

# Rhetoric and etiological beliefs about sexuality: Reader responses to Cynthia Nixon's New York Times interview

Jowett, A & Barker, S

**Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Jowett, A & Barker, S 2017, 'Rhetoric and etiological beliefs about sexuality: Reader responses to Cynthia Nixon's New York Times interview' *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol (in press), pp. (in press)

ISSN 0091-8369

ESSN 1540-3602

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

**This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article to be published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal of Homosexuality*. Full citation details including DOI will be uploaded when available.**

**Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.**

**This document is the author's post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.**

Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

**Rhetoric and etiological beliefs about sexuality: Reader responses to  
Cynthia Nixon's New York Times interview**

Adam Jowett, PhD & Sophie Barker, BSc

School of Psychological, Social & Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University,  
CV1 5FB, UK.

Email: [adam.jowett@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:adam.jowett@coventry.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0)24 7765 8654

Biographical Notes

Adam Jowett is a Lecturer in Psychology at Coventry University, UK. He is currently Chair-Elect of the British Psychological Society's Psychology of Sexualities Section. Address: School of Psychological, Social & Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University, Coventry, CV1 5FB, UK [email: [adam.jowett@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:adam.jowett@coventry.ac.uk)]

Sophie Barker completed her BSc in Psychology at Coventry University, UK.

## **Rhetoric and etiological beliefs about sexuality: Reader responses to Cynthia Nixon's New York Times interview**

In 2012, the US actress Cynthia Nixon was quoted in *New York Times Magazine* as having stated that “for me, it [being gay] is a choice. I understand that for many people it’s not, but for me it’s a choice, and you don’t get to define my gayness for me”. The interview attracted international media attention and public criticism by lesbian and gay activists. This paper suggests a rhetorical approach to understanding etiological beliefs and provides a discursive analysis of 198 online comments by readers of *Pink News*, a gay news website which reported on Nixon’s controversial interview. This paper explores common arguments used in readers’ comments about Nixon and examines the rhetorical construction of sexuality. The analysis examines three themes within the data. Firstly, biological essentialism was treated by many readers as common knowledge; secondly readers suggested that only bisexuals have ‘choice’; and thirdly it was suggested by both Nixon’s critics and her supporters that counter arguments colluded with homophobia. The paper suggests that there is an ideological dilemma whereby both ‘born-this-way’ and ‘choice’ arguments can be understood as colluding with anti-gay prejudice.

**Keywords:** sexual orientation; essentialism; etiological beliefs; rhetoric; discursive

Claims about whether homosexuality is biologically determined, learned or chosen are widely contested within both scientific and political domains. There is an increasing number of scientific studies that claim to have found biological markers of sexual orientation in relation to genes, hormones, brain structures, finger length ratios etc (see Wilson & Rahman,

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

2005 for an overview), which are often widely reported within the media. Critics argue that such studies are often methodologically flawed and that the literature is biased in various ways (see Byne, 1995 for a discussion). For instance, such studies focus largely on men's sexuality but are widely treated as if they are generalizable to women. This is despite growing evidence that women's sexuality may be more malleable and fluid (e.g. Diamond, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Bisexuals have also typically been either excluded from such studies or included within homosexual samples, perhaps because more fluid forms of sexuality problematize the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (Hegarty, 1997). Conflating bisexuality with homosexuality in this way may also reflect cultural beliefs that any same-sex attraction makes someone gay or that bisexuals are simply lesbians or gay men who are not fully out of the closet (Morrison, Harrington & McDermott, 2010).

The debate about the origins of homosexuality however is not just a matter of contestation among scientists, it is also has political implications and is routinely played out within the media. An example of this occurred in 2012 when the American actress Cynthia Nixon was quoted in *The New York Times Magazine* as having said that, for her, being gay was a choice. Her comments proved to be highly controversial and in this paper we examine the reaction of readers of a gay news website. Before examining exactly what Cynthia Nixon said and the reaction to her comments, we begin by outlining some of the existing social scientific research on etiological beliefs and their relationship to social attitudes, consider some real-world evidence from history and propose an alternative rhetorical social psychological perspective on etiological beliefs about homosexuality.

