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Sexual Identities and Practices

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Traditionally, psychology has preferred biological explanations of sexuality that have presented men and women as fundamentally different in their sexual orientation and practices, explaining these differences in terms of biological processes and substances (evolution, hormones, anatomy, etc.). Heterosexuality as 'natural' and 'normal' is entwined within these accounts featuring male dominance and female submission, while homosexuality has been treated as unnatural, deviant and abnormal—a condition requiring psycho-medical intervention.

Since the latter half of the last century, social accounts of sexuality have gained currency and notions of personal choice and individuality have flourished. For example, sexual orientation and practices can be viewed as lifestyle choices informed by one's parents, peers and the mass media rather than determined by genes, hormones or brain regions. However, such 'social' accounts often neglect the influence of cultural values, power relations and expectations which may constrain 'choice'—and while heterosexism and homophobia may not be so visible in the twenty-first century, such prejudice continues to be expressed in more subtle ways. Critical perspectives, largely drawing from sociological, feminist and 'queer' theory perspectives, emphasise the social construction of sexuality, highlighting issues of power, discourse and resistance, as well as complexity and fluidity in sexed identities and relationships.

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This chapter will summarise key ideas around sexuality which have been prominent in mainstream (social) psychology before presenting alternative critical perspectives.

The Big Three: *Neuroanatomy, Hormones and Genes*

For over 60 years, biological understandings of sexuality have been located within studies that invoke neuroanatomical and physiological factors as markers of differences in sexual orientation and practices. These explanations can, as Mustanski, Chivers, Bailey, and Michael (2002) suggest, be placed into three main categories: sex hormones, genetics and brain lateralisation. Before providing a summary of the evidence underlying 'the big three', it is interesting to note that they share common elements, including highlighting 'biological' differences between men and women, and between heterosexuals and homosexuals and emphasising the corresponding sexual orientations and practices as largely natural and immutable (Woodson, 2012).

This first strand of studies views sexual orientation and practices as primarily the result of the presence or absence of sex hormones during sexual development. For example, in their study of women with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (results in higher levels of the male sex hormone), Hines, Brook, and Conway (2004) link higher-than-expected rates of same-sex attraction among these women to the male sex hormone. Similarly, studies with genetic males who do not have a penis (at birth or due to an accident) and are reassigned as female but who, in adulthood, are typically attracted to females provide further evidence for a biological basis to sexual orientation. Furthermore, studies such as Hines, Alsum, Goy, Gorski & Roy (1987) that illustrate lower levels of circulating testosterone in gay men than their heterosexual counterparts reinforce the hormonal basis for sexual orientation.

The second strand of the big three presents sexual orientation and practices as a result of differences in brain structure and brain hemisphere specialisation. Such thinking is exemplified in LeVay's (LeVay, 1991) study, where he indicates differences in the cellular make-up of the anterior hypothalamus of heterosexual men compared with heterosexual women and homosexual men, suggesting a biological substrate for sexual orientation. The role of brain differences is further developed in studies such as Hiscock, Inch, Jacek, Hiscock-Kalil, and Kalil (1994), who conclude that heterosexual women and homosexual men show similar decreased brain hemisphere specialisation when compared with heterosexual men.

Finally, genes as potential mediators of differences in sexual orientation and practices constitutes the third strand of biological explanations and is one that continues to be popular with sections of scientific, academic, media and gay communities. Perhaps the most well-known study is Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu & Pattituccia (1993), who proposed the X chromosome as important in the development of male homosexual orientation, reporting that out of 40 pairs of gay brothers tested, 33 pairs shared the Xq28 chromosomal region. Whilst there have been less-convincing replications of these findings, debates relating to a 'gay gene' were fuelled again recently by Sanders, Martin, Beecham & Guo (2015) study of 409 pairs of gay brothers that further highlighted the role of chromosome Xq28, as well as chromosome 8.

