

CHAPTER 3

SEX, GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I review key moments in the debates around theorising gendered and sexualised subjectivity. I first consider how sex, gender and sexuality have historically been constructed in social science research broadly, and in the discipline of psychology specifically. I then provide a review of feminist poststructuralist responses to these constructions, with a specific focus on Butler's (1990) formulation of identity construction as it relates to the discursive production of gendered and sexualised identities, in order to extend the discussion of poststructuralist theory that was introduced in the previous chapter. Foucauldian theory, although widely taken up in gender studies, has been critiqued for not including an overt gendered focus (Ramazanoglu, 1993). Butler's work, while largely aligned with a Foucauldian and Derridean position, diverges from Foucault's work in that she contributes an explicit focus on the discursive production of not only sexuality but also gendered identities. I conclude this chapter with a review of how female sexuality has been constructed over time, before offering a working understanding of gendered, sexualised subjectivity that can inform the present study.

3.2 Essentialist treatment of sex, gender and sexuality

In this section I consider theories of sex, gender and sexuality as inherent essences, drawn on to posit different sexual "types". I also consider social constructionist challenges to such essentialist treatment.

3.2.1 Sex, gender and the biological imperative

The dominant discourse shaping most social science research on sex and gender has been that biological sex, referring to one's identification as either male or female, is a naturally existing fact that is evident at birth. Gender, on the other hand, is considered to be an acquired identity that depends on social and cultural influences (West & Zimmerman, 1992). In this sex/gender division, sex is typically presented as a biological certainty, as innate and invariable, whereas gender is described as an achieved status that is constructed through social means (West & Zimmerman, 1992).

This sex/gender division has also been upheld in feminist discourse. Starting with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/1988, p. 295) statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", the

social character of gender has been emphasised as distinct from but related to biological sex. This idea was further developed by theorising sex as biological femaleness and maleness, and gender as socially and culturally informed (Oakley, 1972). By reiterating the distinction between sex as biologically determined and gender as socially constructed, feminist theorists have been able to question patriarchal assumptions of biological differences between men and women (Weeks, 1985). They have been able to explore the meanings of femininity and masculinity as it varied over time and context, and have been able to illustrate that, since gender is variable, these meanings can be contested and changed (Jackson & Scott, 2002).

However feminist theorists such as Oakley (1972) have been criticised for not entirely escaping the deterministic conceptualisation of gender. In the sex/gender division, biological sex is treated as a pre-existing given and gender as socially constructed, yet gender is theorised as following from sex and is in that sense similarly fixed (Jackson & Scott, 2002). Within feminist theory, several currents of thought have developed that call such an uncritical treatment of sex into question. Stanley (1984) was one of the first feminist theorists to critique this widely held distinction between sex and gender, arguing that biological sex cannot be accepted as unproblematic. Although many feminist theorists reject biological essentialism in favour of social constructionist arguments, Stanley (1984) points out that by accepting the immutability of sex, such theorists still adhere to a view of gender being a product of biological factors. Stanley (1984) argues that such a view leaves sex untheorised and calls for feminist scholars to theorise biological sex from a social constructionist point of view.

West and Zimmerman (1992) also critique the sex/gender division by questioning the view that sex is a natural given onto which gender is built. They note that if one is born female it is assumed that one will achieve a (stable, unvarying) feminine gendered identity. In this sense the sex/gender division, despite its insistence on the fluidity of gender, maintains a deterministic view where sexed males become gendered males, and sexed females become gendered females (West & Zimmerman, 1992). West and Zimmerman (1992) instead argue that sex is socially constructed, similar to gender. The identification of sex as either male or female (because variations in between are widely rejected) occurs through the application of socially agreed-upon biological criteria for classifying an individual's sex – the process of identifying sex as male or female is therefore a social process. This is further illustrated through the example of ambiguous sex at birth, where the “problem” of ambiguous sex is resolved through medical intervention to construct either a male or female body; in that way a disruption of the naturalised binary is avoided (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003).

3.2.2 Fixing sexuality: The creation of sexual “types”

The preceding section briefly reviewed dominant discourses around biological sex and gender. The following discussion is concerned with the manner in which sexuality has historically been constructed in social science. Sexuality, as it refers to sexual object choice and the structure and expression of sexual desire (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003), has been described in varying ways since it emerged as a field of study in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Theories of sexuality have predominantly been grounded in an essentialist view, moving from a conceptualisation of sexuality as the expression of innate biological drives, to a view of sexuality as identity (i.e. categories of sexual orientation). Psychology as a discipline has been particularly influenced by an essentialist ontological and epistemological approach when theorising about sexuality and sexual orientation. The dominant assumption in psychology was at first to emphasise the biological and intrapsychic determinants of sexuality, in line with Freud’s (1905/1953) libido theory. Subsequent approaches followed an identity model, theorising sexual orientation as an inherent, primary component of identity (Bohan & Russell, 1999b), largely shaped by cultural instead of biological and internal forces but still deemed similarly fixed (Stein, 1989).

In this manner, the same deterministic construction of sex/gender as rooted in biology, discussed in the previous section, has also had widespread and enduring implications for how sexuality has been constructed in social science research. The conceptualisation of sexuality as an inherent essence that resides in individuals that has characterised most thinking around sexuality and sexual orientation can be described as the view that sexuality is an intrinsic property of a person that is independent of social or historical context (Rubin, 1984; Stein, 1992; Weeks, 1987). This view supports a realist ontology, in that the categories that are used to describe reality are considered to refer to actual phenomena that exist independently from our understandings thereof (Bohan & Russel, 1999b; Epstein, 1998).

Essentialism further regards sexuality to be stable with the implication that one’s sexual orientation is seen as fixed and unvarying across contexts or one’s lifespan (Beasley, 2005). It draws on a discourse of biology for support, in that sexuality is viewed as “a biological, unchanging force, given at birth” (Stein, 1989, p. 2). Tiefer (1992) notes that biology has remained in a privileged position in sexuality discourse due to the belief that the body provides access to “true” knowledge about sexuality; “the body comes before everything else; it is the original source of action, experience, knowledge, and meaning for the species and the individual” (p. 312). Much of modern discourse around sexuality reflects this preference for biological explanations, with a strong focus on the study

of sexual instinct as an inherent and natural drive (Weeks, 1987). This drive approach to sexuality, extended later by Freud's theory, is described as finding "normal" expression in heterosexual sex, with a prolific number of "deviations" from normal sexual practice being recorded by sexologists in the late nineteenth century (such as Ellis, 1913; Krafft-Ebing, 1931).

These deviations from what was considered normal sexuality were described in great detail in taxonomies of human sexual behaviour, with descriptions of exhibitionism, sado-masochism, zoophilia, fetishism and many more (Krafft-Ebing, 1931). However, the social concerns that gained prominence during the late nineteenth century resulted in proscriptions against homosexuality in particular, being favoured as a matter of public importance (Weeks, 1981). In this period a discourse on the sanctity of marriage and reproductive (hetero)sexual intercourse was increasingly advanced, resulting in greater control of discourses on extra-marital sex. Such control demanded ever-increasing refinement of other sexualities that threatened the discreet and socially sanctioned role of sex in the marital relationship and of all the various taxonomies or deviations, homosexuality was subjected to the most extensive and consistent social pressure (Weeks, 1981).

Within this context, sexuality came to be treated as a "type" or a category of identity, such as "homosexual" or "heterosexual" (Hicks, 2008). In this view, people are considered as having certain indisputable characteristics (hormonal, genetic, psychological and so forth) that identify them as belonging to the "corresponding" category (Epstein, 1998; Stein, 1992). Weeks (1987) describes this as the belief that by describing our sexuality or sexual orientation, we are relating something about our "true essence of being, our real selves" (p. 31).

Essentialist views of sexuality as different types of identity typically came to support a view that reduces sexual orientation to a binary construction, with heterosexuality and homosexuality being regarded as the only valid categories for sexual identification (Bradford, 2004). These two sexual types are regarded as independent and mutually exclusive (Stein, 1992). This dichotomy is structured hierarchically, with heterosexuality often being considered normative and homosexuality being marginalised through depictions of pathology and deviance (Bradford, 2004). It can be noted again that a biologicistic discourse is incited to support this dichotomy resulting in a distinction being drawn between "the apparently Nature-endowed correctness of heterosexual genital intercourse" and "the bizarre manifestations of 'the perverse'" evident in homosexuality (Weeks, 1987, p. 14). Relevant to the current study, it can be emphasised that such a heterosexual/homosexual binary has the consequence of rendering bisexuality largely invisible in theorising sexual orientation.

A competing view that emerged alongside the heterosexual/homosexual binary within essentialist discourse on sexuality was that of a bipolar construction of sexual orientation⁴. The bipolar approach emerged as a result of amongst others, the work of Kinsey (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) who challenged the restriction placed on sexual expression by reducing sexual orientation to a heterosexual/homosexual binary. Instead, a bipolar view of sexual orientation regards sexual orientation as existing somewhere along a one-dimensional continuum of exclusive heterosexuality on the one end of the continuum, and exclusive homosexuality on the other (Stein, 1992). Based on the scale developed by Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953), individuals are placed at a point along the continuum in response to questions about their sexual practices, fantasies and desires. This conceptualisation acknowledges bisexuality by placing individuals indicating “equal” heterosexuality and homosexuality as existing in the middle of this continuum. The Kinsey scale is further elaborated in more detail in Chapter 4.

In recent years the dominant approach to theorising sexuality has been challenged by authors critiquing the assumptions of essentialism (Bohan & Russell, 1999b). In these critiques the binary view of sexual orientation is considered simplistic, in that it reduces a vast array of expressions of sexuality to two categories (Bohan & Russell, 1999c). It is also critiqued as ignorant of the fact that for many people, their understanding of their sexual orientation changes over time (Bohan & Russell, 1999c). Furthermore, by insisting on grouping people according to what is considered to be internally homogenous categories, the varied experiences of people who qualify as belonging to a category are dismissed. The bipolar view of sexuality can be similarly critiqued, particularly as it still conceptualises sexuality in relation to heterosexuality and homosexuality, albeit in a manner that allows for greater flexibility.

The points of criticism raised here are taken up in the next section, which considers social constructionist challenges to essentialist views of sexuality.

3.2.3 Sexuality or sexualities? Early social constructionist critiques

Social constructionist critiques of essentialist theorising of sexuality emerged from various disciplines, initially most notably from sociology (e.g. Richardson, 1987; Weeks, 1981; 1985) and

⁴ Stein (1992), however, argues against the belief that essentialist theories of sexuality typically assume a binary or a bipolar position, citing essentialist research that rely on two-dimensional views of sexuality in support of this.

anthropology (e.g. Rubin, 1975). The work of sociologists Gagnon and Simon (1973) as well as the labelling perspective employed by Plummer (1975) and McIntosh (1968), served to deconstruct essentialist notions of sexuality as natural. McIntosh (1968), in her analysis of the emergence of the homosexual role, illustrates how homosexual identity is in fact a sociohistoric product and not an essential characteristic of individuals. Her work describes how homosexual acts or practices have been documented at various points throughout history, but that it has only been during recent times that the category homosexual was identified as a social role with identifiable characteristics. Gagnon and Simon (1973) extended this critique in the theoretical context of symbolic interactionism, detailing how sexuality is not a naturally present force, but is instead learned through the development of sexual scripts. Their work contributed to the growing theoretical view that sexuality is fluid and negotiated in social contexts. Rubin (1975), in her formulation of sex/gender systems, highlighted the cultural variability of sexuality in the following manner:

The needs of sexuality and procreation must be satisfied as much as the need to eat, and one of the most obvious deductions which can be made from the data of anthropology is that these needs are hardly ever satisfied in any 'natural' form, any more than are the needs for food. Hunger is hunger, but what counts as food is culturally determined and obtained.... Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained. (p. 165)

During the 1970's these critiques gained momentum and an identifiable social constructionist approach to studying sexualities emerged (Vance, 1998). While social construction theory as it stands today is not a unitary approach, a number of commonalities in social constructionist theorising of sexuality can be identified. Firstly, transhistorical and transcultural conceptualisations of sexuality are rejected in favour of a view that appreciates that understandings of sexuality are historically and culturally informed (Vance, 1998). Secondly, sexual acts are not considered to have any essential or universal meaning; instead the significance and meaning of sexual and affective experiences are influenced by the cultural and historical context in which they occur (Vance, 1998). Designating an act as sexual is in itself contested, as the meaning of what is considered to be sexual is also subjectively constructed (Epstein, 1998). Individuals and societies develop meanings for certain acts, and over time particular acts become constructed as sexual. This is a direct challenge to popular essentialist conceptualisations of sexuality that consider sexual acts as an expression of an inherent sexual drive, or instinctual force. Instead of reflecting inherent physiological or psychological phenomena, the meanings of sexual acts are considered to be variable and socially negotiated (Epstein, 1998).

Following from this, the relationship between sexual acts and identity is not regarded as fixed, and can be attributed varying and complex meanings depending on the discourses available in a particular society. For example, same-sex behaviour does not necessarily imply a subjective gay or lesbian identity or a commitment to belonging to a gay or lesbian community (Vance, 1998). Social constructionist thought is then critical of essentialist constructions that regard sexuality as a type, where “‘doing’ and ‘experiencing’ can become consolidated into ‘being’ through categoric labelling” (Plummer, 1998, p. 85). Thirdly, sexual orientation, or “the direction of sexual desire”, is also not an inherent essential characteristic of individuals but is instead socially constructed (Vance, 1998, p. 163). Within a social constructionist view, sexual orientation is only relevant as a category to the extent that a society constructs it as being meaningful. Not all societies consider sexual orientation as contributing to one’s identity, and in some societies the construct “sexual orientation” does not even occur (Bohan & Russell, 1999a).

It can be noted that despite a focus on fluidity in sexual orientations, social constructionism has for the most part not addressed bisexuality in theorising sexuality (Stein, 1992). Throughout the period of vigorous challenges to essentialist theorising of sexuality that is reviewed here, the debate is predominantly framed through references to heterosexuality and homosexuality, with little or no reference to bisexuality. Stein (1992) states that in his own review of texts detailing the development of social constructionist arguments challenging essentialist theorising of sexuality, most texts have no entry for “bisexual” or “bisexuality” in their indexes, with several entries existing for homosexuality. This invisibility is also reflected in queer theory’s treatment of bisexuality. Queer theory, as a theoretical position that resists heteronormativity, is widely considered as more radical than social constructionist theory and aims to be an inclusive theory that remains sensitive to differences in sexualities (Seidman, 1996). Namaste (1994) notes that many prominent theorists in queer theory also neglect bisexuality in their treatment of what is considered queer. For example, authors such as De Lauretis (1991) and Sedgwick (1990) use the term queer but only refer to gay men and lesbian women in their discussions. It can then be seen that even in theoretical positions that radically challenge essentialist notions of sexuality, a heterosexual/homosexual binary remains dominant and serves to marginalise bisexuality in theoretical debates.

3.3 Deconstructing sex, gender and sexuality

Poststructuralist theorists such as Butler (1990) extended social constructionist critiques by providing accounts that thoroughly deconstruct sex, gender and sexuality. In the following sections I outline Butler’s deconstructive analysis and gender-as-performative thesis. I also discuss her theory

of subversion as it relates to troubling dominant discourses of sex, gender and sexuality. Throughout the discussion I illustrate how Butler draws on Foucauldian and Derridean theory in developing an account of the discursive production of sex, gender and sexuality.

3.3.1 Butler's deconstructive critique

Butler (1990) critiques the notion that sex provides a stable surface onto which gender can be constructed by arguing that sex is always already gendered. The sex/gender division formulated by feminist theorists such as Oakley (1972) posits sex as pre-discursive, as a natural given, and therefore secure in its internal stability (Butler, 1990). However, Butler's (1990) deconstructive analysis illustrates that sex and bodies are very much cultural products. She argues that the separation of biological sex and culturally informed gender in feminist thought implies that gender does not necessarily follow from sex. The sex/gender distinction construes gender as dependent on cultural meanings that vary across time and contexts; gender therefore cannot be assumed to be the "causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (Butler, 1990, p. 6). If that is the case, then the male/female binary is also called into question, as gender is variable and not limited to these two categories (Butler, 1990).

