

Careful What You Ask For: Reconsidering Feminist Epistemology and Autobiographical Narrative in Research on Sexual Identity Development

Feminist theory has had an undoubtable—but inconsistent—influence on developmental psychology. Although feminist perspectives have productively challenged developmental models centered on male experiences (Gilligan 1982) and have called attention to socialization practices that reproduce systematic gender inequalities (Bem 1993), more radical feminist perspectives on scientific epistemology and methodology have had considerably less influence (see Rosser and Miller 2003). On the whole, developmental psychologists tend to embrace the logical-positivist goals and assumptions of straightforward empiricism (summarized in Sprague and Zimmerman 1993), emphasizing the pursuit of objective, quantifiable facts about human development that are free of historical and personal bias. In contrast, feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist postmodernism would claim that objective understanding of human development is fundamentally impossible and that psychological models of development function as culturally specific origin-stories reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups.¹

Although many psychologists would consider these critiques to be fundamentally irreconcilable with standard empirical methods (see Chafetz 2004), others have sought workable compromises between feminist epistemology and empirical research.² These compromises are typically manifested in qualitative interview studies that aim to empower research participants by allowing them to articulate their own subjective experiences and to replace statistical reductionism with thick description.³

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¹ Hartsock 1983; Harding 1986, 1991; Collins 1990; Haraway 1991.

² Longino 1990; Nelson 1990; Nielsen 1990; Allen 2004; Baber 2004.

³ Stern 1990; Gergen, Chrisler, and LoCicero 1999; Tolman 2002; Bettis and Adams 2003.

These methods, however, engender a number of epistemological dilemmas when applied to developmental investigations. Specifically, recent research on the interpersonal construction of selfhood through autobiographical storytelling raises troubling questions about the extent to which qualitative investigations actually coconstruct the developmental phenomena they seek to investigate.⁴ My goal in this article is to elucidate how this dilemma has manifested itself in my own qualitative, longitudinal research on sexual identity development over the past ten years (Diamond 1998, 2000, 2003a, 2005a, 2005b) and to suggest how a more explicit integration of feminist epistemology with research on the developmental functions of autobiographical narrative can transform and advance the knowledge gained from developmentally oriented qualitative research.

Feminist empiricist perspectives on sexual identity development

Sexual identity development is conventionally defined as the process by which sexual-minority (i.e., nonheterosexual) individuals come to acknowledge and accept their same-sex sexual orientation and to develop a positive integration between their nonheterosexual identity and other aspects of selfhood. Given the hegemonic status of heterosexuality, the processes through which heterosexual identities develop have, not surprisingly, received scant attention (with the notable exceptions of Hyde and Jaffee 2000; Tolman 2002). Early models of sexual identity development were riddled with problems that will be familiar to feminist critics of scientific methodology and epistemology. First, most were based on data collected exclusively from men, and thus when these models were applied to women, women appeared “off time” or “off course” with respect to the major developmental transitions that were proposed (Sophie 1986). Second, the models suggested impossibly uniform, inexorable, and linear developmental trajectories, beginning with maladjusted confusion and progressing toward healthy ego integration, consistent with the long-documented bias in developmental psychology toward notions of progress, goal attainment, and the consolidation of autonomous “selfhood” (Miller and Scholnick 2000).

These models also presumed fundamental continuities between early and later erotic experiences, as well as between childhood gender atypicality and adult same-sex sexuality (Boxer and Cohler 1989), reflecting the historical conflation of homosexuality with gender inversion (Krafft-Ebing 1882). Correspondingly, sexual identity models typically conveyed an implicit bi-

⁴ Fivush 2000; Thorne 2000; Pasupathi 2001; Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker, forthcoming.

ological essentialism in which same-sex desires were always the stable products of intrinsic, early-appearing sexual predispositions. This notion directly contradicts the proliferating evidence for fluidity, circumstance, and even choice in same-sex sexuality, particularly among women.⁵ Also, consistent with most contemporary developmental psychology, these models adopted fundamentally individualized notions of sexuality and identity that placed the solitary person at the center of analysis, granting only ancillary roles to culture, community, and relationships despite accumulating evidence of the fundamental importance of these domains for women's sexual development (Peplau and Garnets 2000; Diamond 2003b).