However, accounts of biology as the primary source of sexual orientation have not existed unchallenged. With regard to neuro-hormonal theories, there has been much reliance on animal studies (an area of research known as 'comparative psychology'), making generalisations to humans problematic. Such research has tended to find a correlation between testosterone levels (which are higher in males) and male sexual behaviours (such as mounting); however, as Beach and Ford (1951) note, such behaviours fail to capture the full complexity of human sexual practices. In addition, Meyer-Bahlburg, Ehrhardt, Rosen, Feldman, Veridiano, Zimmerman & Mc Ewen (1984) observe that hormonal manipulations in the laboratory tend to cause alterations in the animal's genitals, which is not something that is evident in 'normal' homosexual populations.

Sociobiological Accounts: Reproduction and Investment

Whilst still couched in biological terminology, sociobiological theories attempt to widen the scope of influential factors on sexual activities through a consideration of genetics, reproductive investment and environmental considerations (Wilson, 2000). Based on Darwinian ideas of natural selection, differences in genetic investment and its survival into future offspring underpin distinctly different sexual strategies and activities for male and female species. Sociobiologists (Hutt, 1972) argue that differences in the size of the ova and male sperm mean that females contribute substantially greater genetic material to each offspring than their male partners and that it is therefore in their interest to behave in ways that maximise their investment. Thus being selective about the quality of males that they mate with and also investing in the care and thus survival of said offspring are depicted as optimal reproductive strategies for females. For males, sociobiologists state that

their relative lack of genetic investment in offspring produces different optimal reproductive strategies—ones based on competing for and reproducing with as many females as possible. Depending on the environmental contexts in which species are situated, male polygamy or promiscuity is proposed as the most effective biological means of ensuring the survival of male genetic material. These differential reproductive and parenting strategies are further naturalised within sociobiological tradition through the linking of sex-specific hormones to adaptive social and sexual development in males and females. Behaviours such as sexual promiscuity, ambition and drive are depicted as the result of the male hormones whilst the female hormone is inextricably geared towards reproduction and the behaviours this incorporates (e.g. Campbell, 2008; Taylor et al., 2000).

Although popular and a much-respected theoretical perspective for understanding sexual behaviour across the animal kingdom, criticisms relating to the utility of this paradigm for understanding the scope and diversity of human sexuality continue to be voiced. For example, Diamond & Wallen (2011) challenges the link between genetic investment and male sexual promiscuity, highlighting that such practices are culturally encouraged and admired in men but perceived as deviant in women. Other theorists have questioned the primary assumption within this perspective that the sole function of sex is the production of offspring and that males and females have different forces driving them to this end (McFadden & Sneddon, 1998).

The Discipline of Sexology

Seismic intellectual, social and political shifts during the late 1800s in Europe, America and beyond resulted in new understandings of human sexuality emerging from the discipline of sexology. Predominant among this tradition is the work of psychologists such as Freud (1933) and Ellis (1936) who provided sophisticated psychosocial insights into human sexual orientations and practices. In his extensive collection of writings on sexuality, Freud intertwined the influence of psychic (unconscious drives), biological and social factors on sexual development. Based on a series of age- and sex-related experiences, Freud presented a developmental journey towards sexual maturation that although initially shared by female and males in infancy, takes different directions in childhood and results in two separate and differential adult sexual destinations. Undoubtedly, the key experience underpinning the accomplishment of distinct male and female sexualities is the differential resolution of the Oedipus complex experienced during the phallic phase. This complex

is perceived as occurring when the child becomes aware of others (especially the father) and how they impinge upon her/his exclusive relationship with the mother (who is, according to Freud, the primary object of the child's love). By founding the Oedipal complex on the child's growing awareness of the presence or absence of the anatomical penis, Freud establishes sexuality and biology as inextricably linked. Furthermore, the differential resolution of this awareness for the young boy and girl is not only depicted as the basis for two natural and complementary sexualities (male and female) but also articulated by Freud as justification for differences in the subsequent social positioning and status of females and males (for a fuller discussion of the Oedipal Complex see Gough, McFadden & McDonald, 2013).