Following from this, Butler (1990) argues that sex itself is also not an immutable category. She states that bodily sex is only intelligible within the male/female binary of gender, and in that sense it is gender that provides sex with meaning. Butler (1990) argues that without the meanings attached to gender, sex and bodies would not be assigned such significance. In her analysis the body is considered as a "gendered performance which is socially constituted as the essence of gender" (Beasley, 2005, p. 101). Put differently, "bodies become gendered through the continual performance of gender" (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 19). Gender is therefore not an essential aspect of identity; it is instead a performance of socially constituted masculinity or femininity (Butler, 1990).

Butler's (1990) deconstructive critique has implications not only for how sex and gender are theorised, but also for theorising sexuality. Through her critique Butler (1990) reintroduces the link between gender and sexuality, which previous feminist theorists severed in their sex/gender formulation. Her account describes how sex, gender and sexuality function together to produce normatively gendered and sexualised subjects. According to Butler (1990), "naturalised heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (p. 30). I elaborate more on Butler's (1990) theorisation of naturalised

heterosexuality, as proposed in her concept of the heterosexual matrix, in subsequent sections. The discussion now first turns to Butler's (1990) theory of performativity.

3.3.2 Butler's gender-as-performative thesis

Butler's (1990) deconstructive critique of gender points to the artificiality of naturalised categories of identity. The constructive aspect of her work is offered in her thesis of gender-as-performative (Bordo, 1992). Butler posits that our identities, gendered and otherwise, have no internal "core"; instead it is brought into being through the practices that construct it (Bordo, 1992). Butler (1990) theorises the performativity of gender as "the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 33). She emphasises that it is only an *appearance* of substance and gender has no essence or "realness"; it is a fiction. The powerful appeal of gender as a stable, seamless identity lies in its repetitive performance over time, to create the illusion of a coherent category (Butler, 1990). The performativity of gender relies on citing past practices, conventions and norms of what it means to be male or female (Butler, 1993a). These citational practices - "bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds" - work together to achieve what is regarded as an appropriate gendered identity (Butler, 1988, p. 519).

In describing gender as performative, Butler (1990) draws on Austin's speech act theory, as well as Derrida's deconstruction of Austin's work. Austin (1976) uses the term "performative" to describe linguistic utterances that perform actions, in that they "'do' as well as 'say'" (Pilgrim, 2001, p. 88). Austin (1979) argues that statements such as an apology or waging a bet are not simply descriptive reports of an action; instead such statements are actions in themselves. Butler (1990) extends Austin's notion of performativity to provide an analysis of how gender is constituted through discourse. Butler's thesis advances an understanding of gender as the recurring citation of practices, resulting in an "an illusion sustained by the incessant replication of norms that materialise that which they govern" (Hey, 2006, p. 440). Hey (2006) explains by use of an example of another type of illusion - animation - describing how cartoon characters "come to life as the trick effect of animation. They are 'dead' images brought to life by graphic iterations, a device allowing for microscopic alterations that simultaneously evince the continuous reality of a coherent but moving image seen on screen" (p. 440). Through the repetition of citational practices denoting "appropriate" gender, the illusion of gender comes to be regarded as fixed, natural and as always already existing. An important implication of Butler's theorisation of gender is that identity becomes a performative accomplishment and therefore moves from a "substantial model of identity to one that requires a

conception of a constituted *social temporality*” (Butler, 1988, p. 520, emphasis in original).

In the next section I turn to Butler’s (1990; 1993a) view of the constraints that regulative discourses place on the performance of gender.

3.3.3 Performativity and regulative discourses

Drawing on Foucault’s notion of the restrictive effects of discourse, Butler (1990) argues that identity categories, such as gender and sexuality, are constrained by the discursive resources available to the subject. Butler’s gender-as-performative thesis posits that identity categories are curtailed by the discursive frame in which they are enacted; identity “scripts” are “always already determined within this regulatory frame, and the subject has a limited number of ‘costumes’ from which to make a constrained choice of gender style” (Salih, 2007, p. 56). The enactment of norms regarding what is considered an appropriate or viable identity corresponds with cultural discourses that constitute and regulate the ideal (Butler, 1990). This has the implication that individuals are not able to take on any identity of their choosing since Butler (1999) emphasises that “to enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice” (p. 189). She continues that “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have” (Butler, 1999, p. 189). Discourse, in making available certain discursive resources, also pose constraints on what is intelligible and possible.

Butler, borrowing from Foucault, refers to this productive influence of systems of cultural intelligibility as “regulatory ideals” (Butler, 1993a, p. 22) or “disciplinary regimes” (Butler, 1999, p. 171). These demarcate what is considered a coherent, natural, viable identity. They mark off “what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility” (Butler, 1999, p. 100). One such regulative discourse, emphasised by Butler (1990) in her gender-as-performativity thesis, is that of the heterosexual matrix. She describes the heterosexual matrix as the “culturally intelligible grids of an idealised and compulsory heterosexuality” against and through which identity is constructed (Butler, 1999, p. 172).

Butler further draws on a Foucauldian notion of power/knowledge when she describes regulative discourses as operating through disciplinary techniques. Individuals are continuously compelled to “cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (Butler, 1993a, p. 232). For instance, Bartky (1988), in her analysis of the construction of female identities, describes how the disciplinary practices that constitute femininity work towards creating an ideal femininity. These practices, such

as exhibiting an appropriate feminine posture or making use of the correct beauty technologies, construct a “practiced and subjected” body (Bartky, 1988, p. 100). Women who are unwilling or unable to enact such an appropriately embodied femininity face disciplinary techniques, such as the sense of deficiency and shame that is associated with women’s bodies that do not conform to social norms (Bartky, 1988). In this manner categories of identity, such as male or female, are “not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation [and] punishment” (Butler, 1993a, p. 232).

Regulative discourses then compel individuals to perform their gender in agreement with dominant norms, or risk being designated as unintelligible and unviable subjects. However, while this demonstrates the constraining effects of discourse, it can be emphasised that the manner in which discourse and power are inextricably linked, also point to the possibility of resistance. As intimated in the previous chapter, Butler (1999) refers to the potential for subversive acts to disrupt regulative discourses:

When the disorganisation and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe. (p. 713)

In the following section I discuss Butler’s theory of subversion, particularly as proposed in her notion of citational politics.

3.3.4 Butler’s citational politics

The preceding discussion points to one of the main criticisms of Butler’s conceptualisation of the subject. By locating the subject in a set of regulative discourses that constitute identity, Butler has been critiqued as denying agency (Deveaux, 1994; Hartsock, 1990). I discussed Butler’s response to such criticism, also as it relates to a Foucauldian conception of discourse as coercive, in Chapter 2. Here I take this debate up again, specifically as it relates to Butler’s account of sex, gender and sexuality.

Butler (1993a) uses the Derridean notion of citation as part of her performativity thesis – she refers to citations as re-iterative practices that constitute that which it describes. Citations are discursive actions that are repeatedly deployed to produce a copy of the original or the ideal (Butler, 1993a). These repetitions of the norms that constitute the ideal are continually re-cited to achieve a viable

identity; however, there is no primary source or authority that constitutes the original (Butler, 1993a). The original does not exist since the “citation of the law is the very mechanism of its production and articulation” (Butler, 1993a, p. 15). In Butlerian theory the “ideal that is mirrored depends on that very mirroring to be sustained as an ideal” (Butler, 1993a, p. 14). Consequently, Butler (1990) argues that gender, and other categories of identity, are always a copy of a copy, or an “imitation without an original” (p. 175).

While Butler’s thesis has the implication that gender is false, in that it only has the appearance of substance, certain gender performatives are privileged as authentic. This is particularly the case for gender performatives that support the continuity and correspondence between sex, gender and sexuality, such as heteronormative masculinity and femininity. Butler (1993a) states that performatives that hold particular authority, that are successful in their citation of gender, do so because they “*accumulate the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*” (p. 227, emphasis in original). Such authoritative performatives obscure their constructed character through appeals to naturalness; they appear to correspond to a “natural” prior original. Butler (1993a) however emphasises that the success of authoritative performatives is only provisional, since the necessity of their repetition exposes them as fictions.

Butler’s theory of subversion draws on the potential for certain practices to trouble authoritative performatives and in that way show up their constructed character. She argues that it is possible for “marginal practices and identities that exploit the paradoxical ‘constitutive outside’ of the hegemonic norm”, to disrupt the naturalness of the norm and produce alternatives to monolithic forms of power (Boucher, 2006, p. 117). Subversive practices take advantage of the supplementary character of dominant terms, where marginal identities (such as homosexuality and bisexuality) function as the “constitutive outside” of the heteronorm (Boucher, 2006, p. 117). Such marginalised or delegitimised identities are “the abject” Other in that they constitute the boundaries of the norm (Butler, 1990). They trouble the authority of the heteronorm precisely because of the impossibility of normative identities to fully assert an identity that is not reliant on *both* reiteration *and* exclusion – normative identities are dependent on the marginal identities that they exclude (Butler, 1997).

One such example of troubling, offered by Butler (1990), is the notion of parody-as-subversion. As discussed, Butler’s (1990) theory of subversion entails appropriating and re-citing discursive acts in different contexts, thereby allowing for resignification of the performative utterances. Considering

the performative character of all gender, it is possible to enact gender in such a way that the constructedness of authoritative identities becomes apparent. In using drag as an example of parody-as-subversion, Butler (1990) argues that “*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*” (p. 175, emphasis in original). She continues, “in the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalised by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler, 1990, p. 175). Drag then has the potential to show up the parodic mimicry of all gender, where there is no original that can be copied (Butler, 1990).

It is possible that bisexuality has the same transgressive potential to trouble heterosexual coherence. To this end, McAvan (2007) notes that bisexuality “problematizes the sex/gender/desire matrix, for though it will at times be necessarily ‘opposite’ sex related, it makes the once-and-forever nature of heterosexual identity impossible” (¶15). McAvan (2007) continues to state, “where the heterosexual act is often thought to confirm identity forever, by its nature bisexuality does not and *cannot* effect such a confirmation” (¶15, emphasis in original). In this sense, Butler’s theory of subversion provides the possibility that marginal identities, such as bisexuality, can potentially trouble the taken for granted naturalness of the heteronorm.

3.3.5 Distinguishing between performance and performativity

From the discussion thus far it becomes apparent that two main points of critique can be levelled at Butler’s (1990) thesis of gender-as-performative. Firstly, her work has been described as positing a subject without agency (a point I have discussed in Chapter 2 and also in the current chapter). Secondly, and to some extent in contradistinction to the first point, her notion of performativity has been interpreted by some critics as positing a volitional subject that actively and deliberately “performs” gender (Pilgrim, 2001). These two areas of critique have resulted in Butler (1993a; 1999) clarifying the distinction between “performativity” and “performance”. While Butler (1999) has described the two terms as related, she has also emphasised certain differences between the terms. Butler (1993a) notes that she uses performativity in a linguistic and sociological sense, not a dramaturgical one. As described earlier, she bases her gender-as-performativity thesis on Austin’s conceptualisation of utterances as performing certain actions, not as indicative of a role that is taken on or acted out. Pilgrim (2001) notes that Austin’s intention with the term performative was clear: “Austin specifically states that the term ‘performative’ is drawn from ‘perform (an action)’, making no mention of the other meaning ‘perform (a part or character)’” (p. 88).

In distinguishing between these two terms, Butler (1993a) describes performativity “not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (p. 2). It is performativity that informs the focus of Butler’s (1990; 1993a) work and she has distanced herself from an understanding of gender as performance. While she argues that performativity will always include performance, in that gender is “both intentional and performative” (Butler, 1988, p. 521-522), she maintains that her work proposes the former as an analytical tool (Butler, 1993a). Consequently, the notion of performance remains underdeveloped in Butler’s own work but has been taken up by other scholars who have argued for the utility of further developing this discarded notion (e.g., Brickell, 2005). Morison (2011), for example, uses both a performative *and* performance focus in her analysis of discourse, attending not only to the influence of wider discursive contexts but also to the processes that are involved in a more conscious and immediate enactment of identity.

In the current study my analytical focus weighs more heavily towards notions of performativity, or what can be described as the macro-context of discourse. However, considering the interrelated nature of the two terms, there are instances in which my focus is also informed by the immediate context of discourse, in that I attend to how participants construct meaning in relation to the interview context and myself as the interviewer. My focus in conducting the analysis is described in more detail in Chapter 5 where I provide an overview of the research process.

What can be emphasised at this point in the discussion is that poststructuralist feminists such as Butler denounce the essentialist stance of earlier theorising of sex, gender and sexuality, and assume a radical social constructionist view of these constructs.

3.4. Theories of sexualities in the context of political activism

Having reviewed theories of sex, gender and sexuality, I now consider the implications of such theories for activism centred on sexual rights. Interestingly, the growing call to consider sexualities as socially constructed and fluid was not echoed by activists invested in bringing about social change and securing minority rights for individuals resisting heterosexuality. Since the 1970’s, when a social constructionist approach to sexuality gained momentum, the essentialist treatment of homosexuality that previously dominated among clinicians and social scientists, has been extended and further reified by gay and lesbian communities themselves (Plummer, 1998).

Epstein (1998) provides an overview of the development of (mostly male) gay political activism and how it relates to the essentialist/social constructionist debates in theorising sexuality. He notes that gay liberation politics initially challenged the view that homosexuality should be “tolerated” with a “left-Freudian view of human sexuality as ‘polymorphously perverse’” (Epstein, 1998, p. 138). Activists called for the deconstruction of categories such as homosexual or heterosexual and positioned themselves as the sexual liberators of society. Epstein (1998) cites activist Carl Wittman, who despite being committed to a gay identity, supported the notion of a universal bisexual nature:

The reason so few of us are bisexual is because society made such a big stink about homosexuality that we got forced into seeing ourselves as either straight or nonstraight... We'll be gay until everyone has forgotten that it's an issue. Then we'll begin to be complete people. (Wittman, 1969/2004, p. 29)

Wittman's (1969/2004) statement was a rare reference to gay activism embracing bisexual potential, a sentiment that was short-lived. The openness and support for fluidity in sexual identities found in pockets of the early gay liberation movement later evolved in relation to changes in social conditions. By the 1970's a new generation of gay activists was rallying for recognition and equal rights by strategically appealing to essentialist notions of homosexual identity. In North America, this strategy echoed a discourse of minority rights that had gained political support (Epstein, 1998). A similar strategy proved successful in South Africa. The arguments drawn on by activists equated discrimination based on sexual orientation to that of other key political concerns, such as eradicating racism and gender-based discrimination. Sexual orientation was communicated as an immutable identity that all people had, instead of focusing on fluid sexual practices or variations in identities (Thoreson, 2008). The successes achieved by lesbian and gay activists internationally and in South Africa were then partly due to the manner in which such groups strategically deployed essentialist discourses of sexual orientation, instead of using references to the fluidity of sexuality (Epstein, 1998; Thoreson, 2008).

It can then be said that to the extent that social constructionist theory has evolved in its theorisation of sexuality as fluid and socially negotiated, a tension has developed between theory and practice (Vance, 1998). On the one hand, theorists have been attempting to deconstruct the sexual hierarchy that prescribes essentialist categories of sexuality and privileges heterosexuality. On the other, gay and lesbian activists have been increasingly seeking legitimation through calling on essentialist categories of sexual identity. These attempts to assume a collective identity (typically gay or lesbian) and mobilise in support of equal rights, has had the problematic consequence of serving to reify the

exact sexual hierarchy that such groups are trying to subvert. The unintended consequence of this strategic essentialism is then a “disjuncture between theory and practice”; where social constructionist notions of fluid sexual identities are currently incongruent to gay and lesbian liberation politics (Epstein, 1998, p. 139).

