



## Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Studies

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Gay, lesbian, and queer studies are separate but related fields of cultural inquiry that attempt to establish the analytical centrality of gender and sexuality within a particular area of investigation. Significant works in the field of gay, lesbian, and queer studies have been undertaken in a variety of disciplines, such as philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, classics, law, government, art, literature, popular culture, family, and education.

As a school of scholarly and critical thought, however, gay, lesbian, and queer studies is complicated by the fact that it is not limited exclusively to the exploration of the glbtq community, nor does the term refer simply to studies undertaken by, or in the name of, lesbians, bisexuals, or gay men. Moreover, not all research into the customs, cultures, and lives of lesbians and gay men necessarily qualifies as gay, lesbian, or queer studies. Therefore, gay, lesbian, and queer studies cannot be defined exclusively by its subject matter, practitioners, or topics.

While related, gay, lesbian, and queer studies define separate areas of inquiry, marked by different assumptions made about the connections between gender and sexuality. Very broadly defined, gay studies examines sexual difference as it is applicable to the male gender, lesbian studies examines sexual difference as it is applicable to the female gender, while queer studies examines sexual difference separate from gender altogether.

### Gay and Lesbian Studies

Just as the civil rights movement to some extent spawned the interdisciplinary field of African-American studies and the rise of feminism produced women's studies, the field of inquiry known as lesbian and gay studies emerged from the gay liberation movement.

Gay and lesbian studies has existed, in any organized form, only since the late 1970s. With the advent of the gay liberation movement gay men, lesbians, and their allies began openly and self-consciously to study themselves and how they were represented in history and culture, which led them to inquire how gender and sexual orientations have been, and are, constructed and conceptualized.

Research in gay and lesbian studies has focused attention on the importance of historical and cultural factors in situating gender and sexual orientation. In two landmark essays, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" (1975) and "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1975), Gayle Rubin developed a theory central to gay and lesbian studies: that gender difference and sexual difference are related, but not the same.

Gender difference refers to the spectrum of meaning defined by the binary terms "man/woman," while sexual difference refers to those defined by the binary terms "heterosexual/homosexual." Gay and lesbian studies investigates the kinds of social structures and constructs that define ideas about sexuality as



Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick helped lay the foundation of Queer Studies in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Photograph created by David Shankbone in 2007. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

expressive acts and sexuality as an identity.

Gay and lesbian studies looks at how notions of homosexuality, and its binary opposite, heterosexuality, have been defined historically. Gay and lesbian studies also investigates how various cultures, or various periods of time, have enforced ideas about what kinds of sexuality are "normal" and which are "abnormal," which are "moral" and which are "immoral."

As Rubin's essays argue, once a category has been identified as "normal," its opposite category, labeled "deviant," is automatically identified as well. The specific acts or characteristics that are contained within those categories get linked to other forms of social practices and methods of social control. Gay and lesbian studies attempts to understand how these categories of "normal" and "deviant" are constructed, how they operate, and how they are enforced, in order to change or end them.

Some noteworthy works within gay studies include Henry Abelove's 1985 essay, "Freud, Male Homosexuality, and the Americans," which shows that Freud's view of male homosexuality was much less pathologizing and much more complex than has usually been supposed; "The Spectacle of AIDS" (1987), Simon Watney's examination of the representations of AIDS in the United Kingdom that characterized gay men as the cause of AIDS and as deserving of punishment and marginalization; and Phillip Brian Harper's essay, "Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Response to the Death of Max Robinson" (1991), in which the social and cultural contradictions that surrounded the figure of Max Robinson, an African-American television anchorman who died from AIDS in 1988, are examined.

Significant works within the field of lesbian studies include Monique Wittig's essay "One is Not Born a Woman" (1981), which offers an alternative to previous explanations of the historical causes of gender oppression; "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation" (1988), in which Teresa de Lauretis explores the problems of lesbian visibility and feminist definitions of gender; and Danae Clark's 1991 essay, "Commodity Lesbianism," focusing on the relationship between capitalism and lesbian identity politics.

### **Queer Studies**

Queer studies is an even more recent branch of theoretical inquiry, having been named as an area of study only in the early 1990s. The scholar who is usually identified as first using the phrase "queer theory" in print is Teresa de Lauretis, in her 1991 essay "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," published in the important journal *differences*.

However, the texts that are considered most responsible for influencing and developing the principles of queer studies are Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault explores social constructionist models of sexuality and sexual codification through religion, politics, and economics. Foucault argues against thinking of any form of sexuality as something natural or universal.

In *Between Men*, Sedgwick develops the idea of "homosociality." Sedgwick argues that nineteenth-century British culture was built primarily on asexual bonds between men (such as friendship, apprenticeship, camaraderie in the workforce, and so on), which necessitated, for social and economic reasons, strong prohibitions against homosexual bonds.

Homosociality represents the range of bonds between men that are necessary to maintain a social order, including those bonds between men *through* women, such as marriage, birth, and so forth. These bonds are presumed to be contrary to pure homosexual bonds, especially within Western cultures, which do not necessitate women as mediating figures. Sedgwick, however, demonstrates how these two antithetical terms, homosexuality and homosociality, frequently collapsed into each other in practice.

What makes queer studies "queer," therefore, is not that it concerns homosexuality or that its practitioners are lesbians or gay men, but that it questions assumptions that are steeped, often subtly, in heterosexist biases.

Whereas lesbian and gay studies attempts to use existing disciplinary lenses (for example, history, political science, literature) to look at homosexuals and sexual orientation in a more positive light than they had been previously, queer theory attempts to "queer" these disciplines, that is, to change them by weeding out the deep heterosexist biases within them.

Queer studies emerged from gay and lesbian studies' attention to the social construction of categories of normative and deviant sexualities. But while gay and lesbian studies focuses largely on questions of homosexuality, queer studies expands its realm of investigation.

Queer studies considers, and conducts a political critique of, anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. The word "queer," as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of "odd," "unconventional," or "out of the ordinary." "To queer," then, is to render "normal" sexuality as strange and unsettled, to challenge heterosexuality as a naturalized social-sexual norm, and to promote the notion of "non-straightness."

Thus, queer studies expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviors, including those that are gender-bending, as well as those that involve "queer" forms of sexuality. Queer studies insists that all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities are social constructs, sets of signifiers that create certain types of social meaning.

For queer theorists, sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional or political power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and then operate under the category of what is "natural" or "essential."

Essentialist notions of homosexuality and heterosexuality are challenged by queer theorists, who, instead, assert an understanding of sexuality that emphasizes shifting boundaries, ambivalences, and constructions that change depending on historical and cultural context.

Two particularly influential works in queer studies are Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993).

Butler's work rejects stable categories of sexuality altogether, and challenges standard gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender politics. In Butler's conception, these terms are rendered meaningless when stripped of the religious, political, and economic codifications that support them.

Alexander Doty's notion of "queer reception" in *Making Things Perfectly Queer* demonstrates another way that standard categories of sexuality are challenged. Doty separates "reception" from "identity" and stresses the way a spectator may derive "queer pleasure" from standard categories in viewing film and television. Thus, heterosexual-identified women spectators might experience "queer pleasure" at the sexual tension generated in films such as *Thelma and Louise*, or heterosexual-identified men might enjoy the exaggerated homoeroticism of certain sporting events or films such as *Rambo*.

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