Male and female sexualities as biologically determined, complementary identities and practices are further consolidated in the work of Ellis (1936). Couched in the language of survival and reproduction, sex is described as being like a biologically orchestrated dance, with the dance partners occupying distinct biologically based positions. The sexually interested but modest female takes centre stage as the 'natural' catalyst for male sexual arousal and desire. Indeed for Ellis women's modesty or reluctance to have sex is the key mechanism shaping men's sexual expression with the inflicting of pain and use of force by men presented as necessary acts to conquer women's natural inhibition towards sex. The pain/pleasure couplet that threads through Ellis writing on female sexuality is further consolidated in his suggestion that women have masochistic tendencies and enjoy both the force and associated pain experienced. For Ellis, then pain, force and pleasure are the by-products of different instinctive impulses characterising female and male sexualities. Finally, the complementary essence of male and female sexualities is further consolidated by Ellis who, like Freud, suggests that different social positions and practices for men and women are the natural outcome of sexual desires and practices. Ellis refers to motherhood as a woman's supreme function and something that required all her energies: 'The task of creating a man needs the whole of a woman's best energies' (Ellis, 1936: 7).

The biological basis of these different but complementary male and female sexualities is developed further in Freud and Ellis consideration of homosexuality. Cloaked in the scientific language of fixation and inversion, both theorists pathologised homosexuality defining it as a developmental or genetic abnormality and as something that needed to be cured. Indeed the cure was not only viewed as vital for the psychological and social well-being of the individual but also to counter the danger that such individuals present to the moral fabric of society. For example, Ellis linked lesbianism

to various forms of social instability, including feminism and the demise of heterosexual marriage, and in particular through his explicit reference to the 'pseudo-homosexual'. This phrase denoted instances when a 'naturally' heterosexual woman was temporarily seduced into an immoral lesbian lifestyle by a real lesbian woman.

However, both theories' contribution to understandings of sexuality remains a highly contested issue. For many psychologists, both theorists were trailblazers, laying the foundations of modern sexuality and generating powerful insights into gender inequality. In supporting the account offered by psychoanalysis, Juliet Mitchell (1974) argued that Freud's account of sexual difference should be read as a critique of the psychic roots of patriarchy in modern society, not as a justification for it. However for other critical feminist social psychologists, the conceptualisations of sexuality in the work of Ellis and Freud are viewed as psuedo-scientific discourses that naturalised the existing status quo of male supremacy, sexual inequality and violence against women that many women were attempting to challenge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Faderman, 1991; Penelope, 1992).

Non-Biological Accounts of Sexuality

Within (social) psychology in the 1960s and 1970s, understandings of sexualities as the product of unconscious/biological, unobservable forces were displaced by Social Learning theory and its focus on sexual orientations and practices as things that are learned through a combination of observation, imitation and reinforcement by multiple socialising agents. Also drawing on psychoanalytic principles, this perspective emphasises the importance of encouragement to behave in 'sex-appropriate' ways through identifying with significant others of the same sex (parent, athlete, cartoon character, etc.). A popular theory within both academic and general populations' Social Learning theory has been used to evidence a range of socialising figures who reinforce normative sexual identities and practices. For example, Downie and Coates (1999) found that in their communication with pre-adolescents about sex, mothers and fathers typically reinforced normative heterosexual sexual identities and practices. More specifically, the authors noted that both mothers and father talked to boys in terms of sexual exploration and adventure while emphasising reproductive and protective issues with girls. Similarly, many studies indicate peers as a pervasive influence shaping sexual orienta-

tion and practices through their multiple roles as information providers and sexual partners (Andersen & Taylor, 2007).

Essentialist understandings of homosexuality were also challenged by psychology in the 1960s and 1970s. Situated within liberal humanistic paradigms, understandings of gay and lesbian people as normal individuals who had had made a personal choice that was as healthy and natural as that made by their heterosexual counterparts emerged. In addition, representations of such individuals as a danger to moral and social instability were contested through the emphasis on their 'personal choice' and 'private lifestyle'. However, whilst such representations were embraced by many who had lived within biological and socially stigmatising discourses of homosexuality, for other gay people and theorists liberal humanistic definitions were also viewed as problematic. More specifically, notions of homosexuality as a matter of personal choice were perceived as rendering invisible social, political and economic injustices experienced by gay people (Kitzinger, 1987). Furthermore some theorists argued that presenting homosexual people as 'just like' heterosexual people, opportunities for gay people to construct differential sexual and social identities (e.g. lesbianism as a source of pleasure Dancey, 1994) were restricted. The lives of lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexuals are now being researched from a position of respect for diversity (see Clark, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010; Clarke & Peel, 2007).

