points to a social context in which liberal and progressive heterosexuals can denounce overt discrimination while harbouring unspoken assumptions that theirs may nonetheless be a normatively superior way of life. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people, beguiled by their new-found public visibility and increasing moves towards equal treatment by the state, should not mistakenly conclude that they are respected and valued as equals in mainstream society.

This analysis questions Bech's foretelling of 'the disappearance of the modern homosexual' in late modernity, by identifying persistent cultural boundaries (Bech, 1997: 194–217). Bech's argument, based primarily on the analysis of debates over partnership legislation, does not give sufficient attention to specific dynamics operating in the realm of childhood (see especially: Bech, 1997: 199–206). A specific analysis of childhood and youth throws light on the persistence of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, by suggesting the continuing existence of pressures to minimize the prevalence of homosexuality.

Some variants of queer theory have also argued that we are witnessing 'a significant destabilization of the heterosexual/homosexual binary' in a way which suggests profound social transformation and that the transcendence of previous boundaries is the consequence of various dynamics associated with postmodernity (Roseneil, 2000; see also Roseneil, 2002). But the analysis here suggests that rather than the reflexivity of late modernity necessarily leading to a queer dissolution of boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, such boundaries have in fact been renewed as a consequence of the interplay between different forms of knowledge-claim.

The policing of the heterosexual/homosexual boundary has particular negative implications in relation to bisexuality and queerness. Analysts of bisexual and queer theory have emphasized the ways in which those who fall at the margins of dominant sexual categories suffer specific forms of oppression (Eadie, 1993; Dollimore, 1997). The emphasis of queer theorists upon dissipating rather than claiming identities has been increasingly resonant with contemporary political circumstances and the declining power of the closet (Warner, 1993; Seidman, 1996, 1997, 1998; Seidman et al., 1999; Roseneil 2000, 2002). Yet the persistence of the homosexual/heterosexual binary in the public sphere frustrates attempts to advance bisexual and queer identities, despite the increasing possibility of narrating personal experiences in these terms in culture more broadly. However, bisexuals and those who identify as 'queer' or dissent from sexual identity labels will nevertheless benefit in some ways from rights gained in relation to same-sex relationships.

The most negative implications of the analysis are for young people, negotiating the disjuncture between developments in the realms of childhood and adulthood. Campaigns for equalization of the age of consent have forcefully advanced claims for equality, privacy, citizenship and human rights to secure decriminalization for over-16s, but debates have continued to skirt the issue of sexual identity-formation and hence the social status of young people under 16. The prevailing emphasis upon the fixity of sexual identities suggests that once homosexuality is seen as a *fait accompli* the state increasingly seeks to minimize overt discrimination in the lives of adults, yet conversely also suggests a pessimistic interpretation of the dynamics applying to under-16s. The policing of a homosexual/heterosexual binary marked by fixity-claims has particular damaging effects upon young people, since it is at the boundary between childhood and adulthood where tensions are greatest. Political discourse in the public sphere demands the clear assignation of sexual identities by the age of 16, requiring teenagers to bundle their polymorphous sexualities into the categories of gay and straight imposed by the adult world. Despite general cultural tendencies towards the emergence of more complex and diverse forms of sexual identification, such as bisexual and queer identities (Roseneil, 2000) which are opening new possibilities for young people (Lehtonen, 2000), adolescents are also simultaneously subject to specific countervailing dynamics. Increasing emphasis in the public sphere upon the establishment of fixed sexual identities has subjected young people to pressures to identify their 'sexual orientation' at an ever-earlier age. It is increasingly apparent that these dynamics, operating in conjunction with the 'mainstreaming of gayness' in the media and popular culture (McNair, 2002: 129–48) are having a profound impact upon the cultural circumstances within which young people negotiate their sexual identities.

This has yet to be clearly demonstrated in the analysis of empirical research with young people, because available data have not been approached from appropriate theoretical and political perspectives. The prevailing tendency of 'lesbian and gay youth research' into the experiences of young people's sexualities from perspectives that problematize heteronormativity is to adopt what can be described as an implicit lesbian and gay standpoint, which prevents it from identifying these crucial dynamics (e.g. Trenchard and Warren, 1984). Tensions between a lesbian and gay standpoint and an alternative youth/childhood perspective are not explicitly examined. Even where there is a critical perspective on the production of the heterosexual/homosexual binary informed by social constructionism and queer theory, and a general attentiveness to young people's specific experiences (e.g. Nayak and Kehily, 1996, 1997; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Griffin, 2002), the primary allegiance of researchers to a lesbian and gay politics prevents the identification of tensions between

adult-oriented lesbian and gay politics and the experiences of young people. Most literature on 'coming out', even that which is informed by sociological perspectives on the self, discourse theory, gender, sexuality and youth, persists in viewing young people's strong assertions of lesbian or gay identity as an achievement necessitated by a general context of heteronormative discrimination throughout society, rather than as an exaggerated feature of life in adolescence produced by specific social forces operating during a specific period of the life course (e.g. Plummer, 1995: 81–96; Savin-Williams, 1998; Markowe, 2002). Recent work helpfully situates the negotiation of coming out as lesbian or gay in the context of young people's specific circumstances in families (Valentine et al., 2003), or in relation to leisure and consumption practices on the lesbian and gay scene (Holt and Griffin, 2003); but for Valentine, Butler and Skelton (2003) the pre-existence of a 'lesbian' or 'gay' identity tends to be assumed; and while Holt and Griffin (2003) explicitly problematize discourses of authenticity and the true sexual self, and analyse how these are employed and sustained by forms of commercial marketing and consumer culture, the particular impact of contemporary political discourses in the public sphere on young people's narratives of identity remains overlooked.