### **Research on etiological beliefs of sexual orientation and social attitudes**

Over the last few decades, public opinion regarding the causes of homosexuality appears to have shifted. According to opinion poll data the percentage of the general public in the US

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

attributing homosexuality to biological factors more than tripled between 1977 and 2006, coinciding with a general shift to more tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008). Social psychological research has also generally found that heterosexuals' who believe homosexuality to be a choice tend to have more negative attitudes towards homosexuality, while those who believe it to be biologically determined tend to have more tolerant attitudes (e.g., Agüero, Bloch, & Byrne, 1984; Eruluf, Innala, & Whitam, 1989; Haslam & Levy, 2006; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Smith, Zanotti, Axelton & Saucier, 2011; Whitley, 1990; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). However, much of this research has been correlational which limits insight into the causal direction of this relationship.

A common explanation invokes attribution theory (e.g. Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008) which posits that people who are understood as responsible for their social stigma are evaluated more negatively than those stigmatised as a result of misfortune (Weiner, Perry & Magnusson, 1988). Accordingly, some social scientists have assumed that educating heterosexuals about the biological basis of sexual orientation may result in greater social tolerance (Whitley, 1990). The social psychological evidence however is mixed. There is some evidence that biological attributions can be associated with *greater* sexual prejudice if stigmatised stereotypical traits associated with sexual orientation are understood to have a biological basis (Kahn & Fingerhut, 2011). Furthermore, Hegarty (2002) found that perceived immutability of sexual orientation correlated with tolerance only among participants who judged biological attribution to be an expression of tolerant values. In conclusion, Hegarty suggests that rather than etiological beliefs influencing attitudes, biological attributions may be better conceptualised as post-hoc justifications for political stances. Very little research has examined attributional beliefs about bisexuality; however, Hubbard and de Visser (2015) found that although belief in the discreetness of bisexuality

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

(that bisexuality was a distinct category) predicted negative attitudes towards bisexuals, beliefs in the immutability of bisexuality (whether it is innate) was unrelated to attitudes towards bisexuality.

One problem with experimental studies and opinion polls is that they only allow for pre-designed responses to survey questions and can present biological versus choice explanations of homosexuality as mutually exclusive beliefs. Qualitative research, on the other hand allows for the expression of ambiguity, contradiction and qualification. For example, Sheldon, Pfeffer, Jayarante, Feldbaum and Petty (2007) found many heterosexuals expressed beliefs that sexual orientation is an underlying predisposition alongside beliefs that sexuality was influenced by environmental factors and is manifest through choice.

Qualitative research has also revealed a complex plurality of perspectives among lesbians and gay men themselves. In her classic study on the social construction of lesbianism, Kitinger (1987) found that women who identified as lesbian accounted for their lesbianism in a number of ways, including as an innate sexual orientation, chance (i.e. falling in love with someone who just happened to be a woman) and choice. Kitinger and Wilkinson (1995) similarly found that women who identified as lesbian after a substantial period in different-sex relationships accounted for this transition in a variety of ways.

Whisman (1996) meanwhile identified three types of accounts among lesbians and gay men: 'determinist' accounts of having been born gay; 'chosen' accounts in which lesbians and (to a lesser extent) gay men claimed that sexuality was within their volition and; 'mixed' accounts that distinguished between aspects of their sexuality that were and were not chosen. Mixed accounts were the most common, occurring in more than half of participants' responses. These participants typically claimed that their sexual attractions were not chosen but qualified this with aspects that were, including their sexual behaviour (choosing to 'act on' sexual attractions), personal identity (choosing to apply the label of 'gay' to oneself) and

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

public identity (choosing to disclose this identity to others). Whisman (1996) also identified that such beliefs had a rhetorical dimension, with lesbians and gay men suggesting that certain beliefs were politically advantageous or risky.

While qualitative research allows participants to express their beliefs in their own words and lacks the artificiality of experimental studies, such studies remain ‘contrived’ by the fact that participants are asked to account for homosexuality rather than spontaneously offering an account. As such, data produced by such studies are subject to participants’ expectations about social scientific research (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). It may therefore be instructive to examine etiological beliefs in real-world contexts.

### **Etiological beliefs in historical perspective**

We could, for instance, examine historical examples of etiological beliefs from a social psychological perspective. For instance, the early sexologist Havelock Ellis, whose theory of ‘sexual inversion’ presented homosexuality as congenital, was aware of the rhetorical function such a theory could serve in countering the idea that homosexuality was the result of moral corruption (Funke, 2013). As Funke (2013) observes, ‘Ellis did not simply write a respectable scientific study of inversion, but he also sought to argue against the criminalisation of same-sex desire in England’ (p. 148). Similarly, throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the argument that people are born gay was used within pleas for tolerance in pursuit of campaigning for lesbian and gay rights (Smith & Windes, 2000).