Finally, all of these models were based on the reports of openly identified gay and lesbian adults retrospectively about events and feelings that transpired up to thirty years earlier. Not only did this produce what Andrew Boxer and Bertram Cohler criticize as a "developmental psychology of the remembered past" (1989, 325), but it failed to acknowledge that individuals' memories of the sexual questioning process were not objective snapshots of "what happened" but rather active reconstructions of selfhood that their conscious and unconscious agendas fundamentally influenced.⁶ Perhaps the most important of these agendas was validation of one's lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, implicitly manifested by consistency with the coming-out stories rapidly proliferating in multiple media outlets (Plummer 1995; Russell, Bohan, and Lilly 2000).

Over the years the weaknesses of sexual identity research have been ably critiqued and (with varying success) corrected. Such corrections are typically made in the context of parallel revisions to the broader study of adolescent sexuality, where a more nuanced, contextual assessment of youths' sexual feelings and behaviors increasingly replaces the long-standing emphasis on theoretically impoverished tabulations of the timing, frequency, and risk profile of various sexual behaviors (Tolman and Diamond 2001; Tolman, Striepe, and Harmon 2003; Savin-Williams and Diamond 2004). Consequently, contemporary studies of sexual identity development are now more likely to study both women and men, to employ qualitative methods, to follow individuals over time, to take cultural and interpersonal contexts more seriously, and to devote more significant attention to sexual fluidity and developmental discontinuity.

⁵ Golden 1987, 1994, 1996; Pillard 1990; Rust 1993; Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1994; Whisman 1996; Baumeister 2000.

⁶ McAdams 1993; Baumeister and Newman 1994; Kihlstrom 1996; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000; Fivush 2000; Tversky and Marsh 2000; Pasupathi 2001; Dudukovic, Marsh, and Tversky 2004.

These changes have undoubtedly enhanced our understanding of the complex psychological process through which individuals with same-sex attractions and behaviors come to think of themselves (or not, as in Diamond 2003a, 2005a, 2005b) as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Nonetheless, they are not without deeper problems, especially when considered from the perspective of feminist philosophy of science. To elucidate this point, the implicit rationale for undertaking qualitative, longitudinal investigations of sexual identity development bears discussion.

Why collect longitudinal narratives?

The collection of longitudinal, qualitative interview data has been advocated as an important methodological “fix” for many of the pitfalls of traditional sexual identity research. Not only do qualitative interviews allow individuals to articulate subtleties about their subjective experiences that conventional quantitative surveys poorly represent (Tolman and Brydon-Miller 2001) but also longitudinal observation has been posited as a particularly powerful corrective to the problem of retrospective distortion (Boxer and Cohler 1989). As Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz note in an influential article, “It was common for [respondents] to say that prior changes in sex-object choice were part of a past history of self-misperception, and that they had finally found their sexual ‘place.’ *A follow-up interview often contradicted their assertions*” (1977, 174; emphasis added). Thus, in this conceptualization, longitudinal observation allows one to “catch” inaccuracies of memory as well as motivated attempts at self-presentation (Hardin and Higgins 1996; Thorne 2000; Pasupathi 2001), thereby allowing the psychologist to model the identity development process on the basis of more accurate data about individuals’ “real” sexual-developmental trajectories.