A further consequence of strategic essentialism in gay and lesbian politics, which is particularly relevant to the current study, is the manner in which it contributed to the marginalisation of bisexual identities. Epstein (1998) cites Altman stating that “few arguments have caused as much controversy among gay audiences as the assertion of a universal bisexual potential” (p. 141). By appealing to an essential homosexual identity, any earlier references to bisexual potential or fluidity in sexual identities have been erased from gay liberation discourse.

A final historical development in gay and lesbian activism that can be briefly discussed here is how sexuality has been treated in the lesbian feminist anti-pornography movement. What became known as the “sex wars” in feminist circles had a significant impact on how sexual morality has developed to privilege certain sexual identities and practices over others. During the 1980’s and 1990’s certain strands of feminist thought, particularly lesbian feminist groupings, developed a strong response against pornography, eventually mobilising with conservative groups to campaign against explicit sexual imagery (Duggan, 1995). Anti-pornography activists associated explicit sexual imagery with women’s oppression through linking the erotic representation of women’s bodies to violence against women (Duggan, 1995). These lesbian feminist groupings extended their objections to many forms of sexuality that fell outside of the boundary of what they regarded as acceptable sexuality:

Within this framework, monogamous lesbianism that occurs within long-term, intimate relationships and which does not involve playing with polarised roles, has replaced married, procreative heterosexuality at the top of the value hierarchy The lower depths are occupied by the usual groups and behaviours: prostitution, transsexuality, sadomasochism, and cross-generational activities. Most gay male conduct, all casual sex, promiscuity, and lesbian behaviour that does not involve roles or kink or non-monogamy are also censured. (Rubin, 1984, p. 301)

Consequently, a “conservative sexual morality” developed within this formation of feminism which led to stricter policing of the boundaries within lesbian feminism and the type of sexual organisation that was regarded acceptable (Rubin, 1984, p. 302). Sexual pleasure and variations in sexual

expression, such as bisexuality, featured very low in this sexual hierarchy. Groupings of “pro-sex” activists attempted to counter this development in feminist discourse by defending excluded sexualities and insisting on a feminist discourse that supports sexual pleasure (Rubin, 1984). Their political aim was to break down strict policing of sexual activities and roles (such as lesbian feminist attacks on sadomasochism and butch femme roles as simply mirroring oppressive heterosexuality) (Rubin, 1984). Despite pro-sex feminists’ insistence on the recognition of sexual variety, the conservative agenda advanced by some lesbian feminist groupings significantly hampered bisexual representation in feminist activism.

In the context of political activism, bisexuality has then generally been excluded either through the strategic deployment of essentialist views of homosexuality, or through lesbian feminist constructions of what constitutes a valued lesbian identity. In both instances sexual variability has been denied in favour of a stable, coherent lesbian or gay identity.

It can be noted here that a frequently mentioned problematic associated with social constructionist and particularly poststructuralist resistance becomes relevant when considering the marginalisation of bisexuality in gay and lesbian activism. This problematic relates to the potential for freed up terms, such as homosexuality, to result in new hegemonies where they become reified and privileged in relation to other terms, such as bisexuality (see Minson, 1986, for such a critique of poststructuralism). Poststructuralist deconstruction aims to challenge dominant categories, such as heterosexuality, through recovering and privileging the marginalised term on which the hierarchical binary relies for its meaning (Hepburn, 1999b). A poststructuralist deconstruction would then aim to free up positions in discourse through disrupting oppressive constructions of sexuality. In this manner the marginal category, such as homosexuality, is recovered and liberated (Hepburn, 1999b). However, it is always possible for liberated terms to become reified in discourse and become another form of social control. Poststructuralist authors caution that even emancipatory terms should be continuously contested and challenged (Butler, 1995; Weedon, 1987). This problematic was also touched on in Chapter 2, where I discussed poststructuralist theory. In the next section I review how female sexuality has been constructed in dominant discourse.

3.5 Theorising female sexuality

Considering that the present study is concerned with how women construct meaning around their sexuality, it is useful to review and problematise images of female sexuality, as they have been constructed in dominant discourse. Dominant discourses, such as psychiatric, medical or legal

discourse, construct sexuality in particular ways and distinguish different sexual identities that are regulated through discourse (Foucault, 1976/1990). Women's sexuality has been described as particularly regulated through regarding the female body as "thoroughly saturated with sexuality" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 104). Women's sexuality is considered central to their identity and encompasses experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, thereby legitimating psychological and medical scrutiny and control of women's sexuality (Foucault, 1976/1990). This section will briefly review how female sexuality has been constructed over time and will argue that such constructions have implications for female subjectivity more generally.

Early Western constructions of female sexuality, prior to the Victorian era, depict an image of a dangerous and voracious sexuality (Weeks, 1987). Weeks (1987) notes that prior to the nineteenth century, "female sexuality was inevitably a problem A long cultural tradition held that female sexuality was voracious, all-devouring and consuming..." (p. 47). Within this construction women were regarded as particularly sexually driven to the extent that their sexual appetites were regarded as threatening to men (Cott, 1978; Weeks, 1987). Cott (1978) emphasises that constructions of female sexuality are of course never monolithic, and notes that the Christian belief system at the time promoted women as more spiritual than men and consequently positioned women as less susceptible to bodily or sexual desires. However, existing alongside this construction was a powerful depiction of women as sexually insatiable; an image often presented as that of a sexually aggressive female filled with carnal lust (Cott, 1978; Ellis, 1913; Weeks, 1987).

With the nineteenth century came an apparent silence around sexuality. Foucault's (1976/1990) analysis, however, rejects the notion of the nineteenth century as a period of sexual repression, arguing that to consider the Victorian silence around sex as an indication that sex was being erased from discourse is incorrect. Instead, he argues that "what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 35, emphasis in original). In this sense the nineteenth century was a time of prolific discourse on female sexuality.

Within this Victorian "discursive explosion" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 17), serving to regulate sex, the previously dominant construction of female sexuality as voracious and lustful was reversed to a construction of women as lacking sexual desire (Cott, 1978). Through this transformation female sexuality came to be treated as "basically reactive, responsive, brought to life only through some sort of 'reproductive instinct', or kissed into life by the skill of the wooer, the male"; thus an image of

female passivity constructed in relation to male desire (Weeks, 1987, p. 47). During the late nineteenth century women's sexuality became increasingly medicalised (Caplan, 1987) and the public discourse of women's lack of sexual desire gained further support from scientific and medical opinion. An example is Krafft-Ebing's (1931) description of women as sexually passive and his concept of sexual anaesthesia to describe a lack of sexual desire. This ideology of female passionlessness is described as the view that "women lacked sexual aggressiveness, that their sexual appetites contributed a very minor part (if any at all) to their motivations, that lustfulness was simply uncharacteristic" (Cott, 1987, p. 220).

Yet, despite the dominance of this discourse of women's lack of sexual desire, the pre-nineteenth century construction of women as lustful and "excessively" sexual remained influential, particularly as it was drawn on to regulate women "manifesting any form of deviance under the reign of passionlessness" (Cott, 1978, p. 221). In this manner it continued to exert influence as a strategy to regulate and control female sexuality, later also through psychological and medical diagnoses such as nymphomania, a diagnosis often afforded to women considered as exhibiting "too much" sexual desire as well as to women engaging in same-sex practices (Groneman, 1994).

Freud's (1905/1953) work, which exerted great influence in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, not only contributed to the ever-increasing medicalisation of female sexuality but also served to further embed female sexuality as existing in relation to male sexual needs and specifically as in the service of heterosexual intercourse. Freud created a distinction between clitoral and vaginal orgasms, arguing that during a process of psychological maturation, the "erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation" that is centred on the clitoris in young girls, is transferred to the vagina in mature women (Freud, 1905/1953, p. 221). This conclusion contradicted the widely supported medical insight dominating at the time, stating that the clitoris was the locus of female sexual pleasure and that the vagina was, as one medical text in the early twentieth century described it, "not very sensitive" and unlikely to be significantly involved in sexual pleasure (Laqueur, 1990, p. 237). However, Freud's construction of female sexuality fitted the dominant social and cultural constructions of female sexuality and was therefore accepted unproblematically. Laqueur (1990, p. 241) notes that "Freud's argument is a testament to the freedom with which the authority of nature can be rhetorically appropriated to legitimise the creation of culture". It served to reformulate the female body to fit the view that the undifferentiated (or "polymorphously perverse") sexuality of the female child is transformed through the process of maturation into the

heterosexual woman, with the concomitant heterogenital configuration to support this view. For critics of Freud, this is “a narrative of culture in anatomical disguise” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 236).

The review thus far illustrates the limiting descriptions of female sexuality that have been circulating in Western discourse, with dominant constructions representing women’s sexuality as dangerous, passive, passionless or as purely in the service of male sexual desire (Weeks, 1987). However the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century have seen an increase in the possibilities for women to self-define their sexuality and resist limiting or oppressive constructions. Generally, a more permissive treatment of both male and female sexuality has emerged, along with somewhat greater flexibility in gender roles (Caplan, 1987). At the same time, however, “radical” transgressions of normative female sexuality, such as non-heterosexual practices or resisting monogamy, are still regarded as violations in need of censure (Vance, 1998).

Much of the theory that informed understandings of female sexuality has been derived from studies that were clearly shaped by the patriarchal assumptions dominating at the time (such as the findings by Freud reviewed in this section). However in the twentieth century, several prominent studies (such as Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1966) moved away from this approach to study male and female sexuality in an apparently democratic, objective and equal manner. Feminist analyses of how female sexuality has been constructed in these influential studies have however demonstrated that despite striving for scientific “neutrality”, these studies frequently fell prey to the biases of the researchers. Superficially these studies appear to promote female sexual autonomy and fulfilment but when viewed critically they are found to reflect the heteronormative patriarchal discourse dominant at the time (Miller & Fowlkes, 1987).

In their analysis of research by Kinsey et al. (1948; 1953), Miller and Fowlkes (1987) argue that Kinsey’s work extends the nineteenth century construction of sexual anaesthesia in women by describing women as sexually less responsive than men. Kinsey also described the women he studied as more likely to value male sexual satisfaction higher than their own. However Miller and Fowlkes (1987) argue that Kinsey never addressed the fact that men are socialised to “give full expression to their sexuality as an indication and demonstration of their masculinity” and that “female sexual response has traditionally been thought to be appropriately derived from relationships with men and their needs” (p. 150). Kinsey attributed his own social meanings, shaped by norms of the time, to female participants’ responses, without exploring their own accounts for “evidence” of how they construct meaning around their sexuality.

While the landmark research by Masters and Johnson (1966) attempted to dispel Kinsey's notion that women are less sexually responsive, their findings have been similarly critiqued. Through obtaining physiological data of the sexual response cycle in men and women, they indicated that women have the same capacity for sexual pleasure as men. They demonstrated that the extent of female sexual pleasure is determined by the quality of the sexual encounter. Furthermore, the highest intensity of sexual pleasure was the result of clitoral self-manipulation, and the lowest by heterosexual coitus, thereby directly challenging the heteronormative Freudian construction of female sexual maturity. Of significance to feminist theorists of female sexuality was that these findings disrupted the notion of heterosexual intercourse as primary and depicted women as sexually autonomous in experiencing pleasure. This challenge to the depiction of female sexuality as being in the service of male sexual satisfaction is however mediated by instances where Masters and Johnson revert to a heteronormative interpretation by describing female genital anatomy in ways that deny autonomy and emphasise heterosexual intercourse as the norm (Miller & Fowlkes, 1987).

A critical reading then indicates that, despite challenging the dominant construction of women's passionlessness and heteronormativity, the work of twentieth century researchers such as Kinsey et al. (1948; 1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) ultimately uphold the traditional discourse by rendering female sexuality as in the service of heterosexual desire (Miller & Fowlkes, 1987). Miller and Fowlkes (1987) state that these key studies in human sexuality fell prey to "imbu[ing] behavioural data with social meanings, but the meanings are those of researchers, not of the women they study" (p. 148).

More recent research indicates that these constructions remain powerful. Discourse analytic work by authors such as Hollway (1984) and Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown (1993) has demonstrated the continued salience of traditional constructions of female sexuality. Hollway (1984) describes three discourses in her analysis of male and female participants' constructions of heterosexuality and the subject positions it designates for women. In describing what she terms the "male sexual drive discourse", female sexuality is constructed in relation to male sexuality, which is regarded as driven by a biological need that must be satisfied. Women are regarded as having lower sexual desire than men, continuing the construction of women as passionless, and as directing their sexuality into pleasing men. This discourse does not articulate women as actively pursuing their own sexual pleasure but instead as "yielding" to male desire in the absence of their own sexual initiative. This

construes female sexuality as passive and as existing only in the service of fulfilling male desire (Hollway, 1984).

Hollway's (1984) description of the "have/hold discourse" refers to the notion that women can only find sexual expression in the context of a monogamous, committed heterosexual relationship, such as marriage. Two positions are implicit in this discourse. On the one hand, women are constructed as almost asexual in that their satisfaction lies not in sexual pleasure but in having emotional intimacy, a fulfilling family life and a context in which to express their maternal instinct. On the other hand, the construction of women's sexuality as dangerous and in need of being controlled remains influential. Women are regarded as sexually voracious, and through submitting to male control in the context of a marriage, their sexuality is reined in (Hollway, 1984).

Hollway (1984) argues that these two discourses exist alongside what she terms the "permissive discourse", where monogamy is resisted and people are considered free to express their sexuality. Similar to the male sexual drive discourse, it considers sexuality as natural and argues that the expression thereof should not be repressed. It differs from the male sexual drive however in that *both* men and women are argued to be free to actively initiate a sexual relationship, opening up the possibility for women to claim a sexual identity with agency equal to that traditionally associated with men. However Hollway (1984) argues that the practices of the permissive discourse have contradictory implications for women – it espouses sexual activity without romantic or emotional bonds but still exists alongside other more traditional constructions of female sexuality. Such an open and unrestricted expression of sexual desire becomes problematic for women in a broader discursive context where non-monogamous female sexuality is equated with negative notions of promiscuity and exploitation.

Gilfoyle et al. (1993) in seeking to extend Hollway's (1984) analysis, describe a further discourse of sex as a pseudo-reciprocal gift in their interviews with young men and women. (Heterosexual) sex is described as a process of transaction whereby women give themselves to men in order to satisfy men's sexual desire, and men reciprocate by giving women sexual pleasure or orgasm. This construction renders women as passive objects, either surrendering themselves for the sake of male pleasure, or passively receiving pleasure. Gilfoyle et al. (1993) point out that this echoes earlier constructions of female sexuality that serve to eroticise male dominance, citing Stekel's (1926/1936) statement that "to be roused by a man means acknowledging oneself as conquered" (p. 190). Such a construction negates any agency or self-determination women might have over their bodies in

sexual encounters. The reciprocal nature of giving that occurs during sexual interaction is then clearly illusory, as it requires of women to relinquish control to men who are positioned in the active role of conferring the gift of sexual pleasure onto women. Gilfoyle et al. (1993) make a point that is relevant to the current study when they describe the centrality of men to the experience of sexual pleasure: “if men are absent then so is sex, and the possibilities of lesbian sex or women’s autoeroticism are ruled out” (p. 195).

This brief review illustrates that although women (and men) are now more likely to enjoy increased freedom in self-defining their sexuality, normative constructions of female sexuality remain influential, where the “ideal” female sexuality entails a passive, monogamous and less lustful woman, expressing her sexuality in the service of male sexual pleasure. Within such a normative construction, female same-sex experiences are delegitimised through their absence in the academic texts reviewed, and when discussed they are constructed as transgressing the normative ideal of heterosexuality.