Constructing a Critical/Feminist/Queer Social Psychology of Sexualities

An important legacy sown by non-biological accounts is the dismissal of sexuality as something that is innate or biologically determined. Indeed this critique provides the foundation on which contemporary definitions of sexuality as socially constructed and negotiated have emerged from within (critical) social psychology. Gagnon and Simon's (1973) classic text *Sexual Conduct* and, more specifically, Sexual Script Theory provides a fitting starting point to explore social and constructed aspects of sexuality. Central to this theory is an understanding of sexuality as a dynamic and diverse collection of identities and practices; the product of a complex interplay between cultural, interpersonal and intra-psychic representations and lived experiences of 'sex'. In a similar vein, the alternative reading of sexuality theorised in Foucault's (1978) *The History of Sexuality* Vol. 1 further denaturalises and demystifies constructions of sexuality as the product of an inner essence.

Rather sexuality is presented as an historical concept, constructed through a number of discourses within legal, religious, medical and scientific contexts. The crux of Foucault's theoretical argument was the rejection of sexual identities and practices as resulting from an inner essence (anatomical, psychological or biological): 'sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to uncover' (Foucault, 1978: 105). Indeed in Foucault's thesis, the social meanings and functions of sexualities are made explicit through his assertion that sexuality provided a means of controlling the body through legislation on birth control and homosexuality, as well as a means of policing the population as a whole with campaigns against immorality, prostitution and venereal disease. He argued that from the eighteenth century onwards, sexuality increasingly provided the central focus around which social bodies, relationships, positions and practices were organised (for a fuller discussion of Foucault's work, see Gough et al., 2013).

1980 saw the production of psychologist Adrienne Rich's now classic text *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. Within this work, Rich (1980) presents a robust challenge to essentialist representations of male and female heterosexuality as complementary identities and of penetrative sex and marriage as the most natural expression of sexuality for women (and by implication men). Rich dismantles the naturalness of heterosexuality for women through two interrelated arguments: the first relating to her exploration of the socially manufactured and coercive nature of heterosexuality, and second, through her dismissal of restrictive clinical definitions of lesbianism in favour of a broader understanding based on the notions of lesbian continuum and lesbian existence. Like Foucault (1978), a key consideration for Rich (1980) was the sexual and social policing of women that essentialist definitions of sexualities promoted and enforced.

More recently, the naturalness of heterosexual orientations and activities has been further challenged by contemporary writings that emphasis the fluidity of sexual identities, orientations and practices across the lifespan of many individuals (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2008; Dickinson, Paul, & Herbison, 2003). Studies by Mock and Eibach (2012) and Peplau (2001) document varying rates of sexual fluidity among sexual minority women and men as well as heterosexual women with changing patterns of sexual identity (homo/hetero/bisexual, unlabelled, etc.) attraction and behaviours linked to a specific relationship, person or life stage. Whilst current evidence suggests greater sexuality stability among heterosexual and homosexual men than their

bisexual counterparts, the absence of specific research on male sexual fluidity prevents a more detailed discussion.

Detailed analysis of the relationship between sexuality, language and social practice remains a key tenet for many scholars researching contemporary male and female sexualities within critical social psychology. Explicitly adopting the view that sexuality is the product of social, cultural and historical discourses, many feminist scholars have analysed the complex and at times, contradictory impact of these linguistically based representations on contemporary female and male sexual orientations, identities and practices. Feminist such as Lees (1993), Thomson and Scott (1991) and Fine (1988) have continued to critique the operation of traditional discourses in shaping female sexualities, noting that within the context of school and home, sexuality for many young women has been discussed largely in relation to their bodies as objects of male sexual desires and fears, with (married) heterosexuality presented as the most natural type of sexuality. Indeed more recently, feminist analysis has turned its attention to what is sometimes described as 'postfeminist' culture, where since the late 1990s, largely mediated constructions of female sexuality have changed to include the celebration of difference, individual choice, the exploration of sexual subjectivity and agency (Gill, 2007, 2008b, 2012). There is an assumption that the goals of feminism have been achieved, and that it is legitimate, indeed desirable, for women to embrace and celebrate sexualised practices previously (and to some extent still) rejected by feminism (McRobbie, 2009). However, many scholars note the irony in the consumption of such identities and practices, as some women and men depart from the goals of feminism and rather (re)produce fragmented, unsafe and unattainable sexual identities and practices that are governed by often contradictory and conflicting discourses. These include traditional hegemonic discourses that emphasis male sexual agency and female vulnerability, knowing and empowered sexy woman discourses as well as the ever present regulatory spectre of 'the slut' (Jackson, Vares, & Gill, 2013; Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley & Mistral, 2012; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe & Thomson, 2004; Tolman, 2002). More specifically, the illusory nature of postfeminist sexual empowerment and freedom was explored in Griffin et al. (2012) study of young women's alcohol consumption within the UK's increasingly sexualised recreational cultures. A discourse analysis of focus group data obtained from participants aged 18–25 participating in 'The Young People and Alcohol' study highlighted a number of contradictory discourses emerging from their talk. On the one hand, as illustrated below,