However, lesbian and gay activists have not uniformly adopted essentialist arguments within their activism throughout history. The gay liberation movement of the 1960/70s, for instance, aimed to ‘free the homosexual in everyone’ (Wittman, 1970/1972) and claimed that the eradication of homophobia and sexism would make the categories homosexual/heterosexual obsolete (Altman, 1971). Meanwhile, radical lesbian feminists of

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

the 1980s adopted slogans such as ‘every woman can be a lesbian’ and ‘feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice’ (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981). These radical strands of the lesbian and gay movement were not engaging in the defensive rhetoric of seeking to justify themselves to the disapproving, but rather employed a more offensive rhetoric to criticise sexism and heterosexism within society.

There are also historical examples to support the argument that biological attributions do not necessarily go hand-in-hand with tolerant attitudes among heterosexuals. During the second-world war, imprisoned homosexuals faced human experimentation by Nazi doctors such as Carl Værnet who conducted hormonal experiments in search for a medical cure for homosexuality (Herrn, 1995). Such doctors and their Nazi benefactors clearly believed homosexuality to have a biological basis, yet this did not result in tolerant attitudes but rather in efforts to eradicate homosexuality through medical means.

These real-world examples by no means provide a comprehensive historical account of etiological beliefs, but they should suffice to demonstrate that there is nothing ‘essential’ or inevitable about the relationship between biological explanations for homosexuality and social attitudes towards sexual minorities (Hubbard & Hegarty, 2014). The same attribution can, in different contexts, be used for divergent rhetorical purposes.

### **A rhetorical social psychology perspective**

As outlined above, the relationship between biological attributions and social attitudes is far from clear and rather than influencing social attitudes, explanations of homosexuality may function as rhetorical justifications for political stances. This logic has much in common with a rhetorical and discursive approach to social psychology. Billig (2009) describes rhetorical psychology as one of a number of ‘flavours’ of discursive psychology that focuses on what



## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

language users are doing within talk, with a particular emphasis on the argumentative nature of language.

Rhetorical and discursive psychologists have been critical of attribution theory which suggests that our explanations of others' behaviour are determined by the information we have to hand and is influenced by cognitive biases. Rhetorical psychologists have argued that rather than being disinterested passive perceivers of reality, we actively produce attributions to manage the accountability of ourselves and others (e.g. to blame others or deny responsibility). As Howitt et al. (1989) point out, questions of social causation 'revolve around not merely the facts of an action but also its morality' (p. 109). Furthermore, Potter and Edwards (1990) suggest that the 'facts' of a situation are typically a subject of debate and that, within an argument, the facts of the matter are discursively constructed to make particular attributional inferences possible (i.e. in order to assign blame/responsibility) (see also Potter, 1996). From a rhetorical psychological perspective then, the distinction made by experimental social psychologists between attributions and attitudes is at least partly an artificial one because in some contexts attributional statements may be taken as articulating a particular attitudinal stance. For example, the slogan 'homosexuality is not a choice, homophobia is' is not simply a phrase consisting of two attributional statements; it is used as an expression of a pro-gay stance.

Rhetorical social psychologist Michael Billig (1987) has also argued that the giving of opinions should not be seen as the expression of an internal state (e.g. a 'belief' or 'attitude') but rather as positioning oneself on a matter of controversy. And within any debate, an argument (*logos*) only makes sense in relation to counter arguments (*anti-logi*). According to such an approach, statements of belief may be used to justify (to oneself as well as to others) the rationality of one's stance (Billig, 1987). For instance, to justify condemnation of homosexuality, it must be framed as a choice because condemning something that people did

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

not choose risks being deemed unreasonable. Volition is thus a rhetorical prerequisite for condemnation. Meanwhile, when gay activists argue that people are born gay and that homosexuality is not a choice, it is a tacit acknowledgement of, and counter to, its opposing argument (Smith & Windes, 2000). Rather than etiological beliefs influencing attitudes, statements about the origins of homosexuality may be rhetorical justifications for stances within moral or political debate. By suggesting that etiological beliefs are rhetorical in nature, it should not be taken that the assertion of such beliefs are to be viewed as disingenuous political strategies ('mere rhetoric'). Rather, rhetorical psychology views thinking itself as argumentative in nature and takes the position that thought cannot be easily disentangled from matters of ideology (Billig, 1987).