This powerful influence of heterosexuality on defining female subjectivity is described by Rich (1980) as compulsory heterosexuality. By using this term, Rich (1980) argues that the system of heterosexuality exists not only on the level of partner choice or sexual practice, but involves a more pervasive gendered organisation of social existence. Through the hierarchical positioning of the gender binary, heterosexuality produces and regulates what is regarded as an acceptable female subject and thereby contributes to the systematic oppression of women. Butler (1990) also refers to this regulatory function of heterosexuality in her discussion of the heterosexual matrix, where heterosexuality is constructed as desirable, natural and normal. In the heterosexual matrix, heterosexuality is regarded as normative and implicates a “causal continuity among sex, gender, and desire” (Butler, 1990, p. 22). In this manner gender and sexuality are performed in relation to the regulative discourse of heterosexuality that prescribes what is considered as acceptable acts in support of the coherence of the category female. Cranny-Francis et al. (2003) articulate the influence of heterosexuality by stating:

The power of compulsory heterosexuality is that for those whose lives conform to its demands, it acts as a constant reinforcement and regulatory mechanism, producing its compliant readers as viable social subjects and regulating any thoughts they might have about alternative gender roles or sexual choices. For those who do not conform to its demands, on the other hand, compulsory heterosexuality acts as a mechanism of exclusion

and oppression, because it consistently constructs them as outsiders, aberrant and bad. (p. 19)

By constructing female sexuality in relation to heterosexuality, any practices that resist this regulatory framework position the person as outside of what is normal and considered as a legitimate subject (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Rubin (1984) refers to the “charmed circle” of sexuality where certain sexualities, such as heterosexual, marital, monogamous and reproductive are considered as existing inside the circle of privilege, while other “deviant” or “abnormal” sexualities are placed outside of what is considered acceptable in the sexual value system. Butler (1990) articulates this in terms of regulating norms, where bodies, genders and desires are naturalised in support of the heterosexual matrix. Such norms include “ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies [and] ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity”; these regulating norms determine what is and what is not considered “intelligibly human” (Butler, 1999, p. xxiii).

Thus, Butlerian theory allows for the exploration of how not only gendered identities, but also other binary frames such as that of sexuality are sanctioned and regulated (Bordo, 1992). Through Butler’s performativity framework, the illusion of authenticity of heterosexuality is “thrown in fresh, critical relief, and productive ‘trouble’ can be made for entrenched assumptions about what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘unnatural’” (Bordo, 1992, p. 169). In this way, new possibilities are created and individuals can potentially inhabit different modes of being that are not restricted to the binary formulations of sex, gender and sexuality (Hey, 2006).

The discussion now briefly returns to constructions of gender, by considering how the body is implicated in theorising sexuality.

3.6 Sexuality and embodiment

In considering sex, gender and sexuality, poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault (1976/1990) and Butler (1990, 1993a) have advanced a view of the body as predominantly a social construction. While this has opened up possibilities to question previously “untouchable” constructs, fixed as they were in naturalising discourses of the body, it has also raised questions regarding the plausibility of theorising sexual acts, identities and desire as separate from bodily experience (Vance, 1998). Theories positing the body as a social construction have increasingly been critiqued by theorists advancing an embodied theory of gender and sexuality (e.g. Connell, 1994; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1994; Sampson, 1998a, 1998b). In order to explore some of these critiques I will

first revisit Butler's (1990) theorisation of gender and the body before considering some of the arguments in favour of reintroducing the body in theorising social practice.

Butler (1990) states that "there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings" (p. 8). The body, according to Butler (1990) is neither a passive medium onto which cultural meanings around gender are inscribed, nor is it an instrument that can appropriate a particular cultural meaning by "taking on" a gender. She rejects these two views of the body, stating that the body itself is a construction. It can be noted that Butler (1990) does not argue that any imaginable construction of gender is available to subjects; instead she states that cultural discourses around sex and gender define what is considered as constituting "the imaginable domain of gender" (p. 9). What is of relevance to the current discussion is that Butler (1990) does not consider bodies as pre-discursive but instead as created through discourses of what is considered natural (male or female) sexed bodies (Butler, 1990).

Butler (1993a) then completely rejects the notion of an underlying reality of extra-discursive or "ready-made" objects, onto which cultural constructions can be inscribed. For Butler (1993a), nothing can be described as existing outside discourse, as the very act of referring to an object as extra-discursive implies demarcating the boundaries of what "will and will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer" (p. 11). The act of delimiting what is considered as pre-existing and what is considered constructed involves drawing a boundary of what constitutes the object under discussion, and therefore implies an act of construction (Butler, 1993a). For Butler, all arguments concerned with embodiment then have a constructionist basis, as even critics of constructionism have to engage in an "initial discursive act that sets forth the boundaries of whatever will become an object in the first place" (Sampson, 1998a, p. 37).

Considering that biological determinism has contributed to oppression based on gender, it is not surprising that feminists such as Butler have privileged constructions of gender as entirely discursive (Connell, 1994). Critiques of Butler's theorising of sex and gender as socially constructed have however mounted, with many theorists arguing that social constructionism has erased the body from theorising (such as Connell, 1994; Sampson, 1998a; Vance, 1998). The advantage of social construction theory, in that it deconstructs categories such as sexuality and gender that have become essentialised, is in this sense also a disadvantage. Deconstruction has opened up previously naturalised and fixed areas of theorisation and has allowed critical questions to be asked, but it has also had the effect of closing up areas of investigation where the body or physiology is concerned.

Vance (1998) asks if it is possible to include the body in social constructionist theorising, without resorting to essentialism: “Are there ways to integrate bodily sensation and function into a social construction frame, while still acknowledging that human experience of the body is always mediated by culture and subjectivity, and without elevating the body as determinative?” (p. 167).

Sampson (1998a, p. 38), in his appeal for including the body in social theory, states that social constructionist treatment of the body has centred on describing the body as an object through generating “talk that is about the body”, instead of appealing to an embodied discourse. Sampson (1998b) particularly focuses his critique on Butler’s (1990) rejection of a pre-discursive body, where Butler argues that “there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings” (p. 8). Although social constructionism has challenged dominant discourse by engaging in debates around how the body is constructed, it has avoided including the body in theorising social practice as embodied (Sampson, 1998b). It has perpetuated a view of discourse as residing only in language, with the body being positioned as disconnected from discourse (Bayer, 1998). Sampson (1998a, p. 31) refers to this as the object-body in social constructionist theorising; through generating discourses about the body social constructionist theory posits the body as “the body that is known as a third-person observer knows any object in the world”, as opposed to engaging in what he terms embodied discourse. In this manner he equates the social constructionist treatment of the body to the objectivist scientific traditions that social constructionism attempts to challenge. By speaking *about* the body instead of from a position that recognises that language itself is embodied, social constructionism mirrors the spectator’s approach it has so strongly critiqued (Sampson, 1998b).

Sampson (1998a) uses the term embodied discourse to refer to:

The intrinsically embodied character of human endeavour: to the idea that we are socialised into both a linguistic and a bodily community of practices such that what we say and the embodied quality of how we say it are simultaneously engendered and inextricably intertwined. (p. 38)

For Sampson (1998a) such a conceptualisation of social practices as embodied implies a move away from viewing the body and language as separate, and instead posits a joint way of being in the world. In this sense, “we cannot stand outside the body when we engage in discourse, for we are always within the body in and through which we are able to talk” (Sampson, 1998b, p. 24). The aim of such an argument is not to revert to a discursive/pre-discursive dualism but instead to

acknowledge that the discursive domain includes not only language but that it is “fully embodied” (Sampson, 1998b, p. 26).

Connell (1994) offers a similar argument by insisting that bodies cannot be erased from experience; “bodies and bodily experiences are implicated in revolt and transformation, as well as in discipline” (p. 11). This is echoed by feminist authors such as Holland et al. (1994), who note that the “material body and its social construction is entwined in complex and contradictory ways which are extremely difficult to disentangle in practice” (p. 22). Connell (1994) argues that bodies are irreducibly involved in social experience and that agency of bodies in social processes should be introduced into our theorising. She advocates a view where bodies are “seen as sharing in social agency, in generating and shaping courses of social conduct”, what she terms a body-reflexive practice (Connell, 1994, p. 13).

The call to include the body in theorising sexuality is not limited to a theoretical exercise; instead the disembodied nature of current conceptualisations of sexuality is argued to have political implications (Holland et al., 1994; Sampson, 1998b). Holland et al. (1994) appeal to theorists to resist Butler (1990) and Foucault’s (1980) conceptualisation of gender and sexuality as predominantly constructed, stating that by dissolving the physical into the social, women’s experience of the physicality of bodily encounters (particularly relevant to sexual activity) is erased. A construction of female sexuality as disembodied requires of women to present a passive, disconnected body (Holland et al., 1994). Theorising female sexuality as disembodied then has the implication of limiting the ways in which women can assume agency in their sexuality; such a view risks duplicating traditional gender hierarchies in that the female body “becomes passive, rather than actively embodied” (Holland et al., 1994, p. 24-25). By including the body in theorising sex, gender and sexuality, opportunities are created for women to re-appropriate their bodies and desires (Holland et al., 1994).

Increasing calls for engaging the body in theorising female sexuality have resulted in the development of strategies to increase embodied accounts in research. Pauw (2009) suggests the inclusion of descriptive accounts of embodied features of interview contexts, such as participants’ visual presentation as well as descriptions of the physical space in which interviews take place. She also emphasises that assuming an embodied approach to discourse implies that the researcher herself should reflect on her embodied presence in the research process - the researcher is positioned as “thinking with a body, located in time and space where the encounter with research

participants happens in a praxeological moment where different discursive fields and inscribed bodies connect” (Pauw, 2009, p. 39). Dé Ishtar (2005, p. 363) argues for the value of attending to non-linguistic aspects of participants’ communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, in order to include the “language of the body” in analysing discourse.

Finally, although not possible to include in the scope of the current project, recent efforts to include the body in theorising sexuality have drawn on visual research methods. For instance, a study by Bowes-Catton, Barker and Richards (2011) made use of photography to research bisexual individuals’ embodied experiences of producing and inhabiting a bisexual identity. These authors argue that language-based methods can be limiting particularly when theorising bisexuality, since participants often move between rejecting and re-inscribing binary formulations of gender and sexuality due to the “structural constraints of discourse forc[ing] them to locate their accounts of sexual subjectivity within the very binary paradigm they so vehemently rejected” (p. 257). They continue to describe how, through incorporating visual methods in studying bisexuality, they were able to facilitate new ways for participants to talk about their gendered and sexual subjectivity, that recognised that individuals’ “lived and felt experiences of the social world take place in embodied material and spatial contexts” (Bowes-Catton et al., 2011, p. 257).

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I aimed to highlight some of the prominent debates around sex, gender and sexuality. I discussed the utility of upholding the sex/gender division in feminist theorising, where presenting sex as biologically determined and gender as dependent on social factors has proven to have political value. Such a theorisation of sex and gender has allowed feminists and gender activists to argue that the gendered constructions on which patriarchal oppression is based are variable and can be challenged. I also highlighted poststructuralist critiques of this strategy, where theorists such as Stanley (1984) and Butler (1990) have argued that the acceptance of sex as biologically determined is problematic and leaves sex untheorised. Instead these authors argue that sex itself is constructed, and that it is gender that provides sex with meaning.

The review also considered how sexuality has been theorised. I reviewed literature indicating that an essentialist binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality has historically dominated most social science research; this has had the consequence of rendering bisexuality invisible in texts theorising sexuality. Social constructionist theories emerged as a challenge to the essentialist theorising of sexuality but similarly neglected to theorise bisexuality, framing their debates mostly in reference to

heterosexuality and homosexuality. Social constructionist approaches were however shown to offer valuable accounts of how such categories are constituted through discourse. The discussion then turned to Butler's deconstructive account of sex, gender and sexuality. I paid particular attention to the strategies for subversion posited by Butlerian theory.

The review also considered how dominant discourse has constructed female sexuality over time, illustrating the continuing salience of restrictive constructions of female sexuality as dangerous, passive and sexually less responsive than men. It highlighted the heteronormative assumption evident in discourses around female sexuality, where same-sex experiences are either rendered invisible, or depicted as transgressing the heterosexual norm and therefore deviant.

The chapter concluded by picking up on one of the main challenges of poststructuralist theory. Poststructuralist analyses of sex, gender and sexuality set out to challenge dominant discourse that posit fixed and essentialist accounts; however, its insistence on rejecting any pre-discursive contribution resulted in a theory of sexuality that is disembodied. Authors such as Connell (1994), Sampson (1998a, 1998b) and Holland et al. (1994) argue for the inclusion of the body in theorising sexuality, through acknowledging what can be termed embodied discourse. This is argued to be particularly relevant to theorising female sexuality, where discourse that includes the body resists depicting the body as passive and disconnected.

The theorisation of sex, gender and sexuality that will inform the present study is based on the poststructuralist notion that, like all categories of identity, these categories are constructed through discourse. Dominant discourse presents a seemingly natural fit between bodies, genders and sexual desire. However, as argued by Butler (1990) and other poststructuralist theorists, this manner of structuring and regulating gender and sexuality is not rooted in an objective material reality; it is socially constructed. The effect of dominant discourses of gender and sexuality is not limited to sexual practices; instead these discourses have a constitutive function in that they posit an "acceptable" gendered and sexualised female subject, one that fits neatly within the regulating discourse of heterosexuality.

Despite the compelling and insistent influence of heteronormative gendered discourse, discourses remain open to change and can be challenged through the emergence of counter-discourses (Hollway, 1984). It is with this in mind that the present study aims to explore how women who

identify as bisexual negotiate their identities in a context of the regulating effects of compulsory heterosexuality.

In the next chapter I review literature related to female bisexuality in order to provide an overview of how female bisexuality has been constructed in discourse over time.

CHAPTER 4

CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMALE BISEXUALITY

4.1 Introduction

In the literature review that follows I review international research focusing on bisexuality, as well as the handful of South African studies that explore the realities of bisexual women. Considering that the present study is concerned with the subjectivities of bisexual women, I mainly focus on how female bisexuality has been constructed, with very few references to male bisexuality. I first situate bisexuality in a historical framework by providing a brief overview of how bisexuality has been constructed over time, notably in ancient Greece and Rome, and also consider the impact of religious discourses on sexual ethics. Thereafter I provide an overview of how bisexuality has been constructed in psychological discourse and finally consider broader public discourses of female bisexuality. I conclude with a consideration of the potential of bisexuality to destabilise the traditional binary logic of gender and sexuality that dominates in most societies.

4.2 Historical accounts of bisexuality

4.2.1 Bisexuality in classical Greece and Rome

In attempting to trace the historical construction of bisexual discourse many authors cite the fluid sexual practices documented in classical Greece and Rome (such as Cantarella, 2002; DuBois, 1995; Veyne, 1985). This is often done in an attempt to retrieve bisexuality from historical invisibility since bisexual practice, although occurring in rare historical accounts, has predominantly been absent from the history of sexuality (MacDowall, 2009). The terminology of bisexuality, homosexuality and heterosexuality are of course modern inventions and different categories of sexuality were not known to the peoples of ancient Greece or Rome (Cantarella, 2002). However, bisexual behaviour was common and socially sanctioned in particular forms in classical Greece and Rome (Cantarella, 2002). This was particularly the case for men – accounts of female same-sex sexuality were generally not documented and sexual relationships between women were not socially sanctioned in Greece and Rome (Cantarella, 2002).

Fluid sexual practices between men were accepted in Greek and Roman times since the distinction in sexual behaviour was one of activity or passivity, with men assuming an active role and women a passive role (Cantarella, 2005). As long as they were in an active role, Greek and Roman men could demonstrate their virility by subjugating either male or female partners (Cantarella, 2005; Veyne,

1985). A common same-sex practice in Greece, restricted to males, was that of pederasty, the practice of an adult male courting a young boy. This practice appears to have developed in the late seventh century BC and is described in historical texts as mostly occurring during the Archaic and Classical periods (Nissinen, 1998). Pederastic relationships in Greece were socially visible and were often marked by desire but also served the purpose of educating young boys to eventually become proper citizens (Cantarella, 2002). These adolescent boys were relegated to a passive role but were expected to assume an active role in sexual behaviour, with men or women, once they become adults (Cantarella, 2005).