It was for these reasons that I launched, in 1994, a longitudinal interview study of adolescent women’s sexual identity development that integrated detailed qualitative analysis with more conventional quantitative investigations of the prevalence and developmental timing of different acts and experiences (Diamond 1998, 2000, 2003a, 2005a, 2005b). My goal was a relatively straightforward one: to examine young women’s sexual identity development from women’s perspectives and particularly to launch a systematic inquiry into the experiences of change, fluidity, and situational variability in same-sex sexuality that had long been anecdotally noted in the psychological literature on female sexuality but that had received little systematic empirical attention (reviewed in Baumeister 2000). In particular, I hoped that by following young women over time I could capture changes and discontinuities in desire, behavior, and iden-

tity before they were potentially erased by women's selective memories. By eliciting detailed narratives I intended to more accurately represent the nature of these phenomena via women's nuanced descriptions of their antecedents, subjective quality, and eventual repercussions.

Sure enough, over the ten years of the study the majority of participants have changed their identity labels and have undergone notable fluctuations in their sexual behavior and even their self-reported sexual attractions (Diamond 2000, 2003a, 2005a, 2005b), allowing me the opportunity to question women in detail about the motives behind and consequences of these transitions both as they occurred and as they were recollected years later in ensuing interviews. From this perspective, then, the use of a qualitative, longitudinal approach would appear to be a success.

But it is not quite that simple. Rather, as I have analyzed and reanalyzed these data over the years, I have become increasingly preoccupied with two fundamental dilemmas that spring from the very nature of my qualitative, longitudinal methodology and that have critical implications for feminist investigations of human development. The first dilemma concerns the problem of discerning which version of events should be considered more accurate when women's self-reported autobiographical narratives show divergence and self-contradiction over time (which I call *the authenticity problem*). The second dilemma concerns the extent to which women's own participation in the study—specifically, the process of regularly recalling and recounting sexual events and memories to me during a series of qualitative interviews—has fundamentally influenced, and some might say created, the very identity development process I have sought to model (*the reflexivity problem*). Both of these issues are undoubtedly familiar to those well versed in feminist and postmodernist philosophy of science, and my goal is not to rehash their basic parameters. Rather, in the following sections I first illustrate the specific manifestations of each of these problems within longitudinal sexual identity research and then argue that theoretical and empirical work on the developmental functions of socially recounted autobiographical narratives (Pasupathi 2001) provides a productive way to work within these dilemmas from a feminist framework, to consider a more useful and generative set of questions about the phenomenon of sexual identity development and how psychologists should study it.

The authenticity problem: "What really happened?"

First interview

In fourth and fifth grade, I was aware that I wasn't doing the things

that other girls did, and that made me feel bad. I was a tomboy, played with my brother and did the things that he did. . . . Later on, in junior high, everyone started to date and I wasn't into the dating thing, and that made me wonder about my sexuality and think back to how I'd been different from other girls. But I still didn't connect it to my sexuality, since I still had crushes on boys, and I would think "I'm straight, I just don't have anyone I really want to date." It wasn't until my senior year of college that I really began to question, 'cause I met a lot of gay people, started to hang out with them and really enter their world. Eventually I met a woman that initiated something, and that was it. (Interview with anonymous respondent, 1995)

Two-year follow-up

The first thing I think about now is having crushes on camp counselors—that's my most vivid memory now. That's when I started to fight with myself about it, saying "I better stop this. . . ." That was when I was fifteen. I was sort of scared, but it wasn't all that conscious. It got more conscious when I was maybe a sophomore in college. I had a fight with this friend about this "coming out" program that everyone in our dorm had to go to. I thought it was totally stupid, and I didn't want to go, and she said, just for the sake of argument, "Well what if I was gay, what would you think about that!" And the whole thing really stayed with me, and I kept thinking afterward "Why did that get me so angry, why was I so mad at her?" But it took me another year to really put it together. I remember always being called a tomboy when I was really young, but I didn't really understand what that meant. (Interview with same anonymous respondent, 1997)

Five-year follow-up

I think it was just looking at women and feeling sexually attracted to women and not knowing how to deal with it 'cause it was something that had never been talked about. Being confused. I seemed to feel that familiar quiver in my thighs when looking at a woman rather than just a man, and that and the other part was that I was always a tomboy and that stereotype always went with lesbians. But around ten, eleven, twelve I started wanting to hang out more with certain counselors at camp, and they all happened to be women. (Interview with same anonymous respondent, 2000)

Which version of this respondent's coming-out story is true? Did she first

discover same-sex attractions through crushes on camp counselors, her lack of interest in heterosexual dating, her overly vehement objections to a college information session on coming out, or feeling quivers when she looked at other girls?