Discursive psychologists typically advocate the use of 'naturally occurring data', in the form of real-world texts or interaction that would exist irrespective of the research being conducted (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Very little research has investigated spontaneously generated attributional discourse relating to homosexuality in the real-world. The current study therefore seeks to naturalistically examine how non-heterosexuals react to the claim that sexuality can be chosen by someone who themselves identifies as gay. It will examine how they criticise or defend this viewpoint and how they articulate their own (counter)position.

### **The present study**

The aim of this study was to examine online reader comments regarding Cynthia Nixon's *New York Times* interview. Best known for her role as Miranda in the US television show *Sex & the City*, Nixon first made headlines in relation to her sexuality in 2004 when, after a 15-year relationship with a man with whom she had two children, she was reported to be dating a woman, who she subsequently went on to marry. But it was an interview with *The New*

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

*York Times Magazine* in 2012 that was the source of controversy that is the focus of the current study. In the article, Nixon was quoted as follows:

I gave a speech recently, an empowerment speech to a gay audience, and it included the line ‘I’ve been straight and I’ve been gay, and gay is better’. And they tried to get me to change it, because they said it implies that homosexuality can be a choice. And for me, it is a choice. I understand that for many people it’s not, but for me it’s a choice, and you don’t get to define my gayness for me. A certain section of our community is very concerned that it not be seen as a choice, because if it’s a choice, then we could opt out. I say it doesn’t matter if we flew here or swam here, it matters that we are here and we are one group and let us stop trying to make a litmus test for who is considered gay and who is not...why can’t it be a choice? Why is that any less legitimate? It seems we’re just ceding this point to bigots who are demanding it, and I don’t think that they should define the terms of the debate. I also feel like people think I was walking around in a cloud and didn’t realize I was gay, which I find really offensive. I find it offensive to me, but I also find it offensive to all the men I’ve been out with. (Witchell, 2012)

Nixon’s statement that she ‘chose’ to be gay attracted public criticism in what has been described as an international ‘media firestorm’ (Goodine, 2015: 116). The present study will examine how readers of a gay news website responded to coverage of her comments and how such responses are rhetorically constructed and oriented.

### **Data and method of analysis**

The analysis focuses on reader responses to an article published by *PinkNews* with the headline ‘Cynthia Nixon: My homosexuality is a choice’ (McCormick, 2012). The article quoted the relevant section of *The New York Times Magazine* interview and attracted 198

reader comments. Reader comments on this website were chosen rather than those on *The New York Times* website in order to focus on how readers of a gay media outlet responded to Nixon's words. *PinkNews* is a UK-based online news website marketed to the LGBT community and claims to be 'Europe's largest gay news service'. Of course not everyone who reads or comments on this website identifies as gay and verifying the identity of those who post online is not possible. One reader implied that she was heterosexual, commenting that she did not choose to be 'straight', while another made anti-gay comments and was described by other commenters as a 'straight troll'. However, many readers who commented suggested they were non-heterosexual either by explicitly identifying themselves as 'gay', 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' in their comments or implicitly through referring to 'we' or 'us' when referring to 'gay' people. Online reader comments provide a naturally occurring source of data, on an issue that might otherwise be difficult to capture naturally (Jowett, 2015). As the reader comments were just as publicly accessible as the news article itself, it was deemed that these data were firmly in the public domain and that the consent of individuals was not required. The details of the project were however declared to Coventry University's ethics committee.

Online comments were copied and pasted into a word processing document for coding and further analysis. The data were then analysed thematically drawing on insights from a rhetorical psychological approach. Billig (1987) suggests that when people argue, their criticisms and justifications frequently appeal to what they consider to be 'common sense'. The analysis followed broad guidelines by Billig (1997) which involved indexing themes of common sense and the discursive features within the data, however discourse analysis cannot easily be described in terms of a series of processes. Rather, as Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 168) explain, "there is a broad theoretical framework which focuses the attention". To refine the themes and ensure that they were transferable beyond this one case,

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

comments made on a similar article on the same website with the headline ‘Julie Bindel: You can choose to be gay – I chose to live my life as a lesbian’ (Duffy, 2014) were also examined. The themes identified applied across both articles, however only comments regarding Nixon are examined here as it was the more internationally recognised example.

### **Analysis**

Three themes within the reader responses will be examined here: biological essentialism as common knowledge; only bisexuals can choose; and collusion with homophobia. Each of these themes are discussed below and extracts are labelled with their comment number (C#).