In ancient Rome homosexual experiences between men were also common and regarded as “normal”. These experiences were documented particularly in early Roman history from the second century BC onwards (Boswell, 1980) and differed from the pederastic relationships of the Greeks (Cantarella, 2002). Sex between males was an extension of the dominant social roles of Roman men, in that it was practiced in contexts where it could indicate power and domination. It is for this reason that male and female slaves were subjected to sexual domination but not free Roman men or young boys who would grow into Roman men (Cantarella, 2002; Veyne, 1985). Since Roman masculinity was constructed along the binary of activity and passivity, bisexuality was regarded acceptable as long as the male was the active or penetrating partner during sexual activity, regardless of the sex of his sexual partner (Cantarella, 2005).

Greek pederastic relationships as well as Roman men’s same-sex practices illustrate that in classical Greece and Rome the option to have heterosexual as well as same-sex experiences was socially sanctioned only for men, and not for women. Foucault (1976/1990) also refers to the privileged male discourse of sexuality that dominated in classical Greece. Very few documented references to female same-sex sexuality exist (Cantarella, 2002). One reason for this lack of representation might be the particular social position of women in the ancient Mediterranean world - women in ancient Greece were barred from education or participation in public life and were relegated to a reproductive role in the private domain (Cantarella, 2002). Similarly, Roman women existed within a gendered hierarchy where women did not participate in public life (Brooten, 1996). Female sexuality was therefore not publicly visible and was considered to be something that should be controlled (Cantarella, 2002).

The main account of female same-sex sexuality during this time comes from the life and poetry of the Greek poet Sappho from the island of Lesbos, who lived around the seventh century BC

(Davenport, 1980; DuBois, 1995). Sappho's poetry provides a challenge to privileged male sexuality through celebrating erotic female same-sex sexuality (DuBois, 1995). The same-sex relationships described by Sappho differ in several ways from the pederastic relationships of men in Greece (Cantarella, 2002). Instead of the distinct educational value that pederastic relationships entail, Sappho's writings describe female same-sex sexuality in terms of deep affection and love (Cantarella, 2002).

Whereas the poetry of Sappho provides an account of female same-sex sexuality from the subject position of a woman, the sparse accounts in ancient Rome are all filtered through the writing of men (Cantarella, 2002). The construction of Roman female same-sex sexuality is not the celebrated love between women that is evidenced in Sappho's writing, but instead an image of vulgar, unnatural acts between "depraved" women (Brooten, 1996; Cantarella, 2002). Considering that Roman men were in a dominant social role, the notion of women seeking pleasure from other women served to disrupt male dominance. This resulted in representations of female bisexuality in Rome as unnatural and socially reprehensible, unlike the socially sanctioned depictions of male bisexuality (Cantarella, 2002).

4.2.2 The influence of religious discourses on sexual ethics

Before the introduction of Christianity, the Greek and Roman acceptance of male bisexuality had already been altered by the pagan sexual ethics of self-control and abstinence. Pagan beliefs held that sexuality is only acceptable if channelled towards procreation, and such beliefs established a negative view of same-sex sexuality and a preference for heterosexuality (Cantarella, 2002; Veyne, 1985, 1987). Widely supported interpretations of Biblical texts have resulted in the Judeo-Christian religions extending this sexual ethic into a punitive and moralising view of same-sex sexuality (Cantarella, 2005).

Most current interpretations of the Hebrew Bible as well as the Christian Bible condemn same-sex sexuality as sinful and unnatural (Brooten, 1996). This is based on verses from Paul in his letter to the Romans (included only in the Christian Bible) and verses from the book of Leviticus, which presents legislation and codes aimed at ensuring the holiness of the people of Israel (included in both the Christian and the Hebrew Bible). While the Hebrew Bible makes no reference to female same-sex sexuality, it does condemn male-male sexual intercourse (Walsh, 2001). The only reference to female same-sex sexuality in the Christian Bible is in Paul's letter to the Romans. I will first discuss the relevant verses from the book of Leviticus, before turning to a discussion of Romans 1:26-27.

The widely cited verses from Leviticus that are often used in support of arguments opposing same-sex sexuality include Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Both references make no mention of female same-sex sexuality. Leviticus 18:22 is addressed to men only: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”. In Leviticus 20:13 the focus is again on male-male intercourse: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them”⁵. Several explanations have been proposed for the omission of female same-sex sexuality from these ancient Israelite laws. Brooten (1996) suggests that the patriarchal system that dominated at that time implied that lawmakers were simply more concerned with male behaviour than they were with female behaviour. Another suggestion is that because these texts are placed within the context of purity concerns in Leviticus, they are more related to possible defilement through the commingling of excrement and semen, which could occur during male-male anal intercourse, than they are to sexual ethics (Olyan, 1994). Female same-sex relations would not involve the commingling of two defiling substances and would therefore not necessitate inclusion in these laws⁶ (Olyan, 1994).

Despite the fact that female same-sex sexuality is not mentioned in Leviticus, these verses are still frequently employed to condemn female same-sex sexuality in addition to male same-sex sexuality. This is illustrated in an example cited by Brooten (1996), where an American colonial statute from New Haven (formulated in 1656) placed the death penalty on male-male as well as female-female sexual relations. This statute first cites Leviticus 20:13, and then continues to note that “if any woman change (sic) the natural use, into that which is against nature, as Rom.1:26, she shall be liable to the same sentence, and punishment” (as cited in Brooten, 1996, p. 195).

Many of the current interpretations of Biblical texts argue that Paul’s letter to the Romans replaced the previous distinction between active and passive sexuality – dominant in the ancient Mediterranean world – with a total condemnation of same-sex sexuality, regardless of the gendered

⁵ Authors such as Boyarin (1995) and Olyan (1994) argue convincingly that although anal intercourse between men was prohibited by the Levitical laws, other homoerotic acts between men were not. The reasons for ancient Israelite laws prohibiting male-male anal intercourse in particular are complex; Olyan (1994) provides a thorough discussion of various scholars’ interpretations.

⁶ Olyan (1994) notes that according to such reasoning defilement would also occur during male-female anal intercourse, yet it is not prohibited anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. He suggests that this might be because male-female anal intercourse did not necessarily form part of the range of sexual acts practiced at the time, and would therefore not be included in the Levitical laws (Olyan, 1994).

roles assumed in sexual behaviour (such as Cantarella, 2002). To emphasise the introduction of this distinction between homosexual and heterosexual, Paul, in his letter to the Romans (Romans 1:26-27), specifically makes reference to the condemnation of female same-sex relations in addition to male same-sex relations: “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another”. Some readings of this Biblical text argue that the inclusion of a reference to women indicates that it is not the notion of what constitutes masculine sexuality that is under consideration, as is the case in Roman sexual ethics, but instead the entire concept of same-sex sexuality that is being decisively and without exception condemned (Cantarella, 2002). The widely held interpretation of this Biblical text is then that same-sex sexuality, for men as well as women, is unnatural and sinful (Cantarella, 2002).

However such a reading of Romans 1:26-27, where same-sex sexuality is condemned as sinful, has been challenged by scholars who argue that these texts cannot be interpreted without taking into account the historical and cultural contexts in which they were written (Dreyer, 2005). Paul’s letter to the Romans is situated within the particular gendered, sexual and status-related norms that prevailed in the ancient Mediterranean world (Tolbert, 2002). Scholars such as Brooten (1996) disagree with the view that Christian sexual and gendered ethics differed significantly from Roman views during that period, stating that “early Christians shared certain fundamental assumptions about sexual relations and gender with their contemporaries” (p. 190-191). The negative evaluation of female same-sex sexuality in Romans 1:26-27 is then based on the patriarchal views shared by the early Christians as well as the non-Christian world at that point in time (Brooten, 1996).

This patriarchal model of gender and sexuality – one of dominance and submission, with an adult male assuming the dominant role – implied that sexual relations did not occur between people of equal status and any sexual act that transgressed this model was regarded as unnatural and was therefore deplored (Tolbert, 2002). Women who assumed an active role, through having sexual relations with other women, were seen as engaging in acts that violated their “natural” passivity and transgressed the asymmetric sexual order (Brooten, 1996). Through his reference to women who “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” (Romans 1:26), Paul is then not condemning female same-sex sexuality per se, but instead condemning behaviours that contravened the accepted patriarchal model of gender and sexual relations. It is an extension of the view that “nature calls for men to be superordinate and active and for women to be subordinate and passive”, shared by the early Christians as well as other Mediterranean cultures (Brooten, 1996, p. 192).

Thus far I have focused the discussion on the treatment of same-sex sexuality in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The motivation for this is that Christianity has been particularly influential in shaping political and social identities in South Africa. Although there is some religious diversity in South Africa, close to 80% of South Africans consider themselves Christian, making Christianity the most common religion in South Africa (StatsSA, 2001)⁷. However, regardless of religious identification, Christianity has informed South African realities on many levels. Christian-nationalism informed the development of apartheid ideology in South Africa, and Afrikaans churches, particularly the Dutch Reformed Church, were supportive of segregationist policies (Dubow, 1992). Under the apartheid regime, South African schools followed a curriculum based on a system of Christian National Education, where Christianity explicitly and implicitly informed education and socialisation in schools (Chidester, 2003). Christian discourse therefore shaped South Africans' realities not only on a religious level but had a wider impact on political ideology, pedagogy and socialisation. Consequently, even if individuals do not identify as Christian, the normative influence of Christianity remains evident in the social realities of most South Africans, and also in their constructions of sexuality (Delius & Glaser, 2002).

As far as other religious texts' treatment of same-sex sexuality is concerned, most texts share a focus on condemning male-male sexuality, with little concern for female-female sexuality. In the Islam faith, for example, the Qur'an prohibits male-male intercourse, while no mention is made of female same-sex sexuality (Bouhdiba, 1985). Although female same-sex sexuality is largely omitted from religious texts, it does not mean that religious discourse is not used to discriminate against lesbian and bisexual women. As noted earlier, prohibitions against male same-sex sexuality in religious texts are generally extended to also fuel condemnation of female same-sex sexuality. To conclude, it can be stated that popular interpretations of religious texts, particularly in countries where a Christian worldview predominates, are drawn upon when constructing same-sex sexuality as sinful and unnatural – a construction that has fuelled discrimination against gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals (Brooten, 1996).

⁷ This is followed by 1.46% identifying as Islamic, 1.23% as Hindu and 0.17% as Jewish, while 15.1% of South Africans consider themselves non-religious (Statistics South Africa, 2001).

4.3 Bisexuality in psychological discourse

Current understandings of religious discourse have constructed heterosexuality as the only “natural” expression of sexuality. Early psychological theories, in turn, influenced this construction by considering bisexuality in medical terms of illness and pathology.

4.3.1 Psychoanalytical accounts of bisexuality as pathology

Psychoanalytical theorists mainly described bisexuality in terms of pathology and deviance (Murphy, 1984). Freud was particularly vocal about his views on bisexuality but mostly discussed bisexuality in relation to the development of homosexuality (Murphy, 1984). Freud’s views on bisexuality evolved over a period of time and were often inconsistent; at times he depicts bisexuality as a more “natural” psychological state while at other points he describes it in pathological terms.

Freud (1937/1963) describes sexual desire as diffuse and open – in his view all human beings are bisexual in that everyone has the potential to choose male or female sexual objects:

It is well known that at all times there have been, as there still are, human beings who can take as their sexual objects persons of either sex without the one trend interfering with the other. We call these people bisexual and accept the fact of their existence without wondering much at it.... But we have come to know that all human beings are bisexual in this sense and that their libido is distributed between objects of both sexes, either in a manifest or a latent form. (p. 261)

This universal bisexual potential is described as a primordial state in which sexuality is undifferentiated. In this primordial state individuals have the “freedom to range equally over male and female objects” (Freud, 1905/1953, p. 145). However, bisexuality is associated with an infantile stage of psychic development and is not regarded as a healthy psychological state for an adult. Although Freud contends that all individuals are originally bisexual, the expectation is that over time people eventually limit their object choices to only one sex. In homosexual and heterosexual individuals this repression requires constant effort (Freud, 1937/1963). This leaves bisexuals in a state of less conflict as they do not need to relentlessly repress one of the object choices (Freud, 1937/1963). In this sense, Freud (1937/1963) describes bisexuality as an ideal polymorphous state where libidinal energy is freely distributed. However, despite this apparently positive view of bisexuality, Freud contends that bisexuality is an indication of immaturity as the individual failed to successfully resolve the stages of psychosexual development that determines healthy adult

functioning (Murphy, 1984). In this view, heterosexuality is regarded as the normal or healthy outcome of development (Freud, 1937/1963).

Stekel (1922/1946), a contemporary of Freud, focussed his work on homosexuality as a form of pathology. Stekel concurred with Freud's view that all people are bisexual and that the "normal" individual represses his or her homosexual desires:

I am of the opinion that all persons are bisexual. The disposition toward homosexuality exists in everyone; the homosexual represses his heterosexuality; the heterosexual his homosexuality. I further maintain that the homosexual component remains in everybody, but it depends upon the patient if he will indulge in it. (Stekel & Frohman, 1930, p. 443-444)

Similar to Freud (1937/1963), Stekel (1922/1946) contends that the repression of homosexual desire occurs during puberty and is part of the normal developmental process. For Stekel, Freud and most other psychoanalytical theorists of that time, the notion of constitutional or universal bisexuality was acceptable, but the ideal course of development was for all individuals to eventually repress any homosexual desires and maintain an exclusively heterosexual orientation. In this manner bisexuality is considered as the undifferentiated and immature site from which other sexualities develop, with heterosexuality being the healthy outcome and homosexuality the pathological outcome of psychological development (Rapoport, 2010). It is not theorised as an option that can be taken up by a psychologically mature adult (Angelides, 2001).

The implication of this is that even a more positive reading of Freud's views on bisexuality falters when considering the pervasiveness of the heterosexual norm, since Freud's formulation of a primary bisexuality functions to support a heterosexuality/homosexuality binary (Butler, 1990). Bisexuality is theorised by Freud as existing in the past, as a primordial state that serves as the site for the emergence of either a homosexual or heterosexual identity, but not as a viable sexual identity in itself (Angelides, 2001). Butler (1990) asserts that "the effort to locate and describe a sexuality 'before the law' as a primary bisexuality or as an ideal and unconstrained polymorphousness implies that the law is antecedent to sexuality" (p. 74). Freud's formulation of bisexuality implies that the social and cultural laws that regulate sexuality act themselves out during the course of development and function to repress homosexual desire (Garber, 2000), or in the case of psychological dysfunction, repressing heterosexual desire (Freud, 1937/1963). However, Butler (1990) contends that Freud's theory does not provide for an ideal state that exists prior to repression of heterosexual or homosexual desire; instead "the illusion of a sexuality before the law is

itself the creation of that law” (p. 74). The notion of bisexuality as an ideal state that exists outside the law of repression only becomes possible “once the idea of the law is in place” (Garber, 2000, p. 184). A reading of Freud’s bisexuality as an ideal state prior to the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary is then dismissed; instead this positioning of bisexuality preceding the binary is in fact argued as only being possible because of the very existence of the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Butler, 1990).