The authenticity problem springs from the conventional emphasis in longitudinal qualitative methodology (exemplified by Blumstein and Schwartz 1977) on catching and correcting memory errors or reconstructions by attending to discrepancies between accounts given at different times. The stakes, from an empiricist perspective, are high—if the researcher inadvertently accepts an inaccurate report as authentic (i.e., “I experienced my first same-sex attraction at the age of ten” vs. “I had no awareness of same-sex attractions until I was in college”), one risks building a model of sexual identity development that fundamentally misrepresents this process (e.g., “Sexual minorities typically experience their first awareness of same-sex sexuality in middle childhood”).

Yet, taking a step back, it becomes apparent that the very framing of the authenticity problem relies on two problematic assumptions: first, that the goal of longitudinal research is to uncover a true and generalizable trajectory of development; second, that consistency across successive longitudinal accounts is a marker of authenticity, such that we should pay most attention to those aspects of an individual’s autobiographical narratives that have undergone the least change over time. Both of these presumptions are misguided. First, researchers are increasingly challenging the notion that sexual identity development is an inherently linear and internally coherent process with an objectively discernible beginning, middle, and end, casting doubt on the notion that developmental psychologists should seek to discover or validate one or more discrete “pathways” from heterosexuality to homosexuality in the first place.⁷ Second, findings from psychological research on autobiographical memory suggest problems with using consistency as an implicit marker for authenticity. Although it might seem straightforward enough to assume that accurate memory for a particular event facilitates consistency in its telling and retelling, this assumption sidesteps the more basic dilemma of defining and identifying “accurate memories” to begin with. All memories are dynamic and situationally influenced (Davies and Harre 1990; Schacter 1996; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000), and autobiographical memories are particularly sensitive to individual’s present goals, self-perceptions, and

⁷ Sophie 1986; Cass 1990; Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1994; Peplau and Garnets 2000; Diamond 2005b.

interpersonal contexts.⁸ This is perhaps particularly true for the autobiographical memories of lesbian, gay, and bisexual-identified individuals, whose “authenticity” as members of this social category (in the eyes of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and the culture at large) is often implicitly judged on the basis of recounting a series of childhood and adolescent events that have been deemed emblematic of “homosexual” development, including early feelings of differentness, latent and unnamed same-sex desires, social stigmatization, and even adolescent suicidality (Plummer 1995; Russell, Bohan, and Lilly 2000; Savin-Williams 2001).

Thus, whereas researchers employing longitudinal assessments tend to assume that immediate recountings are accurate and only later recollections are distorted and reconstructed, findings from psychological research indicate that this is not necessarily the case. Rather, narrative reconstruction is an ever-present process through which individuals actively enact present goals and self-perceptions through autobiographical reflection and recall, and it shapes the very encoding of personal experiences (reviewed in Pasupathi 2001) as well as the recollection of these experiences five minutes or twenty years later. Perhaps most important, consistency is itself an important motivator for reconstruction and reinterpretation, given that individuals typically seek to present a stable and coherent sense of self to themselves and to others.⁹

Hence, the very process of telling self-stories to social partners (or social scientists) engages multiple psychological mechanisms that promote later consistency by organizing and consolidating preferred versions of events (Schank and Abelson 1995; Tversky and Marsh 2000). Consequently, the question posed earlier—“Which of two discrepant accounts is really true?”—begins to seem fundamentally unanswerable, and the practice of tacitly assuming the veracity of a respondent’s consistent accounts comes to seem equally problematic. This is not to suggest that consistency is fundamentally arbitrary or that it has no meaning whatsoever within the context of the self-story, only that it may mean something altogether different than first thought. Perhaps the question we should be asking is not “What was the impact of this (true) event on X?” but “What is it about this particular scenario or memory that has given it such prominence as a core feature of this individual’s narrative sense of self?”