#### ***Biological essentialism as common knowledge***

##### *Appeals to scientific facts*

Despite Nixon limiting her claim to herself (‘for me, it is a choice’) rather than making a claim about homosexuality in general, arguments about scientific evidence were widely invoked. Readers therefore treated Nixon’s comments as having a double signification. She was taken not only to be talking about herself but to be depicting a wider shared reality, in which choice is possible. Many of the readers who criticized Nixon appealed to science as a warrant for the idea that homosexuality is biologically determined. For example, one reader commented “It’s been proven that it’s part of your DNA, not a matter of choice” (C21). In this way a number of comments boldly stated biological determinism to be scientifically ‘proven’ without reference to any particular studies, as if this were simply a matter of common knowledge. Readers described Nixon as a “stupid woman” (C175) an “idiot” (C13) and a “brainless dimwit” (C119), as if questioning biological determinism indicated a lack of intelligence. Another reader simply commented “catch up on your science” (C62) as if such a belief could only be sustained by those lacking basic scientific knowledge.

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

Several readers, however, did refer to specific studies to support their criticism of Nixon:

A recent functional magnetic resonance imaging study has demonstrated that upon viewing of both heterosexual and homosexual erotic stimuli, only those images corresponding to the subject's sexual orientation produced hypothalamic activation patterns associated with sexual arousal. This is the utter antithesis of people "choosing" a sexual orientation, and means that sexual orientation is not a choice, but a slave and function of their biology (from African News 2011). (C176-177)

In a 1991 study Simon LeVay demonstrated that a tiny clump of neurons of the anterior hypothalamus – which is believed to control sexual behavior and linked to prenatal hormones – was on average more than twice the size of heterosexual men when contrasted to homosexual men. These results have been confirmed by later studies. (C35)

It is worth noting that these are not presented as simplified lay summaries but are laden with scientific terminology (e.g. 'hypothalamic activation', 'neurons of the anterior hypothalamus'), rhetorically functioning to present the reader as scientifically knowledgeable. The last sentence of the second comment also wards off a potential criticism by attending to the issue of reliability ("these results have been confirmed by later studies"). This is taken to be rhetorically sufficient, with no need to cite these other studies.

This invocation of science is testament to how biological research on homosexuality has firmly entered everyday consciousness. Moscovici (1983) observed that in contemporary Western societies "common sense is science made common" (p. 29). Notions of the 'gay brain', genetic explanations and so on appear to have passed from scientific discourse to common sense. Discourse analysts meanwhile suggests that popular understandings of

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

science do not merely inform opinion but science can be rhetorically invoked to support one's argument as an objective arbiter of truth (Potter, 1996). So, by criticizing Nixon in this way, readers presented themselves not as having a different opinion or experience but as describing the 'facts' of the matter.

### *Appeals to common sense*

In addition to criticisms that Nixon's comments were contrary to scientific evidence, her account was also criticized for lacking common sense more broadly. One way in which this was done was by constructing being gay as something nobody *would* choose. For instance, one reader argued that: "one does not choose to be gay. If we had a choice to be gay, be ridiculed by others, beaten because we are different who on this planet would 'choose' to be gay. It's a much harder life" (C18). Similarly, another commented:

I struggled as a teenager and young adult with this. All the girls around me marrying men and having kids and I knew this wasn't what I wanted and couldn't understand why. I am always reading in pink news etc where someone who's gay [sic] has been tormented, bullied etc because of their sexuality! Why the HELL would you 'choose' that?! (C190)

Both of the above comments pose a rhetorical question ("who on this planet would choose to be gay"; "Why the HELL would you choose that?") which function as a negative assertion. The idea that someone might freely choose to live a 'harder life' is presented as irrational and inconceivable.

So Nixon's suggestion that she chose to be gay was criticized for contravening common sense in two ways: firstly, the notion of choice was presented as being inconsistent with common knowledge of scientific evidence and secondly, the notion that someone would choose to be gay in a homophobic society was depicted as beyond belief.