4.3.2 The inconceivability of bisexuality

Where psychoanalytical theorists mostly constructed the bisexual individual as psychologically immature and as deviating from the heterosexual ideal, the theories that followed generally insisted that bisexuality was inconceivable and thereby effectively rendered it invisible (such as Bergler, 1956; Stern, 1961). Bergler (1956), a prominent psychoanalyst in his time who held disparaging views of homosexuality (Drescher, 1997), considered the simultaneous attraction to both males and females to be impossible. Within his view, individuals who regard themselves as bisexual are denying their homosexual orientation:

Bisexuality - a state that has no existence beyond the word itself - is an out-and-out fraud. The theory claims that a man cannot be - alternatively or concomitantly - homosexual and heterosexual. Nobody can dance at two different weddings at the same time. These so-called bisexuals are really homosexuals with an occasional heterosexual excuse. (Bergler, 1956, p. 80-81)

While bisexuality was increasingly rendered invisible through statements such as Bergler’s, psychology as a discipline sharpened its focus on homosexuality as pathology. In 1957 homosexuality first entered the DSM-I as a sociopathic personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1957), followed by the DSM-II listing it as a sexual deviation in 1968 (American Psychiatric Association, 1968). Although this classification of homosexuality as a psychological disorder certainly had negative implications for individuals who identified as bisexual, the absence of any reference to the term bisexuality in these editions of the DSM was indicative of its invisibility in psychology at that time.

4.3.3 Challenges to psycho-medical discourses of bisexuality

The first challenge to the notion of bisexuality as deviant and pathological was through the work of Kinsey and his colleagues, who also contributed to the somewhat increased visibility of bisexuality, especially in the United States. Through an investigation into sexual behaviour in men (Kinsey et al.,

1948) and later in women (Kinsey et al., 1953), the Kinsey Reports challenged public discourses of what was considered normal or abnormal sexual behaviour. Kinsey et al. (1948; 1953) conceptualised bisexuality as existing on a continuum of sexual orientation. This view was different from the dominant heterosexual/homosexual binary that considered sexual orientation in terms of categories that are mutually exclusive. Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) instead developed a scale that measured sexual orientation on a continuum from exclusive heterosexuality with a value of zero, through to exclusive homosexuality with a value of seven. In the middle of this continuum was a category for equal heterosexuality and homosexuality, which can be considered as bisexuality (Kinsey et al., 1948).

Stein (1992) however points out that assigning people to the middle of the continuum is conceptually problematic as it groups together people with dramatically varied sexual practices and desires. He notes that according to the scale, bisexuality can refer not only to “people who are erotically inclined to both men and women” but also to “primarily heterosexual people who on one occasion engaged in same-sex sexual activity” and “primarily homosexual people who engaged in an isolated instance of other-sex sexual activity” (Stein, 1992, p. 335). Furthermore, such a conceptualisation of bisexuality does not entirely disrupt the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary, as it still conceives of bisexuality as a category that comprises of composite parts of heterosexuality and homosexuality, thus deriving its meaning from the dominant binary system of sexuality (Däumer, 1992).

Furthermore, the Kinsey scale can be criticised as not being a true continuum, as individuals have to be placed in one of the seven categories dictated by the scale. In this sense it still conforms to an essentialist conceptualisation of sexuality as distinct “types” or categories. However, the manner in which it conceptualises sexual orientation paved the way for a social constructionist approach that reflects fluidity. Kinsey et al. (1948) did not view sexual orientation as fixed but instead argued that one’s sexual orientation can vary over the course of a lifetime:

... there is a considerable portion of the population whose members have combined, within their individual histories, both homosexual and heterosexual experience and/or psychic responses. There are some whose heterosexual experiences predominate, there are some whose homosexual experiences predominate, there are some who have had quite equal amounts of both types of experience The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to

force facts into separated pigeonholes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. (p. 639)

The publication of the Kinsey Reports was followed by more challenges to the dominant discourse in psychology that regarded homosexuality as pathological. Researchers such as Hooker (1957) and Szasz (1970) served to destabilise the illness model within which homosexuality was interpreted. Hooker (1957) compared the psychological adjustment of homosexual and heterosexual male participants and concluded that there were no differences between the groups, thereby deconstructing the dominant association between homosexuality and mental illness. Szasz (1970) argued that homosexuality should not be regarded in terms of pathology and disease and that psychiatry uses such a construction of homosexuality to exert social control. However, both Hooker (1957) and Szasz (1970) focused on homosexuality and made no reference to bisexuality, with the implication that its invisibility in psychology remained largely in place.

By 1973 the challenges to psychology's negative construction of homosexuality gained impetus and homosexuality was deleted from the list of psychological disorders in the DSM. The DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) however continued to refer to homosexuality through a new diagnosis called ego-dystonic homosexuality. In the DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) this diagnosis was removed and the only mention of homosexuality was under Sexual Disorders not Otherwise Specified, referring to marked and persistent distress regarding one's sexual orientation. It is again noticeable that no mention is made of bisexuality in these editions of the DSM, emphasising its absence from psychological and psychiatric discourses at the time.

It is in this context of resistance against psychology's negative treatment of homosexuality that affirmative theories of homosexuality began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. However, it was only until much later that bisexuality began to receive attention in psychological research.

4.3.4 Affirmative approaches to bisexuality

4.3.4.1 Bisexuality identity formation as a linear progression

Initially, more positively framed approaches to sexual orientation focused on homosexuality through, amongst others, theories of homosexual identity development. Within these models, bisexuality only featured as a transitional stage in the final development of a homosexual identity and was not studied as a sexual orientation separate from homosexuality. A widely studied theory of homosexual identity formation is that of Cass (1979). Her linear model entails six stages: identity

confusion; identity comparison; identity tolerance; identity acceptance; identity pride; and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979). Within this model, heterosexual feelings or experiences are regarded as interfering with the formation of a positive homosexual identity, thereby constructing bisexuality as a temporary or transitional stage in achieving a well-adjusted homosexual identity.

Several other theorists developed models of identity development pertaining to homosexual men and women (such as Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Plummer, 1975; Ponce, 1978), with similar work on bisexuality remaining largely absent. However, more recently the increased visibility of bisexuality has resulted in a handful of models for bisexual identity development emerging. Similar to the sequential stage models of identity development proposed by theories of gay and lesbian identity, theories that account for bisexual identity development are predominantly based on a stage sequential approach. Weinberg, Williams and Pryor (1995) propose a stage model of bisexual identity development based on their research with both male and female bisexual individuals. As a first stage, it is proposed that the individual experiences initial confusion, where feelings of sexual attraction to both males and females are experienced as unsettling and disorienting. Confusion during this stage is exacerbated by the sense that one has to choose either a heterosexual or homosexual identity, with bisexuality not considered a socially valid option. The second stage concerns finding and applying the label of bisexuality. This stage entails accepting feelings of attraction to both males and females and becoming comfortable with a bisexual identity. This occurs through various ways, including having a sexual encounter that confirms feelings of attraction, becoming part of a community of individuals who identify as bisexual or learning about bisexuality from books about the topic.

A third stage proposed by Weinberg et al. (1995), is that of “settling into” the identity. This entails not only acceptance of bisexual feelings but also a sense of identifying as bisexual, or “a more complete transition in self-labelling” (Weinberg et al., 1995, p. 31). These individuals become less concerned with others’ views of their sexual preference and consider themselves part of a supportive community. Weinberg et al. (1995) posit a final stage of bisexual identity development which they argue is unique to bisexuals. This fourth stage is that of continued uncertainty about their sexual identity, despite having reached a stage where they adopt the label bisexual. These authors argue that this uncertainty and doubt is partly due to the lack of social validation that is received for adopting a bisexual identity, which makes it difficult to consistently sustain over time.

Bradford (2004), in exploring sexual identity development in men and women who identify as bisexual, proposes four stages in the formation of a bisexual identity. Firstly, the stage of questioning reality includes feelings of doubt and pressure to identify as either heterosexual or homosexual. During the second stage, inventing the identity, the individual increasingly accepts feelings of attraction to both men and women and starts to define their identity as bisexual. In the third stage, that of maintaining the identity, the individual must preserve their identity as bisexual in the face of marginalisation and a lack of validation in both heterosexual and homosexual contexts. Finally, the stage of transforming adversity entails engaging in social action through participating in a bisexual community (Bradford, 2004).

Bradford (2004) states that this model is in contrast with the model proposed by Weinberg et al. (1995) in that rather than using heterosexual identification as the starting point, a third of her participants initially identified as homosexual. Furthermore, she notes that the first two stages of her model correspond with the model of Weinberg et al. (1995) but that the latter two stages differ. In the model of Weinberg et al. (1995) the last two stages are marked by the presence of some uncertainty and doubt about sexual identity, while the stages proposed by Bradford (2004) are signified by affirmation and certainty of bisexual identity.

4.3.4.2 Social constructionist challenges to stage theories

Stage theories of identity development have been criticised as depicting identity development as proceeding through a linear progression of stages with little variability, based on an assumption of identity development having a fixed beginning and end-point (Eliason, 1996). Social constructionist approaches to bisexual identity have proposed that bisexual identity is not fixed and that assuming a particular sexual identity is negotiated amidst various contextual influences (Rust, 1993). Rust (1993) states that linear stage models are inadequate since the development of sexual identity “is not orderly and predictable; individuals often skip steps in the process, temporarily return to earlier stages of the process, and sometimes abort the process altogether by returning to a heterosexual identity” (p. 51).

Bisexual women often disclose their sexual orientation to others at a later age than lesbian women, and exhibit what is regarded as less “stable” sexual identities (Rust, 1993). Within a framework of stage sequential models of identity development where the acquisition of a stable sexual identity is the desired outcome, uncertainty and change are indicative of psychological immaturity (Rust, 1993). A social constructionist approach however rejects the notion of an essential identity that is

settled into through a developmental process. Instead, an individual will identify him/herself in relation to his/her social context. With the social world continuously changing, variation in sexual identity is not regarded as undesirable (Rust, 1993).

In my review thus far I have focussed on how bisexuality has been constructed in available historical accounts of sexuality, as well as its treatment in psychological theories. I now broaden the boundaries of the review to also include public discourses of bisexuality and consider how bisexuality is typically positioned within such discourses. There is of course a constant interplay between what I term here public discourses and the discipline-specific discourses I have reviewed thus far. Psychological theories of sexuality are influenced by broader public discourses and in turn impact on how sexuality is constructed in discursive formulations in a public sphere. The separation here is then to a large extent artificial.

4.4 Constructions of female bisexuality in public discourses

The emerging body of research related to female bisexuality has predominantly focused on dominant constructions of bisexuality and their impact on the subjectivity of bisexual women. These constructions mostly depict bisexuality negatively and function to invalidate bisexuality as a sexual identity. In this section I review these constructions of female bisexuality, before considering attempts by bisexual women to retrieve bisexuality from invalidation in public discourses.

4.4.1 The cultural unintelligibility of bisexuality

Within the culturally dominant heterosexual/homosexual binary of monosexism, bisexuality is rendered unintelligible (Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002). Monosexism is a term used analogous to heterosexism to refer to the “dichotomous construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality (i.e. monosexualities) as the only legitimate forms of sexuality” (Rust, 2002, p. 204). Bower et al. (2002) use the term cultural intelligibility to denote “the ways in which bisexuality is constructed as incomprehensible and illegitimate within the dualist logic of hetero/homo” (p. 36). I first discuss how such unintelligibility can relate to bisexual practice not being identified as such, in that instances of same- and opposite-sex erotic interactions are dismissed as situational. This is followed by a discussion of the manner in which such unintelligibility of bisexuality negates the possibility of claiming a bisexual identity.

Stobie (2003) notes that in African contexts in particular, bisexual practice is often discounted and forced into a heterosexuality/homosexuality binary. Such unintelligibility of bisexual practice can be

traced back to early accounts of female bisexuality in African contexts. Anthropological texts typically described bisexual practice in such contexts as “situational bisexuality”, where same-sex interactions are described as occurring mainly because of restrictions on heterosexual activity (Aina, 1991). Herskovits (1938) makes reference to female same-sex relations in his publication on Dahomey youths where he describes sexual-erotic play among girls. He describes these activities between female youths as part of adolescent development where male and female youths have limited contact and therefore restricted opportunity for sexual interaction. Evans-Pritchard (1970), in fieldwork among the Azande in Sudan, also ascribes the occurrence of female same-sex sexual activity to a lack of opportunity for intercourse with male partners. Evans-Pritchard (1970) recounts how informants described to him that wives in polygamous marriages would have scarce opportunity to sleep with their husbands and would satisfy each other for sexual release. In that sense, bisexual practice is rendered less valid, and bisexuality as an explanatory framework is dismissed through insisting on participants’ “inherent” heterosexuality.

Describing fluid sexual practice within a framework of situational bisexuality points to a historical reluctance to acknowledge the existence of same-sex sexuality in African contexts. Epprecht (2006) refers to this as a colonial misrepresentation of African sexualities being purely heterosexual, where same-sex sexuality has historically been construed as “un-African”. More pertinent to the current discussion, descriptions of situational bisexuality also indicate a refusal to consider bisexuality as a valid sexual practice - participants are instead positioned as inherently heterosexual and as only resorting to bisexuality when deprived of opportunities for opposite sex contact.

In contemporary research, the unintelligibility of bisexuality is not restricted to bisexual practice but also extends to how claiming a bisexual identity is viewed as incomprehensible in dominant discourse. Monosexuality positions heterosexuality and homosexuality as the only categories of sexuality and within this discursive structure bisexuality is not considered to be an authentic or viable sexual identity (Bower et al., 2002). A construction of bisexuality as indecision is often called upon to support the cultural unintelligibility of bisexuality. In viewing bisexuality as indecision, there is an incitement for individuals to commit to either heterosexuality or homosexuality, or as bisexual women often describe it, to “get off the fence” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 36). This indecision is often constructed in heteronormative terms as simply being sexual experimentation, where the person engaging in same-sex relationships is seen as experimenting or following a trend of sexual permissiveness (Rust, 2002). Rust (2002) refers to the example of college students in the United States being depicted as more likely to experiment with lesbian identities during their studies but

adopting a heterosexual lifestyle once they leave college. In this construction of bisexuality, the person is expected to eventually return to a normative heterosexual identity after the period of sexual experimentation, and bisexuality is not considered as a more enduring sexual identity (Rust, 2002).

This incitement to “get off the fence” is constructed in somewhat different terms in lesbian spaces. Bisexuality is often doubted by lesbian communities through beliefs that bisexual women are going through a transitional phase that will ultimately be resolved through accepting their homosexual identity (Bower et al., 2002; Rust, 1995). This resonates with psychological theories of identity formation discussed earlier in this chapter, by reducing bisexuality to a stage in the development of an enduring and stable homosexual identity. Contributing to the view among lesbian women that bisexuality is only a phase is the common occurrence that many lesbian women initially have relationships with men before committing to an exclusively lesbian identity (Hartman, 2005). Lesbian women’s view of bisexually-identified women experiencing a similar process in establishing an eventual lesbian identity is then often based on their own narrative of their sexuality, where bisexuality acts as a “gateway” into the lesbian community but not as a more enduring identity (Hartman, 2005). A participant in Ault’s (1996) research provides the following account of discrimination resulting from inhabiting an ambiguous sexual identity in a lesbian community:

I used to identify myself as ‘confused’, then I figured out I was bi; internally, it was joyous. I was fairly uncomfortable with ‘confused’ as an identity. Externally, well, someone tried to kill me because I am attracted to women, and all my lesbian friends dumped me when I came out as bi. Seems like, to me, they thought ‘confused’ was better. (p. 454)

Although some individuals might ascribe their same-sex experiences to being part of experimentation or a transition to a homosexual identity, such constructions can be perceived as condescending as it implies a lack of self-knowledge on the part of bisexually-identified women. By constructing bisexual women as confused about their sexuality, or as undergoing a transitional phase, they are positioned as ignorant of their “real” sexual identity (Garber, 2000). Constructions of bisexuality as a transitional or experimental identity also serve to reinforce the invisibility of bisexuality within a dominant heterosexual/homosexual binary of sexuality (Rust, 2002).