postfeminist constructions of alcohol consumption as a normative non-gendered cultural practice that provided a social space within which young women could throw off the shackles of respectable sexuality/femininity and be sassy sexual agents was presented:

It's just fantastically fun: Getting drunk and the joys of losing all your inhibitions

Laura: you just lose your inhibitions (.) you're confident (.) it's fun (.) you just have fun and you're not bothered what anyone else thinks of you
Maria: you don't have to be completely drunk to be like that
Laura: oh I do
Sara: yeah I do […]
Laura: no but you can say things that you wouldn't say walking down the street to some random guy when you're drunk […]cos you can blame it on the fact that you were drunk (.) if you needed to (laughter)

However, the authors note that these aspects were counterbalanced with discourses of (sexual) respectability that were used by young female participants to distance their activities from negative perceptions of 'sluttish' behaviour or being perceived as loose or easy:

Holding the figure of the 'drunken slut' at bay: Claiming respectability

DC: Do you ever (.) or would you ever consider going out on your own?
Caz: I wouldn't consider going anywhere on my own (.) I spose it's because it's (yeah) like umm well (.) one cos I'm a lady (yeah) and like you've obviously gotta be careful about going out on ya own (.)

The use of the term 'lady', Griffin et al. (2012) suggest, allows Caz to present herself as a responsible, respectable consumer of alcohol and in doing so to distance herself from traditional negative images of lone female drinkers as loose and/or prostitutes.

To conclude, the authors noted that whilst these young women managed to negotiate the dilemmas and contradictions associated with drinking within sexualised UK social spaces, this was far from a straightforward task. Rather, representations of sexiness that offered empowerment and the ability to subvert gender norms were simultaneously regulated by anxieties relating to

reputation and respectability. Similar depictions of postfeminist female sexuality as empowering and at the same time fragile and insecure are reproduced within studies exploring the negotiation of female sexuality within diverse aspects of neoliberal sexualised cultures, including pole dancing (Donaghue, Whitehead, & Kurz, 2011), digitalised sexual identity (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011) and slut shaming (Ringrose & Renold, 2012).

The last two decades have seen an increased critique of discourses of male sexuality that construct it as hedonistic, misogynist and homophobic, with the plural, contested and contradictory nature of male sexual identity and practices explored (McCormack & Anderson, 2014; McCormack, 2013; Anderson, 2013; Hall & Gough, 2011). Research in both the USA and UK suggests that while continuity persists in relation to the dominance of a 'heterosexual machismo' discourse (Measor et al., 1996), changing social and economic climates are providing some men with new opportunities for 'doing' sexuality. These new ways of being a man include the use of grooming techniques (traditionally associated with women) to enhance their (hetero) sexual success as well as the opportunities for emotional and physical closeness with male peers without fear of being labelled 'gay'.