⁸ McAdams 1993; Kihlstrom 1996; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000; Fivush 2000; Tversky and Marsh 2000; Pasupathi 2001; Marsh and Tversky 2004.

⁹ Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Cass 1990; Plummer 1995; Thorne 2000; Pasupathi 2001; Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker forthcoming.

The reflexivity problem: Coconstruction in the researcher/participant relationship

Twenty-one-year-old bisexual, first interview

I should probably tell you that I'm not one of those people who "knew" from an early age. . . . I'm probably not a very good example of a gay person, and I don't want to mess up your study or anything, so it's okay if you don't want to interview me after all. (Interview with anonymous respondent, 1995)

Nineteen-year-old lesbian, two-year follow-up interview

When I was twelve I used to have these fantasies about women. . . . But you know, I don't think I ever thought of this until after you first interviewed me. (Interview with anonymous respondent, 1997)

Twenty-five-year-old bisexual, five-year follow-up interview

What I remember about first questioning my sexuality was that a lot of my friends were questioning—actually, I think you interviewed some of them—and that really made me think about it, and then I had that interview with you, and then I was reading more in my feminism class, and I realized that I really related to a lot of it, it really opened my mind. (Interview with anonymous respondent, 2000)

Twenty-nine-year-old unlabeled woman, eight-year follow-up interview

I finally made out with a girl! I remember thinking afterward, "Hey! I can talk about this in my next interview." (Interview with anonymous respondent, 2003)

A standard tenet of logical-positivist scientific methodology is that the process of investigating the phenomenon of interest must remain fundamentally independent of the phenomenon itself. As exemplified by the quotations above, qualitative interviews typically—and some would say unavoidably—threaten this requirement. The intense interpersonal engagement afforded by in-depth qualitative interviews, especially when the topic at hand is personal and personally meaningful to the participants, tends to engender reflexivity, or bidirectional influence, between researcher and participant.

Strict empiricists consider reflexivity a threat to the neutrality of the researcher and the independence of the data, and they therefore advocate clear boundaries between researcher and participant and careful standardization of interviewer behavior to keep bias at bay. In sharp contrast,

postmodern feminist perspectives on scientific methodology (particularly feminist standpoint epistemology) actually celebrate and welcome reflexivity as productively disrupting the traditional power imbalance between researcher and participant (Baber 2004), challenging the rigid Western dichotomization of self and other (Harding 1998), and permitting deeper and more accurate knowledge “through participating in an empathic relationship rather than through a private, neutral process” (Welch-Ross 2000, 115). As Robyn Fivush argues, “More objective knowledge will be garnered from the scientist and subject participating together in constructing knowledge than from either viewpoint alone” (2000, 89).

Importantly, however, these perspectives tend to take for granted that the researcher-participant relationship, and the knowledge produced in the context of this relationship, occupies a singular moment in time. Yet, in the context of developmental research, when qualitative interviews between the same researcher and the same participants are repeated at multiple time points, the implications of the reflexivity problem change. In this respect, the developmentally oriented work of Monisha Pasupathi (2001) is particularly pertinent. She argues that the conversations we have about ourselves with social partners are themselves important forces for developmental change largely as a function of two key principles: *coconstruction*, referring to the fact that any autobiographical recollection told to a social partner is fundamentally the product of both the speaker and the interpersonal context, and *consistency*, referring to the fact that the narratives we tell about ourselves feed forward to canalize future recollections. This alters the autobiographical knowledge base so that we are successively more likely to recollect and recount memories that portray a consistent sense of self. In sum, “what we tell certainly influences, and may become, what we ‘know’ about our own past. . . . The social shaping of memory may also be a process by which the self is socially shaped” (Pasupathi 2001, 661). Pasupathi (2001) supports her perspective with a sweeping synthesis of empirical research on the specific cognitive processes underlying coconstruction and consistency in the domain of autobiographical memory, and thus one might argue that her work elucidates the psychological underpinnings of what Michel Foucault describes as the productive nature of discourse, such that language and other regulated social practices “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, 49).