Yet my research on young people's role in age of consent debates suggests that young people's own narratives of identity, and their formulations of political arguments, take a specific form which is significantly shaped in relation to discourses in the public sphere (Waites, 1999b, 2005). In these debates, young lesbians and gay men (in particular) placed a heavy emphasis upon their experience that sexual identity is not a choice, and is established at an early age. By contrast, while many lesbians and older gay men (in particular) share similar views, in formulating their arguments for an equal age of consent they typically placed a greater emphasis upon political principles and values, particularly equality. The difference in form between these narratives can be seen as embodying a different political sensibility. Young people's discourse tends to mobilize fixity-claims more strongly as the foundational element, because they are situated in relation to a liberal framework which assumes the preferential status of heterosexuality, yet dialogues surrounding this process reveal tension and anxiety. Lehtonen's research, using interview data, suggests how many young people are frustrated by a pressure they experience to identify strongly as 'lesbian' or 'gay' (Lehtonen, 2000). Sue Sharpe's recent analysis of qualitative data from the *Respect* study of young people's values also suggests that those young people who move beyond homophobic discourse require fixity of sexual identities as a foundation before being willing to argue for the value of equality. Sharpe comments that 'young people found a need to focus on questions of causality' (Sharpe, 2002: 271). The fact that

fixity-claims have remained central in the public sphere provides the explanation for this circumscribed form of liberalism.

It is therefore young people who are the primary bearers of the burdens generated by the continued reliance upon fixity-claims in mainstream politics, with which much lesbian and gay politics has been complicit. While researchers examining youth and childhood have increasingly drawn attention to the particular contexts of young people's lives through which homosexuality and heterosexuality are produced (e.g. Nayak and Kehily, 1996, 1997; Holt and Griffin, 2003), youth research risks a tendency to overstate the autonomy of youth cultures from wider social dynamics. Youth and childhood research needs to recognize how mainstream liberal political discourse in the public sphere has contributed to the persistence of a heterosexual/homosexual binary in relation to which young people are pressurized to categorize themselves. The contemporary form of the heterosexual/homosexual binary creates particular tensions and difficulties in young people's lives; hence young people are paying a price for pragmatic strategies of engagement with biomedical science.

This article has demonstrated that knowledge-claims concerning the fixity of sexual identities in adolescence are not an irrelevant legacy of debates now in the past. Rather, the fixity of sexual identities in the public sphere is a crucial and enduring feature of contemporary sexual politics, and a key element in the resilience of the heterosexual/homosexual binary in late modernity. The acceptance that sexual identities become fixed prior to adulthood can be conceptualized as one of the defining features of the new sexual order of non-discrimination and cultural diversity in law, social policy and popular discourse. This analysis will, I hope, facilitate a more rigorous and focused analysis of the contemporary heterosexual/homosexual binary and prevailing understandings of 'equality'.

What should be the political response to this analysis? Although I have criticized excessively pragmatic and strategic approaches, political responses do need to be strategic to a degree rather than purely idealistic. My analysis suggests that fixity-claims, and biomedical conceptions of sexual identity and subjectivity more generally, are entwined with a new political configuration, including discourses of liberal multiculturalism and equality. They are clearly socially and politically embedded, and cannot be easily 'argued away'. On the other hand, however, the completion of debates over the age of consent, Section 28 and adoption opens a space for new forms of public debate, and represents an opportunity. Furthermore, I have argued that in the context of challenges to biomedicine the dominant representatives of the lesbian and gay movement – leading elites, political organizations, and public intellectuals – now have greater power and potential for agency, should they care to attempt to change the terms of debate.

A central conclusion therefore is that public intellectuals associated with lesbian, gay and bisexual movements need to renew attempts to make public interventions to advance 'constructionist' perspectives on sexual identities. The low profile of public intellectuals in the UK, and the lack of a public profile for sociology, have important implications in this context. As I have shown, there has been a profound failure of political dialogue in debates over sexual identity in the public sphere, and a sustained gulf between social scientific academia and the public. Inevitably such moves will involve difficult confrontations with hegemonic heterosexuality in forms previously evaded, opening up new dangers as well as possibilities.

In this article I have sought to identify the way in which past strategies have shaped the present situation, to present an analysis of contemporary conditions and the intellectual and political choices we now face, and to foreground the specific impact of past strategies upon particular groups. My analysis suggests that the 'lesbian and gay movement' that is recognized by mainstream society (i.e. leading organizations, networks of elites, key intellectuals and so on) has more scope for a creative and disruptive intervention than is recognized in analyses which exaggerate the monolithic intransigence of biomedical knowledge. It also identifies the specific forms of damage done to bisexuals, to queers seeking to evade or disrupt sexual identities, and especially to young people, which are inherent in the present situation. A central political question, therefore, is whether those in the 'lesbian and gay movement' who comprehend the intellectual legacies of gay liberationism identify themselves with a political project concerned with these groups sufficiently to take the opportunity that now arises. For bisexual and queer politics, meanwhile, a critical issue that remains is the need to develop sustained and effective political strategies to influence discourses on sexuality and achieve political representation in the public sphere.

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Note

1. This discussion of the age of consent debates repeats arguments from another article (Waites, 2003).

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Biographical note

Matthew Waites is Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the Faculty of Development and Society at Sheffield Hallam University. He has published journal articles and book chapters on age of consent laws and lesbian, gay and bisexual politics in the UK, and is co-editor (with Jeffrey Weeks and Janet Holland) of *Sexualities and Society: A Reader* (Polity Press, 2003). His book, *The Age of Consent: Young People, Sexuality and Citizenship* (2005) is published by Palgrave Macmillan.
Address: Applied Social Sciences, Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Crescent Campus, Sheffield S10 2BP.
[email: m.a.waites@shu.ac.uk]