*Only bisexuals can choose*

Whereas above it was the notion of ‘choice’ that was challenged, Nixon’s claim to be ‘gay’ was also questioned. Some readers took Nixon’s claim to have made a ‘choice’ at face value but suggested that the existence of choice implies bisexuality. A number of readers suggested that one can infer Nixon’s real sexuality from her comments. For example:

She is evidently bisexual if she feels she is attracted to both men and women. It’s not about others defining her sexuality for her. If she was genuinely lesbian it would be a case of ‘going through the motions’ if she went with a man. (C2)

Exclusive attraction to other women is presented here as the criteria for being ‘genuinely lesbian’. Note that according to the account of lesbianism provided above, a woman can have had previous relationships with men and still be ‘genuinely lesbian’ but they must account for this as a case of ‘going through the motions’. This idiomatic formulation provides a culturally familiar plot for accounting for lesbians who have previously been in different-sex relationships. It captures the canonical ‘coming-out’ narrative whereby the lesbian initially attempts to follow cultural expectations of heterosexuality before learning to accept what she really was all along. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) note that women who identify as lesbian after a substantial period of being in different-sex relationships tend to be constructed in one of two ways: i) that they were ‘really’ lesbian all along or ii) that they are ‘not really’ lesbian now. These two accounts are both presented in the above extract. By stating that Nixon is “evidently bisexual” the reader suggests that Nixon is ‘not really’ gay, because if she were “genuinely lesbian” her previous relationships with men would not have been genuine (i.e. she would have been lesbian all along).

In making the argument that Nixon is not ‘really’ gay these readers differentiated between sexual ‘orientation’ and ‘identity’:



## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

Bisexuality appears as others have said to be Nixon's orientation and therefore in her case she has chosen to fall in love with someone of the same sex... Obviously Nixon should identify as a bi woman with a preference for woman [sic] and by not embracing that – she devalues the whole LGBT movement (C78)

People who are bisexual are attracted to both sexes (whether or not they like that label). Nixon has clearly disclosed she has been attracted and involved (not for appearances sake or out of duress – but out of desire) with people of both sexes. She might not choose to identify by the label but the definition is clear from what she describes, she is bisexual (C26)

In such comments sexual orientation was constructed as a fixed, underlying and non-volitional sexual attraction, while sexual identity was presented as a choice regarding the label one publicly goes by. Thus these readers suggest that the category 'bisexual' or 'gay' corresponds to something beyond the label itself and that one's choice of identity category can be correct or incorrect. The first of the two comments above claim that "*obviously* Nixon *should* identify as a bi woman" (emphasis added). The use of 'obviously' here signals the status of what is to follow as common sense while the 'should' implies a moral imperative. Accordingly, such readers suggest that one is not free to identify oneself using a category of one's choosing but one 'should' use the correct terminology. By 'not embracing' the bisexual label, Nixon is not merely accused of using inaccurate terminology but of devaluing a whole social movement.

In some comments this argument took on an 'if-then' structure: "*if* she has a 'choice' about whether to assume a gay or straight identity, *then* her orientation (her innate attraction) is bisexual" (C7, emphasis added). If-then statements rhetorically claim that a second assertion follows logically from that which precedes it. This if-then formulation packages and

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

asserts common sense knowledge about sexual categories. Membership categorization analysts tell us that categories of person (e.g. 'gay', 'straight') are 'inference rich' and are culturally bound with common sense knowledge about those categories. If a person self-categorizes in a certain way but contravenes the common sense knowledge about that category then they may be seen as a 'defective' category member (Schegloff, 2007) and re-categorized accordingly (Speer, 2005). Here, Nixon's claim to have chosen to be gay is presented as contravening common sense about what it is to be 'gay' - that one is exclusively attracted to members of the same-sex and has no 'choice' about being a category member – and so she is re-categorized as 'bisexual'.

The if-then structure also constructs bisexuals as having the ability to 'choose'. For instance, one reader asserted: "making the choice of being with man or woman does not make you gay. It makes you bi" (C21). Associating 'choice' with the category of 'bisexual' arguably allows those commenting to dissociate 'choice' from the category 'gay'; 'they' (bisexuals) have a choice, 'we' (gay people) do not. So within this argument, not only is choice taken to imply bisexuality but bisexuals are also constructed as having choice. Yet, readers were not suggesting that people 'choose' to *be* bisexual, bisexuality was also constructed within an essentialist discourse of sexual orientation:

She says that she has had proper relationships with men, and that now she is in a relationship with a woman. That does NOT make her gay. It makes her bisexual. If she was not attracted to women then she would not now be in a same-sex relationship. She has no choice in terms of where her attractions like [sic]. The only 'choice' she made is when she decided to act out on her natural same-sex attractions. (C120)

As with the comments already discussed, this reader suggests that a bisexual orientation can be inferred from Nixon's comments. The reader then asserts that Nixon has no choice regarding who she is attracted to. No warrant is given for this; it is taken for granted that

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

sexual attraction is outside the realm of choice. The reader concedes that Nixon has a 'choice' regarding whether to 'act out' her attractions but she downgrades this second kind of choice by prefacing it with 'only' and problematizes its use by putting it in scare quotes. Choice is constructed as confined within the boundaries of unchosen preferences. Just as many of Whisman's (1996) lesbian and gay participants differentiated between aspects of sexuality that were chosen and those that were not, here the contrary themes of choice and a lack of choice sit alongside one another.