Although Pasupathi was speaking specifically of individuals’ “real-life” interpersonal conversations with friends, lovers, family, and colleagues, the methodological implications with respect to conversations with researchers

are notable and profound. Specifically, her work suggests that the researcher-participant relationship (especially in the context of qualitative, longitudinal, autobiographical interviews) not only coconstructs the very self-story being told to the researcher but also has lasting implications for the participant (and perhaps for the researcher as well). Consider, then, the implications for studies of sexual identity development, in which processes of change and stability in sexual self-concept are the primary locus of interest. According to the principles outlined above, this sexual self-concept is, to some degree, a creative work in progress that takes shape during the sexual identity interview as the individual organizes and coordinates his or her autobiographical memories with respect to his or her own goals and the presumed goals of the researcher (as in one of the examples quoted earlier, where some participants assumed that I wanted only “good examples” of sexual identity discovery).

Yet long after the interviews end, the coconstructed autobiographical narratives they elicited remain forces for continued identity development, further channeling and organizing self-views in the service of consistency and coherence. Thus, not only might sexual identity be conceived as an emergent property of the qualitative sexual identity interview—“not something we *have* but something we *do* in interaction” (Fivush 2000, 97)—but sexual identity development might be correspondingly conceived as an emergent property of longitudinal observation. Modifications in sexual self-concept might, in fact, become clearest, most coherent, and most formative the moment that the individual begins to answer the question, “So, has anything changed about the way you see your sexual identity since the last time we spoke?”

Reframing developmental questions

Of course, the aforementioned dilemmas of authenticity and reflexivity are only problems from a strict empiricist perspective. As noted earlier, both feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist postmodernism are unremittingly skeptical about claims regarding scientific truth and neutrality altogether, and they would therefore cast doubt on both the possibility of identifying “authentic” identity narratives and the possibility of neutral, fully independent relationships between researcher and participant. Yet does this obviate the possibility of gaining any systematic understanding of sexual identity development?

The challenge of refashioning scientific practice so that it generates useful and meaningful knowledge while accounting for the multiplicity,

partiality, and inherent interdependence of that knowledge has, of course, been a long-standing project within feminist philosophy of science.¹⁰ My own approach to this challenge, in the specific context of longitudinal sexual identity research, springs from the fundamental role of autobiographical narrative in this domain. Specifically, I would argue that one way to “save” the study of sexual identity development from the inherently partial, coconstructed, and contextualized nature of the qualitative longitudinal interview is to move these interviews from the domain of method to the domain of content, following in line with parallel approaches by theorists (obviously Foucault 1980), sociologists (Plummer 1995), historians (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey 1989), and, most recently, developmental psychologists (Pasupathi 2001; Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker forthcoming). In other words, we need to shift from thinking about autobiographical narratives as a way of determining what develops to thinking about autobiographical narratives as—to some degree—that which develops.

In other words, if the goal of (repeatedly) asking respondents “How did you first come to first realize your same-sex attractions?” is to arrive at a consistent and generalizable model of how this process “actually” unfolds in childhood or adolescence, then this objective—and the use of longitudinal, qualitative interviews to achieve it—is problematic. But I would argue that this might not even be the most interesting or developmentally informative question we could ask. Rather, a more revealing—and answerable—question is “How do individuals craft developmentally specific, goal-relevant interpretations of their own erotic subjectivity in the service of maintaining a comfortable, coherent, and socially meaningful sense of self?”