In his recent book *The Declining Significance of Homophobia*, McCormack (2013) argues that some male teenagers in the UK and USA are challenging understandings of male gender and sexuality as fixed and oppositional to that of gay men and women. Rather, these young men are actively redefining male sexuality as fluid, emotionally involved and not exclusively heterosexual. Set against the backdrop of increasingly positive attitudes to homosexuality in parts of the USA, this author presents evidence of young men challenging once strong codes of (hetero) sexuality built on the 'othering' of gay men and feminine attributes/practices, and replacing these with homosocial relationships that enable them to understand and express their sexual identity and desires differently. More specifically, McCormack describes young heterosexual men expanding the boundaries of heterosexuality to include friendships with gay peers, the adoption of appearance-related activities such as waxing, wearing make-up, and enjoying increased emotional intimacy and physical tactility with same-sex peers. In addition, for some young men, same-gender sexual acts are not socially perceived as indicators of homosexuality or non-heterosexuality.

Whilst the author notes that lived experiences may be mediated by social factors such as class, ethnicity and geographical location, other scholars researching sexuality do not replicate such representations of 'inclusive masculinities' (Anderson, 2013) and rather highlight the ways in which rebranded versions of traditional misogynistic masculinities mediate the sexual politics and practices of some men. For example, in their recent work on female student's social

and sexual experiences with some male counterparts within higher education, Phipps and Young (2015) depict the dominance of a particular brand of 'traditional' masculinity—'laddism'—enacted through misogynistic 'banter', the objectification/sexual availability of women and pressure/competition around sexual prowess and status. Similar homosocial bonding over drinking, football and sex by male university students is also depicted in research by Dempster (2011) and Gough and Edwards (1998).

However, this is not to suggest that within critical social psychology, individuals are perceived as passive recipients of social practices. On the contrary, individuals are understood as actively working towards various social positions and representations. For example, many of the female students in the Phipps and Young (2015) study critically engaged with the 'lad culture' on campus by refusing to 'flirt on demand', and verbally challenged sexist remarks. Indeed, the diverse strategies that women use to resist dominant representations of female sexuality are well documented within critical social psychology literature. For example, studies by McFadden (1995), Holland et al. (1994), Fine (1988) highlight a range of resistances among young heterosexual women, including choosing to be celibate, delaying marriage and motherhood until they have 'had some fun', as well as reclaiming terms such as 'slut' and 'slag' to represent sexual empowerment and agency. More recently, the complex and fluid ways in which young women from different classes and ethnic backgrounds negotiated and disrupted contemporary discourses of sexual knowingness and sexual innocence (e.g. the rap-king-girl woman or slut-child) is illustrated in Renold and Ringrose's (2011) concept of 'schizoid subjectivities'. Furthermore, in their work with lesbian women, Ussher (2005) and Dancey (1994) noted similar resistance among the women interviewed to what they perceived as negative representations of lesbianism. These strategies included emphasising the positive benefits associated with a lesbian lifestyle, including the removal of the perceived necessity to conform to role expectations and the solidarity and companionship they experienced living as lesbian women (for a fuller discussion, see Clark, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010; Clarke & Peel, 2007).

Summary

Feminist, queer and critical social psychology scholars have led the way in criticising mainstream psychobiological accounts of sexuality. This critical work has become more important than ever as biologically determined accounts of sexual orientations and practices have made a popular comeback due to advances in neuroscience and its enthusiastic reporting by the mass media. Naturalising accounts of heterosexuality within (social) psychology

and wider culture has been thoroughly questioned, as have constructions of homosexuality as deviant, and critical work seeks to explore sexed identities and relationships in diverse contexts. In recent years, explorations have focused on the subtle manipulation of feminism by the mass media, marketing and advertising industries, which have co-opted women's desire for greater sexual expression and assertiveness as a way of mainstreaming hypersexualisation and pornography. Critical engagement with classic theories such as psychoanalysis and post-structuralism along with critical social psychology research (e.g. Jackson et. al., 2013 and Diamond et. al., 2011) seeks to challenge the increasingly subtle manipulation of sexed identities by producing sophisticated socially embedded understandings of heterosexual, gay, lesbian, trans and bisexual lives. Finally, on a personal note, the importance such theorising on sexuality was brought to life for me in a recent conversation with my 13-year-old son about how his peers talked about their own and others' sexuality. It was heartening that they talked about multiple understandings of the 'sexual self', using a range of terms such as pansexuality, heterosexuality, skoliosexuality, homosexuality, genderqueer and neutrois, and whilst recognising that there is not absolute free choice, that sexual identity is much less rigid than in the 'dark ages' when I [MMcF] was growing up!!

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