### *Collusion with homophobia*

Readers also criticized Nixon by claiming that her comments were 'irresponsible'. Nixon's suggestion that she chose to be gay was constructed by readers as inherently dangerous because it provided ammunition for 'bigots':

Cynthia Nixon's stupidity and irresponsibility is quite breath-taking....All the religious lunatic and bigots are going to jump on her incredibly irresponsible words and use them as an excuse to bash us all. There is no choice in terms of sexual orientation. Such a pity Cynthia Nixon chose to make such harmful, untrue, and dangerous comments. She is such an idiot (C120)

Similarly, another reader berated Nixon as follows: "This woman makes mad [sic] and all the bigots are clapping their hands right now because of this ridiculous and dangerous statement" (C190). The claim here is not only that Nixon's etiological belief is inaccurate but also that its assertion is politically 'dangerous'; one shouldn't use a discourse of choice because those with an anti-gay agenda will use those words against the gay community. The broader rhetorical context in which those who condemn homosexuality typically claim it to be willfully chosen (Smith & Windes, 2000) is taken-for-granted as understood, as it is not fully articulated.

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

While readers' comments were overwhelmingly critical, there were a handful of comments in support of Nixon. In contrast to arguments that Nixon's comments aided the cause of bigots, supporters of Nixon claimed that it was an insistence on 'born this way' rhetoric which colluded with homophobia:

We absolutely, and increasingly, have the debate around sexuality shaped for us by those who oppose us. The point is not whether it's a choice or not, it's that there is no proper moral or ethical reason to oppose same-sex attraction or love. (C86)

That our actions may not be a direct result of genetics, does not make them any less valid or any more immoral. She [Nixon] raises important points about how we use labels in the gay community. We should not use our genes as the twinkie defence. Go Cynthia! (C172)

I don't think anyone 'chooses' a sexual orientation [...] but not really the point, which is the alacrity with which lgbt activists scream that we must all insist we were born this way in order to legitimate the claim for equal rights. This colludes directly with the homophobic view that our lives and loves cannot be a valid choice, and that choice is fair game for discrimination and inequality. The point of fact that it in practice is NOT a choice is irrelevant to the issue. (C118)

For these readers, the legitimacy of homosexuality is a matter of morality rather than science. Etiological arguments are not considered necessary or indeed relevant to justify homosexuality and essentialist rhetoric is here constructed as evading personal responsibility ("a twinkie defence"<sup>vi</sup>). So in contrast to the charge that Nixon's words provided bigots with ammunition, her supporters claimed that it is using biology as a defense that evades responsibility and colludes with homophobia. There appears to be what might be described as

an ideological dilemma here (Billig et al., 1998) whereby both ‘choice’ and ‘born this way’ rhetoric can be viewed as potentially colluding with anti-gay prejudice in different ways.

## **Discussion**

In this article we argue that etiological beliefs should be examined within the rhetorical contexts in which they are expressed. As an example of how this might be done, we have examined naturally occurring data in the form of online comments by readers of an online news article, discussing Cynthia Nixon’s statement about having chosen to be gay. Such readers were not simply stating beliefs or textually representing cognitive structures. Rather they were engaged in the social activity of arguing, criticizing or justifying Nixon’s comments within a particular social and political context. Nixon’s comments were treated by many readers as contravening scientific evidence and common sense. However, one need not assume scientific evidence informs people’s beliefs which in turn shapes attitudes. Rather, people may construct the ‘facts’ and draw upon science to rhetorically support particular positions (Potter, 1996).

Others accounted for Nixon’s purported ‘choice’ by re-categorizing her as bisexual. This re-categorization provided a culturally intelligible way of accounting for choice while also maintaining the essentialist position that sexuality is fixed. By constructing sexuality as consisting of three discrete categories (straight, gay and bisexual), Nixon can be neatly re-categorized in a way that presents the categories of ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ as stable. It could be argued that the data runs counter to the literature on bisexuality which tells us that the genuineness of bisexual identities are typically questioned, and that bisexuals are often considered by others to be ‘really’ lesbians or gay men who are not fully out of the closet (Morrison, Harrington & McDermott, 2010). Yet, here we have someone who claimed to be gay but was considered by others to be ‘really’ bisexual. It would appear then that those in

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

same-sex relationships with a history of different-sex relationships risk having their identities questioned irrespective of how they identify, unless they conform to a narrow cultural narrative.