This is a particularly useful perspective to apply to longitudinal qualitative research because it fundamentally changes the nature and significance of discrepancies between successive autobiographical narratives. No longer are they unwelcome signs of inaccuracy that must be resolved (presumably by prompting participants to “think harder” or “be honest”); rather, they are actually the most important data generated by longitudinal interviews, since they reveal critically important information about how individuals make different types of meaning out of their personal pasts depending on changing social, interpersonal, and developmental contexts. Forthcoming work by Pasupathi, Emma Mansour, and Jed Brubaker provides an elegant example of this approach, as the authors have focused on identifying specific types of self-event relations that individuals invoke when telling about autobio-

¹⁰ Longino 1990; Nelson 1990; Harding 1991; Heckman 1997.

graphical events that do or do not characterize the way individuals view themselves. Their preliminary investigations indicate four types of self-event relations: explain/illustrate relations, in which an event is described as exemplifying an existing trait or characteristic; dismiss relations, in which an uncharacteristic event is discounted; cause relations, in which an event is portrayed as instigating change in the self; and reveal relations, in which an event prompts discovery of a hidden truth about the self. The applications to coming-out stories are notable (particularly with respect to dismiss and reveal cases), and Pasupathi's team has already begun to productively explore the specific relevance of this approach for clarifying sexual identity development (Brubaker 2004).

Expanding this approach to investigate longitudinal change in these narrative strategies is the next step. Thus, one might ask not only why some individuals talk about early same-sex contact in terms of causing their sexuality and others as revealing their sexuality, but why and how some individuals might invoke causation at one point in time and revelation at another (to either the same or different social partners) as they actively manage their own understanding of their erotic autobiography across the life course. From the perspective of standpoint epistemology, one might argue that this approach shifts from seeking a multiplicity of knowledges by studying different individuals to seeking a multiplicity of knowledges through examining multiple time points in any single individual's life.

Finally, the problem of reflexivity in the context of longitudinal, qualitative sexual identity interviews actually emerges as a particular strength of this methodology when one considers the specific importance of socially performed autobiographical narratives for the development and enactment of sexual-minority identities (Plummer 1995; Jones 2000). If the narrative self is something we "do" rather than "have" (Fivush 2000), then how better to model the process of identity development and maintenance as it is enacted in countless coming-out and "how I first knew" conversations with friends, lovers, and parents than to instantiate that process in the researcher-participant relationship over time? This is made particularly clear in the case of one participant (pseudonym "Anna") for whom the identity development process is largely a series of conversations. During the first interview Anna recounted that she had first begun questioning her sexuality during her second year at college, when she was supporting a close friend who was questioning her sexuality. Anna reported that she and her friend had a series of long and involved conversations about bisexuality and about their own sexual feelings, and Anna claimed that she inadvertently started to "tag along" in her friend's coming-out process.

Eventually, both women identified as bisexual. By the second interview, however, Anna had entered graduate school and was living in a much more socially conservative environment; by the five-year follow-up interview she had decided to identify as heterosexual instead of bisexual:

Interviewer: How do you currently label your sexual identity, if at all?

Anna: Well, you know, this is an interesting thing, 'cause it's actually funny that you called me around this time. Recently, I was talking with some friends, and we decided that I have to come out as heterosexual.

Interviewer: Now, what does it mean when you say that you have to come out as heterosexual?

Anna: It was kind of bizarre. It really has to do with a lot of the questions in your interviews, so it's kind of like a coincidence it seems. I was visiting some friends of mine who have never been really comfortable with people identifying as bisexual. I used to identify as bisexual, I think I still do in some contexts, but they were never really comfortable with that, and anyway my relationships in the past couple years have been primarily with men. So in order to appease my friends, I'm coming out as heterosexual. So I have to label myself for their benefit, and also for other people's benefit. It's just a more comfortable identity for everybody involved.

Interviewer: Does it feel more comfortable for you?

Anna: At first it didn't, I thought like, oh my God, am I sort of betraying some real nonheterosexuality in me by forcing myself to adjust to this necessary cultural label? At first I was upset about myself, but now it's sort of a safety. . . . I mean, my department is very homophobic, so I feel that it's a safe place for me to identify as. So let's just say it's out of safety.