Another consequence of the unintelligibility of bisexuality within a monosexist binary is that bisexually-identified women construct their own identity in the terms afforded by this dominant discourse (Ault, 1996). When conceived of within the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary,

bisexuality is not considered to be a complete identity with the same “wholeness” that monosexualities imply (Bower et al., 2002). Within this binary logic of sexuality, bisexually-identified individuals remain “half heterosexual” and “half homosexual”, instead of being able to claim the type of legitimate and complete identity afforded by monosexualities (Bower et al., 2002).

4.4.2 Constructions of bisexual chic

Bisexuality has at various points in history been constructed as chic and fashionable, particularly in artistic contexts (Garber, 2000). Author Virginia Woolf and poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) typified this in the early twentieth century (Garber, 2000). Garber (2000) cites a statement in a 1974 edition of *Time* where an interviewee asserts that “it has become very fashionable in elite and artistically creative sub-groups to be intrigued by the notion of bisexuality” (p. 19). More recently, the personal lives of celebrities such as the late South African pop singer Brenda Fassie, Hollywood celebrity Lindsey Lohan, as well as the hit song by bisexually-identified Katy Perry, *I Kissed a Girl*, have generated great media interest in and increased visibility of female bisexuality (Diamond, 2005; Munro, 2009).

These popularising accounts of bisexuality have served to increase bi-visibility: “bisexuality – and even the by now much-recycled concept of ‘bisexual chic’ – has moved steadily into the mainstream, fuelled by music videos, talk shows, sitcoms, and advertising, as well as by sexual practice” (Garber, 2000, p. 21). However, the notion of bisexual chic also implies an experimental identity that can be adopted or discarded, depending on social and cultural trends, and in this sense serves to delegitimise bisexuality. Thompson (2007) notes that while media representations of bisexual chic serve to popularise bisexuality, it also strengthens the notion of bisexuality being a trendy, and by extension, transient identity.

Another manner in which a construction of bisexual chic is employed is as a marker that strengthens the boundaries of the category bisexuality. Ault (1996) refers to bisexual women’s discourse creating distinctions between “true bisexuals” and “trendy bisexuals”. A participant in research by Bower et al. (2002) states that:

If somebody is going to claim the bisexual, like being a bisexual woman, I feel that there’s certain responsibilities that go with that It’s not just about, you know, having a little safe fling with a woman one night and then saying, oh, I’m bisexual. (p. 39)

In efforts to retrieve bisexuality from constructions of illegitimacy, where bisexuality is erased within the monosexual binary, bisexual women police the boundaries of what constitutes the category

bisexual and position women who conform to a notion of bisexual chic as not belonging to such a category.

It can be noted that a construction of bisexual chic is one that is mostly reserved for women – images of male bisexuality are not often popularised in the mainstream media (White, 2001). This is possibly due to the general eroticisation of female bisexuality, which I discuss later in this chapter.

4.4.3 Bisexuality as associated with promiscuity

Another dominant construction of bisexuality is that of bisexuality as necessarily equated with promiscuity. According to this discursive formulation, bisexual women can only identify as such if they remain involved with both men and women; a bisexual identity is then predicated on the necessity of having concurrent relationships with men and women (Klesse, 2005). In this sense being in a monogamous relationship with either a man or a woman serves to destabilise one's bisexual identity (Eadie, 1996).

For many bisexual women such a construction of bisexuality as necessarily equated with non-monogamy is considered to delegitimise bisexuality and complicates their ability to self-identify as bisexual (Bower et al., 2002). In societies that value monogamy as the ideal the association of bisexuality with non-monogamy carries with it a range of negative implications for women who claim such an identity. Within this discursive formulation the bisexual woman is constructed as hyper-sexual, as incapable of being in a faithful relationship or as an “insatiable nymphomaniac swinger” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 38).

This construction of bisexuality is common in both heterosexual and homosexual spaces. In heterosexual spaces it is often drawn on to reinforce the moral “unacceptability” of bisexuality. In her research Ault (1996) makes specific reference to prejudice among religious groups in the United States. Ault (1996) cites statements by the religious right depicting bisexuality as “the ultimate perversion” and describing bisexuals as sleeping “with anything that moves” (p. 452). In heterosexual groups that do not necessarily identify with the sentiments of the religious right, negative attitudes towards bisexuality are also common. In research conducted in the United States among self-identified heterosexual undergraduate students, the majority of participants endorsed marginalising stereotypes regarding bisexuality, such as the notion that bisexual individuals are obsessed with sex (Eliason, 2001) or are more promiscuous than individuals from other sexual categories (Eliason, 1997).

In gay and lesbian spaces the construction of bisexuality as equated with promiscuity is often drawn on to depict bisexual women as untrustworthy partners. In this construction the commitment and loyalty of bisexual women are doubted and many lesbian women believe that a bisexual partner might leave the same-sex relationship for a partner of the opposite sex, should the same-sex relationship no longer meet their needs (Eliason, 2001; Ochs, 1996).

Problematic in discursive moves aimed at countering a construction of bisexuality as necessarily equated with promiscuity, is that it reinstates the heteronormative ideal of monogamy (Bower et al., 2002). Promiscuity discourses are often drawn on to regulate and police female sexuality (Klesse, 2005), relegating a range of sexual behaviours as outside of the construction of an acceptable female sexuality. These behaviours include sex outside of marriage, sex that is not defined as heterosexual and sex with more than one partner (Klesse, 2005) – all behaviours that negate constructions of female sexuality as supporting male sexual desire and control (Pheterson, 1986). Promiscuity discourses then often function in ways that limit female autonomy and sexual agency (Klesse, 2005). Further to this, when bisexual women resist a construction of bisexuality as equated with promiscuity, a new exclusion is created in that non-monogamous bisexuals are marginalised (Bower et al., 2002).

4.4.4 The eroticisation of female bisexuality

A common construction of female bisexuality is that of an eroticised male heterosexual fantasy (Bower et al., 2002; Klesse, 2005). In this construction of bisexuality, the bisexual woman is positioned as “the ultra sex toy” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 38) or what a participant in a study by Klesse (2005, p. 452) refers to as the “hot-bi-babe” fantasy. In this manner female bisexuality is often construed in relation to male fantasies of a man either watching two female lovers having sex, or engaging in a ménage à trois with two women (Garber, 2000). This kind of positioning reduces bisexuality to sexual behaviour, a discursive formulation that occurs often in relation to non-heterosexual orientations. Gay, lesbian and bisexual identities are often depicted as centring only on sexual behaviour, while heterosexuality is more often depicted as representing a range of affective and relational qualities and is not so easily described in relation to sex only (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Rubin, 1984).

The eroticisation of female bisexuality negates an autonomous female sexuality as bisexuality “is reduced to, and defined in terms of, its appeal to heterosexual males” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 39). In

this construction, bisexuality is constructed in terms of how it relates to male desire, and not as a sexual choice that is “valid in and of itself” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 39). The eroticisation of bisexual women as a heterosexual male fantasy acts to delegitimise bisexuality, and also contributes to the reluctance of some bisexual women to claim a bisexual identity (Bower et al., 2002). In disclosing their sexual identification to certain male friends, bisexual women risk evoking responses that objectify them in relation to a male sexual fantasy (Klesse, 2005). Eroticised depictions of female bisexuality create a “pseudo-supportive” environment for bisexual women in that female bisexuality is only considered acceptable when moderated by a heterosexist male gaze (Thompson, 2007, p. 53).

4.4.5 Bisexuality as a threat to lesbian politics

Rust (1993) notes that one might expect lesbian and bisexual women to form an easy alliance considering that both groups continue to face marginalisation in heterosexist societies. However this is not the case, as many bisexual women find it problematic to claim a bisexual identity within lesbian social spaces, recounting experiences of a hostile and exclusionary response from lesbian women, or what Hartman (2005, p. 63) describes as a “chilly climate” between bisexual and lesbian women. The tension between lesbian and bisexual women is largely accounted for by the continued influence of identity politics. As a historically marginalised group, lesbian communities have cohered around a common identity, which has helped to advance collective action (Bower et al., 2002). Such identity politics have necessitated the establishment of normative notions of what constitutes “genuine” or “legitimate lesbianism” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 42). Relationships with men were further regarded as undermining efforts to resist sexism and patriarchy (Rust, 1995). As a result, bisexual women are often viewed with suspicion because of their sexual ambiguity and their commitment to the lesbian movement is considered to be unclear (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1974; Rust, 1995). In one of the rare accounts of bisexuality in South African research, Zubeida, a self-identified bisexual woman, echoes this experience when she says:

I guess I feel oppressed as a bisexual person. Most lesbian and gay organisations don't really cater for bisexuals - I think largely because bisexuals are even less visible than homosexuals. There is also so much distrust of bisexuals in the homosexual community. (Chan Sam, 1995, p. 191)

In addition to being regarded as undermining lesbian politics, bisexual women are also often considered as risky partners by lesbian women (Hartman, 2005). Drawing on the previously discussed discourse of bisexual women as necessarily promiscuous, many lesbian women avoid involvement with bisexual women as they doubt their ability to be faithful (Klesse, 2005). There is

also a view that bisexuality is increasing the spread of HIV and AIDS (Eliason & Raheim, 1996). In lesbian communities the concern is that bisexual women can contract HIV from their heterosexual encounters and introduce it into the lesbian community when in a relationship with a woman, further adding to lesbian women's distrust of bisexual women (Israel & Mohr, 2004).

Bisexual women negotiate marginalisation in lesbian social spaces in different ways, with many avoiding disclosing their bisexual identity and instead focusing on "passing" as lesbian (Ault, 1996; Bower et al., 2002). Bisexual women may present as lesbian at the expense of their lived bisexual reality in order to gain some sense of acceptance and belonging within lesbian communities. Such adoption of a lesbian identity in the face of exclusionary moves from lesbian communities, challenges the commonly referred to notion that bisexuality is a "safe" identity (Bower et al., 2002). These authors cite a statement by Clarke (1981) asserting that bisexuality is a safer identity than presenting as lesbian, for bisexuality retains the possibility of at some point having a heterosexual relationship, which is posited as more socially valued. Garber (2000) refers to the belief that it is easier to come out as bisexual compared to coming out as gay, citing a bisexual youth stating that claiming a bisexual identity allows you to "recognise your feelings but not totally alienate yourself from society" (p. 17). However, this is not always the case, as bisexual women still face discrimination and exclusion, often in both heterosexual and homosexual spaces.

The discursive move of "playing at being lesbian" is to some extent the result of the disciplining norms imposed by the lesbian community serving to marginalise bisexuality (Bower et al., 2002; Hartman, 2005). Bower et al. (2002) note that this resonates with Foucault's (1977/1995) notion of disciplining gazes that serve to regulate subjectivity. It is also in part a result of the internalisation of such a disciplining gaze, in that bisexual women self-regulate their subjectivity through omitting or minimising aspects of their realities that may identify them as bisexual, something that is of course easier to manage when in a relationship with a woman compared to a man (Bower et al., 2002). Hartman (2005, p. 69) also mentions the discomfort and "self-imposed pressure to hide their 'heterosexual side'" experienced by many bisexual women when interacting in lesbian scenes and cultures. In order to participate in lesbian social spaces, bisexual women often resort to erasing the specificity of their bisexual identity (Ault, 1996). The cost of presenting as lesbian is often a sense of inauthenticity and a betrayal or disavowal of bisexuality as a viable sexual identity (Bower et al., 2002).

4.4.6 Bisexuality as a strategy to retain heterosexual privilege

A further dominant construction of female bisexuality is the notion of bisexuality as a strategy employed by lesbian women in order to retain some heterosexual privilege (Bower et al., 2002). A common belief among lesbian women is that bisexual women deny or conceal their “true” lesbian identity by presenting as heterosexual (Rust, 1993). This allows bisexuals to have “the best of both worlds”, without having to face the consequences of identifying as lesbian (Ponse, 1978). Zubeida, the participant in the South African study referred to earlier, describes this in the following way: “Sometimes we are seen as sitting on the fence and enjoying the best of both worlds; usually we are seen as being unable to come out of the closet” (Chan Sam, 1995, p. 191).

Däumer (1992) lists some of the social and material benefits of presenting as heterosexual in societies that remain predominantly heteronormative. These include “social endorsement and a certain visibility; legal and financial benefits (and) relative safety from homophobia” (Däumer, 1992, p. 96). In this construction bisexual women are considered as really being lesbian but are viewed as resisting a lesbian identity for fear of homophobic reactions from others, or because they are reluctant to identify with homosexuality as a marginalised and oppressed identity (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1974; Bower et al., 2002; Eliason, 2001; Esterberg, 1997).

Relevant to this is the notion of concealable stigma which states that some potentially stigmatised markers of identity, such as sexual orientation, can be concealed more easily than others in order to avoid discrimination (Goffman, 1963; Herek & Capitano, 1996). Sexual orientation, unlike other social markers such as race or gender, is not necessarily immediately obvious to others (Herek & Capitano, 1996). Bisexuality is considered to be even more easily hidden from others, compared to a gay or lesbian identity (Rust, 1993). Bisexual women can presumably present as heterosexual and thus hide their otherness more easily than lesbian women or gay men, should they remain in relationships with men only. Once they have a relationship with a woman, however, their heterosexual privilege is revoked.

Many lesbian women hold the view that bisexual women have access to resources in heterosexual spaces and are therefore not in need of the support lesbian communities could potentially offer (Rust, 1993). This view has been discounted by bisexual women asserting that they have specific needs and interests that are not met by lesbian or heterosexual resources (Rust, 1993). The relative lack of an identifiable bisexual community, compared to more well-established lesbian communities, means that these needs often remain unfulfilled (Ault, 1996; Bradford, 2004). Constructing

bisexuality as a strategy to retain heterosexual privilege then serves to further marginalise bisexual women in lesbian spaces. It also contributes to the delegitimisation of bisexuality as a sexual category through reducing it to a strategy employed to avoid lesbian stigma and discrimination (Bower et al., 2002).

4.5 Retrieving bisexuality from invisibility and invalidation

The dominant constructions of bisexuality reviewed here all serve to delegitimise and invalidate bisexuality, both in relation to heterosexual and homosexual social spaces. Such discursive formulations of bisexuality that render it invalid have consequences for the subjectivities of bisexual women, where the invisibility and unintelligibility of bisexuality render their identities unviable within discursive formulations that promote monosexualities. Although there is still a lack of research exploring the realities of bisexual women, a handful of studies have investigated how bisexual women negotiate their sexual identities in such a context of invisibility and invalidation (such as Ault, 1996; Bower et al., 2002).

Some bisexual women respond to this discursive context of oppositional sexual categories by refusing to label their sexual identity, since identifying as bisexual is experienced as serving to fix their identity (Bower et al., 2002). Despite the fact that bisexuality is often theorised as inhabiting an ambiguous space in the heterosexual/homosexual binary, the act of claiming a bisexual identity does not necessarily disrupt the fixity proposed by monosexism (Bower et al., 2002). In order to avoid such fixity, many bisexual women resist labelling their sexuality since the signifier “bisexual” functions as a “lens through which all other aspects of the self are understood” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 31). In this way “it fixes in place a cultural script that does not restrict itself to sexual identity but which is taken as defining all features of one’s character or ‘being’” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 31). For bisexual women who value a fluid and open identity, such fixing of identity along sexual categories is undesirable.

However many bisexual women, although uncomfortable with labelling their sexual identity, wish to resist the politics of invisibility that surround bisexuality (Bower et al., 2002). Bower et al. (2002) assert that bisexually-identified women resist powerful discourses of bisexual invisibility and invalidation through the construction of reverse discourses. Reverse discourses advanced by bisexual women function to make bisexuality “thinkable, nameable, and therefore viable” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 40). In the following section I discuss three such strategies that are used to advance reverse discourses of bisexuality – the first being the retrieval of bisexuality from invisibility through

mobilising around a queer identity, the second being the privileging of bisexuality through reinscribing a bisexuality/monosexuality binary, and the third being the adoption of a deviant or transgressive identity.