(Interview with anonymous respondent, 2000)

It is particularly fascinating to read this narrative with an eye to the identity construction process itself, regarding not only the conversations with friends that have undoubtedly shaped her self-concept but also the rhetorical strategies that she uses during the interview to create a specific interpretation of her own motives for identity change and their repercussions. She repeatedly signals her own ambivalence about reidentifying as heterosexual, perhaps in order to leave herself the possibility of future same-sex sexuality. For example, she says "I used to identify as bisexual, *I think I still do* in some contexts," notably shifting from past to present tense, and she also explicitly notes that part of her motive for identifying

as heterosexual is to “*appease* her friends” and feel politically “safe,” given her new more conservative environment. Later, she seems to actively engage me in substantiating this interpretation of her identity transition by concluding “So *let’s* just say it’s out of safety,” as if we need to collectively agree on a “reason” for the transition that will preserve consistency with her prior interviews while also leaving open the possibility for future attractions to women (for the record, however, by the eight-year follow-up interview she had gotten married, although she continued to acknowledge attractions to women).

Thus, to the extent that the interview process feeds back to shape the identity development of the participant, this process is analogous to parallel mechanisms occurring in individuals’ social relations and in their own self-talk and thus is analyzable in these contexts. Consequently, acknowledging rather than constraining reflexivity allows the researcher to consider a variety of questions regarding how discursive social relations constitute a critical force for psychological development.

Conclusion

Importantly, the notion that sexual identity should be investigated from a fundamentally narrative perspective is not new. Numerous (typically feminist) theorists have argued that a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity is better conceptualized as a status of *becoming* rather than *being* (Fuss 1989; Butler 1990; Phelan 1993), suggesting the importance of investigating sexual identity as “a narrative, a story” (Garber 1995, 87) rather than an essence. Yet, historically, this point of view has been more influential within the domains of feminist and queer theory, sociology, history, and cultural studies than developmental psychology. To some extent this is ironic—after all, if sexual identity takes its very meaning from the ongoing, reconstructive, recursive processes of speaking, remembering, and acting across diverse social and interpersonal contexts over the life course, then all studies of sexual identity are fundamentally developmental.

Yet to the extent that developmental psychologists continue to mine sexual identity narratives only for the “objective truth” about how same-sex sexuality “naturally unfolds,” we will remain hamstrung in our understanding of sexual-minority development. No qualitative interview can provide a fundamentally accurate portrait of how one’s sexual-minority identity was “really” experienced in—or developed from—erotic feelings and behaviors at age eight, or twelve, or fifteen. However, analysis of the specific correspondences and gaps between longitudinal narrative accounts within the specific domain of the interviewer-interviewee relationship reveals how

we “come to report a particular event given the situation we are in” (Fivush 2000, 98) and how individuals construct a “self in progress” out of disparate stands of experience to suit their own lay notions of development (Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker forthcoming).

Thus integrating feminist epistemology with recent psychological research on the coconstruction of autobiographical narrative provides a road map for working within the problems of authenticity and reflexivity in sexual identity research to reach systematic and useful information about this phenomenon in different individuals and contexts. Feminist epistemology, then, leads us to conclude not that longitudinal, qualitative research on sexual identity development has no valid knowledge to offer but rather that this knowledge is of a fundamentally different sort than we originally thought, elucidating development not as an inexorably forward-moving program with a fixed outcome but as an emergent, discursive, fundamentally social process. Importantly, this does not imply that developmental psychologists should systematically abandon any and all attempts to locate erotic events and experiences in “real” chronological time in investigating sexual-minority lives. Rather, following Joyce Nielsen (1990), I would advocate a dialectical approach that synthesizes and alternates between a focus on developmental events and a focus on their reenactment, reconstruction, and recounting, working toward an understanding of sexual-identity development that most ably represents its fundamentally social-contextual status.

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