4.5.1 Evoking a queer/non-queer binary

Many bisexual women evoke a queer/non-queer dichotomy to resist invisibility. In Western contexts the term queer is often employed by bisexual women as a less restrictive identity compared to bisexuality (Ault, 1996; Bower et al., 2002). The term queer has been re-appropriated by gay and lesbian groups in the United States during the 1990s and has been reformulated as a broader category of identity that is not limited to those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian, but instead includes “anyone whose proclivities, practices, or sympathies defy the strictures of the dominant sex/gender/sexual identity system” (Ault, 1996, p. 456). For many bisexual women the term queer is then considered to encompass a greater range of potential positions, whereas bisexual still implies a choice between men or women, which reduces sexuality to yet another binary (Bower et al., 2002).

The term queer allows for a sense of belonging that bisexual women find difficult to attain in strictly heterosexual or homosexual spaces, where identity politics often limit the acceptance of bisexuality (Bower et al., 2002). Queer is used instead to evoke a sense of community – because of its more inclusive meaning it is easier for bisexual women to position themselves as part of a queer community (Bower et al., 2002). Queer is then used as a collective term under which persons claiming varied sexual identities can mobilise for social and political action, thereby minimising differences between gay, lesbian and bisexual identities (Bower et al, 2002).

However, it is precisely this lack of specificity when assuming a queer identity that also renders bisexuality invisible, similar to terms based on monosexualities (Bower et al., 2002). Bower et al. (2002) articulate this in the following manner:

The acknowledged tension is that the political and strategic use of the label queer undercuts the politics of bisexual visibility and legitimacy. That is, bisexuality is both subsumed by the sign queer (and thus erased) and excluded by it (and thus invalidated). (p. 33)

Ault (1996, p. 457) concurs that queer can act as a “cloaking mechanism”, creating a sense of unity but also ignoring specificity through grouping together varied sexual identities. Bisexual women can mobilise along with lesbian women under a common identity as queer but by collapsing different

sexual identities, bisexual invisibility is again reinforced (Ault, 1996; Garber, 2000). It becomes evident that the queer/non-queer binary affords bisexual women visibility as part of the queer community; however it remains a problematic identity in that it erases bisexual specificity.

Spurlin (2001) notes that queer studies, as a discipline, has been restricted by a Eurocentric bias that has excluded African sexualities from its focus. He states that queer studies:

...have shown little interest in the cross-cultural variations of the expression and representation of same-sex desire; homosexualities in non-Western societies are, at best, imagined or invented through the imperialist gaze of Euroamerican queer identity politics, appropriated through the economies of the West, or, at worst, altogether ignored. (p. 185)

The academic focus of queer studies has then typically remained on American and European sexualities. However, there has been an increasing use of queer theory as well as the employment of the term queer by South African theorists of sexuality. Reddy (2005), for example, uses the term queer in his research about varied issues relating to same-sex desire in South Africa. Amory (1997) also argues convincingly for the relevance and utility of queer in African contexts. Motswapong (2010, p. 201) employs the term queer extensively in her work about sexualities in Botswana through references to “queer communities” and “queer sexualities”.

However, a careful reading of how queer is employed by researchers and theorists in African contexts indicates that it rarely acts to support bisexual visibility or describe bisexually-identified individuals’ realities. Similar to the concern raised in international contexts, the use of queer in African contexts appears to typically erase bisexuality. While bisexuality is often explicitly named in texts that employ the term, its inclusion is rarely extended beyond such naming. For example, Motswapong (2010) includes bisexuality when she describes queer sexualities as including the “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community in Southern Africa” (p. 101). However, the rest of her discussion remains focused on issues pertaining to gay men and lesbian women, with bisexuality (as well as transgender and intersex) not being addressed in any substantial manner. In a similar vein, Amory (1997) relates her argument for the advancement of the term queer in African contexts to research and activism pertaining to gay and lesbian realities only, with no mention of bisexual realities. Reddy (2005) also emphasises that his use of the term queer relates specifically to a homosexual identity.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that in most international contexts queer implies a broader inclusion of varied sexual identities that resist heteronormativity, but its use in texts referring to African sexualities typically limits it to lesbians and gay men (such as in Amory, 1997; Motswapong, 2010; Reddy, 2005). It appears that the potential for queer to increase bisexual visibility or inclusion in gay and lesbian discourse has yet to be realised in South African contexts. While queer discourse in the United States and European contexts appear to allow for mobilisation and inclusion of bisexual women, bisexuality is largely absent from the emerging queer discourse in Southern Africa.

4.5.2 Evoking a bisexuality/monosexuality binary

Bisexual women also call on a bisexuality/monosexuality binary to assert the legitimacy of bisexuality (Bower et al., 2002). This strategy is quite different from the queer/non-queer binary where bisexuality is collapsed under the queer sign, along with gay and lesbian identities, based on its oppositional stance towards heterosexuality (Ault, 1996). In the queer/non-queer binary, bisexual individuals are considered as more similar to gay and lesbian people than they are to heterosexuals (Ault, 1996). However, a different configuration is used when evoking a bisexuality/monosexuality binary; bisexual identity is positioned as normative while monosexualities, which includes heterosexual and homosexual identities, are considered as “sexually limited by a pathological preference for intimacy with members of only one sex” (Ault, 1996, p. 458). Within this binary, bisexuality is construed as “open” and monosexuality as “closed” (Bower et al., 2002).

In drawing on such a bisexuality/monosexuality binary, bisexual participants in Ault’s (1996) research describe their attraction to others as unrelated to gender, as their attraction is based on “differences ... in the individuals, not in their sex” (p. 458). This is similar to Kitzinger’s (1987, p. 102) notion of participants responding to “the person, not the gender” that she discusses in her research concerned with female same-sex attraction. In constructing bisexuality in this manner, it is positioned as privileged over monosexualities, as bisexuals are open to attraction that transcends gender categories, while monosexuals are construed as limited in their sexuality (Ault, 1996). The bisexuality/monosexuality binary is also supported by notions of normativity and pervasiveness to assert the legitimacy of bisexuality (Bower et al., 2002). In this sense, bisexual practice is constructed as far more common than is publicly acknowledged, and is also construed as a more “natural” sexuality, relative to monosexualities where sexual object choice is limited (Bower et al., 2002). This claim draws on the notion of a universal bisexual potential, referred to earlier in this chapter in relation to Freud’s conceptualisation of bisexuality. In this formulation bisexuality is positioned as

transhistorical, as an innate potential that resides in everyone, and that is repressed by heterosexuals and homosexuals (Angelides, 2001; MacDowall, 2009). Blumberg and Soal (1997) refer to a similar legitimising move in their South African research, where participants drew on a subject position of the “normal bisexual” to assert their sexual identity as natural and that of monosexuals as “other”.

4.5.3 Reclaiming the deviant and transgressive

A final strategy to assert bisexuality as a legitimate category of sexual identification is identified in Blumberg and Soal’s (1997) South African research. These authors describe a subject position of the “sex-radical” where participants in their research reject monogamy and encourage “exploration of unconventional modes of sexual expression” (Blumberg & Soal, 1997, p. 87). This subject position is seen as celebrating the deviant and transgressive as it resists a limiting description of bisexuality that focuses on sexual identification or intimate relationships. This position is assumed as a form of resistance towards the norm and embraces an identity of the other. In this manner bisexual women appropriate a discourse of bisexuality as necessarily equated with promiscuity and redeploy it in the service of their own political goals: to reclaim sexual autonomy and transgressive sexual expression outside of the restrictions of monogamy discourses, which they perceive as constraining their sexuality.

4.6 The potential of bisexuality to subvert the logic of binaries

It is precisely the difficulties of identifying as bisexual in an oppositional sexual culture that are considered to provide bisexuality with its radical potential to challenge such oppositional categories. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, several theorists have noted the potential for bisexual identity to destabilise the traditional binary logic of gender and sexuality (such as Ault, 1996, Däumer, 1992; Garber, 2000; Hartman, 2005). Arguing that gender is regulated in part through dominant constructions of sexualities, and in particular monosexualities, these authors consider the possibilities of bisexuality to challenge the dichotomous organisation of monosexualities and by extension also the gender binary.

Ault (1996, p. 460) argues for the possibility of bisexuality to disrupt binary thinking, asserting that “bi women refuse to locate themselves on either side of the hetero-homo divide, expressing commitments, instead, to a sexual ideology they believe capable of undermining egregious hierarchical systems of sexual difference”. Garber (2000, p. 87) articulates this potential succinctly: “... binary language will not offer a space for bisexuality because it declines to take temporality into

consideration: Bisexuality is not an 'identity' but a narrative, a story". Bisexuality complicates descriptions of sexual orientation based on involvement in either same- or opposite sex relationships; instead of conceptualising a fixed sexual identity it invites a view of sexuality as an unfolding or continuously storied identity (Garber, 2000). Bower et al. (2002, p. 47) appeal to researchers to "acknowledge the transformative potential of bisexuality and the ways in which it can confound bi-polar accounts of gender and sexuality".

Däumer (1992, p. 91) argues that bisexuality "transgresses bipolar notions of fixed gendered and sexed identities" by occupying a discursive space between the oppositional categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Bisexuality opens up a discursive space in which gender, as the focus for defining sexuality, can be questioned. Däumer (1992) cites Sedgwick (1990), who interrogates the automatic linking of sexual identity and gender. Sedgwick (1990, p. 8) considers various dimensions of sexuality, such as a "preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants" and marvels at how from this litany of possibilities, a single dimension, that of gender, has been constructed as informing sexual orientation. Däumer (1992) considers bisexual discourse as offering alternatives to focusing on the gender of the person to whom we are attracted; in bisexual discourse a possibility is created to inhabit many sexual and gendered selves - discursive positions currently unavailable in monosexist discourse.

Däumer (1992) argues that the potential for bisexual discourse to disrupt binaries of gender and sexuality rests on resisting a construction of bisexuality as a third sexual option. If bisexuality is constructed as a third distinct sexual identity the oppositional sexual culture that currently predominates is simply continued. According to Däumer (1992) such a view of bisexuality, as a third identity that integrates heterosexuality and homosexuality, denies the subversive potential of bisexuality. She further argues that it is also inadequate to construct bisexuality as a divided sexual identity, where the bisexual individual is considered as comprising of heterosexual and homosexual "sides" constantly in conflict with each other. This formulation also relies on a discursive formulation of sexuality as oppositional (Däumer, 1992).

Both these formulations of bisexuality limit the potential of bisexuality to transgress binary categories, as they rely on situating bisexuality in a monosexist framework (Däumer, 1992). Bower et al. (2002) concur that the radical potential of bisexual discourse can only be realised if it is theorised,

“not as embodying elements of both heterosexuality and homosexuality, but rather as outside of the binaries of monosexism and with the potential to confound mutually exclusive sexual communities” (p. 47-48). Garber (2000) refers to this as viewing “bisexuality as eroticism, (as) ‘unpigeonholed sexual identity’, *not* bisexuality as the ‘third’ choice between, or beyond, hetero- or homosex” (p. 18). The radical potential of bisexuality lies in its conceptualisation as “a sign of transgression, ambiguity, and mutability” (Däumer, 1992, p. 103).

One way in which bisexual women can actualise this potential is through resisting the heterosexual/homosexual and male/female binaries by only provisionally labelling their sexual identification, or by resisting labelling altogether (Bower et al., 2002). Through resisting definition and by only adopting bisexuality as a provisional description of their sexuality, bisexual women retain the fluidity and ambiguity of bisexuality, and therefore bisexuality’s potential to disrupt discursive binaries of gender and sexuality (Bower et al., 2002). It might be necessary for bisexual women to at times claim a bisexual identity in order to resist monosexual hegemony but the provisional nature of such an identity should be acknowledged through “continually questioning what such an identity means” (Bower et al., 2002, p. 48).

Blumberg and Soal (1997) refer to this potential when they describe a subject position of the “non-labeller”, where any form of classification or categorisation according to sexual orientation is resisted. Participants in their study indicate that labels of bisexuality are perceived as limiting and are mostly drawn on out of a sense of responsibility to create awareness of other forms of sexual expression. By remaining open to what the term means it is then possible for bisexual women to “affirm the importance of deliberately ‘appearing under the sign’ from time to time, while at the same time permanently retaining the lack of clarity about ‘what precisely the sign signifies’” (Butler, 1993b, as cited in Bower et al., 2002, p. 34). As I discussed in Chapter 1, the subversive potential of bisexuality in challenging oppositional binaries has rarely been empirically investigated in bisexual women’s accounts. This brief mention by Blumberg and Soal (1997) is an exception to this silence in the literature. I take up this possibility for bisexuality to disrupt oppositional binaries in subsequent chapters where I present the discourse analysis of participants’ accounts.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I reviewed how bisexuality has been constructed over time, starting with accounts of bisexuality in classical Greece and Rome that served to marginalise female bisexuality. I also briefly considered the influence of religious discourses on transforming views of same-sex sexuality through

adopting a punitive and moralising position. I reviewed the manner in which psychology as a discipline has constructed bisexuality, at times through depictions of pathology and at other times through rendering it invisible. Although in the minority, there are also accounts that regard bisexuality through a more positive lens, such as theories focusing on bisexual identity development that contribute to bisexual visibility.

The review continued to consider broader public discourses of bisexuality, where bisexuality is depicted as culturally unintelligible, as necessarily equated with promiscuity, as an eroticised male fantasy, as a threat to lesbian politics, or as a strategy to retain heterosexual privilege. These constructions function together to delegitimise bisexuality and also render it incomprehensible in relation to the heterosexual/homosexual binary. It is in this context of invalidation and illegitimacy that bisexual women attempt to construct their identities and the review considered strategies used by bisexual women to retrieve bisexuality from such a discursive space. It also acknowledged the discomfort such “fixing” of identity can create when a fluid and open identity is valued. The review concluded with a discussion of the subversive potential of bisexual discourse, where claiming a bisexual identity has been described as a transgression of the discursive boundaries of gender and sexuality.

It is worth emphasising the lack of African and South African literature with a focus on bisexuality. Only a handful of local studies could be identified that focus on female bisexuality and these studies were generally concerned with describing bisexual practice and not self-aware bisexual identities [such as the anthropological research conducted in African contexts by Evans-Pritchard (1970) and Herskovits (1938)]. Only two South African studies could be identified that focused specifically on women who claim a bisexual identity. The first account identified in local literature is the story of Zubeida referred to earlier in this chapter. Zubeida is a self-identified bisexual woman who presents her story in Gevisser and Cameron’s (1995) collection of gay and lesbian narratives. Zubeida’s narrative is one of five included in a section entitled *Five women: Black lesbian life on the Reef*. The chapter title’s elision of her bisexual identity with that of being lesbian is not surprising, as the rest of the volume makes no reference to bisexually-identified individuals, instead focusing on gay and lesbian realities (the book’s title further reflects this focus: *Defiant desire: Gay and lesbian lives in South Africa*). In her short narrative Zubeida refers to many of the issues faced by bisexually-identified women, mentioned in this chapter in relation to international literature: the relative invisibility of bisexuality in relation to gay men and lesbians, distrust by lesbian women, and negative depictions of bisexual women as indecisive and as sexually indulgent (Chan Sam, 1995).

The second South African study reviewed in this chapter that explicitly explores the experiences of self-identified bisexual women is that of Blumberg and Soal (1997). Blumberg and Soal (1997) conducted a focus group discussion with seven female bisexual participants who formed part of a bisexual women's group. These authors identify three constructions of sexual identity that emerged in the group, reviewed at different points in this chapter. These three positions include the normal bisexual, the sex radical and the non-labeller. They point to the complexity of negotiating a bisexual identity in that these positions are assumed in ways that are at times contradictory, in participants' efforts to present "desirable' images of their sexual selves" (Blumberg & Soal, 1997, p. 85).

It is then clear that there is a severe lack of South African research focusing on bisexuality. The present study aims to supplement the sparse available accounts of South African women who claim a bisexual identity.

In the following chapter I explicate the qualitative research methodology that was used in the present study.