In response to public criticism, Nixon later made a ‘clarifying statement’ in the LGBT magazine the *Advocate* in which she asserted:

My recent comments in *The New York Times* were about me and my personal story of being gay. I believe we all have different ways we came to the gay community and we can’t and shouldn’t be pigeon-holed into one cultural narrative which can be uninclusive and disempowering. However...I would like to clarify: while I don’t often use the word, the technically precise term for my orientation is bisexual. I believe bisexuality is not a choice, it is a fact” (Grindley, 2012).

Some may take this as vindicating Nixon’s critics who claimed that she was *really* bisexual. However, rather than assume that we can distinguish whether Nixon’s clarifying statement in the *Advocate* is more or less accurate than her original comments in *The New York Times*, a discursive psychologist would consider what her comments were functioning to ‘do’ in either case. In *The New York Times* interview, Nixon’s comment was not simply a statement of etiological belief. Rather, she was criticizing the notion that gay people should allow anti-gay rhetoric to determine how they speak about themselves. Meanwhile, in the *Advocate* Nixon’s statement appears oriented towards pacifying her critics (D’Cruz, 2014). Interestingly, Nixon’s clarifying statement is not a complete retraction of her original comments. She does not fully rescind her claim of ‘being gay’, she continues to suggest that people come to the gay community ‘in different ways’ and argues that forcing gay people to express themselves in a way that is consistent with a single cultural narrative is disempowering. Yet, by going on to re-categorize herself as ‘technically’ bisexual, she appears to be repairing the original comments in the *New York Times*, which had proven to be problematic, in line with this

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

essentialist cultural narrative. She could therefore be seen to be doing contradictory things within this clarifying statement.

How important (or not) essentialist rhetoric is for bringing about social and political change remains unclear. Hegarty (2010) found that over the course of teaching a module on LGBT issues which did *not* include biological explanations of sexuality, both sexual prejudice and beliefs in immutability reduced significantly, while students characterized belief in sexual fluidity as ‘enlightened’. Such a finding would appear to suggest that essentialist arguments are by no means necessarily for reducing prejudice. However, some have argued that the notion of immutability remains rhetorically required for lesbians and gay men to claim ‘minority rights’ within particular legal systems (Stein, 2014).

Nevertheless, ‘born this way’ rhetoric is clearly still understood to be important by many within the LGBT community. Whisman (1996) comments that speaking of choice in relation to sexuality is akin to breaking a taboo and that refuting the notion of choice has codified into a dominant rhetoric among lesbian and gay advocates. Smith and Windes (2000) note that the rhetorical battle between pro-gay and anti-gay advocates typically involves refutation of claims made by the other side. As those who condemn homosexuality often claim homosexuality is a choice, pro-gay advocates refute this claim. This ‘party line’ is then policed by many lesbian and gay activists. However, there are dissenters who find such rhetoric profoundly heterosexist. For instance, Whisman (1996) argues that when lesbian and gay activists’ plea that they *cannot* choose, the heterosexist assumption that they *should* choose to be heterosexual remains unchallenged.

We have highlighted that there are dilemmatic aspects to etiological beliefs (Billig et al, 1988). Although some argued that Nixon’s comments provided bigots with ammunition, others, in line with Whisman (1996), suggested that refuting choice colludes with

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

homophobia. In other words, there are contrary implications of both biological and ‘choice’ arguments. This dilemma is summarized nicely in the following quote by Sinfield (1994: 70):

[If chosen] lesbians and gay men can boldly assert our choices; on the other hand, we may be judged to have perversely chosen a wrong or inferior lifestyle. If we are genetically determined, it might seem futile to harass people who are only manifesting a natural condition. On the other hand, our enemies might regard us as an inferior species.

What enables lesbians and gay men to argue among themselves about the dangers of ‘choice’ versus biological arguments is that etiological beliefs do not have their positivity or negativity built into them. There are political advantages and risks attached to both, and either can be used to make contrary arguments. Essentialist arguments may be rhetorically useful when pleading for tolerance, but this does not mean that such beliefs are inherently more positive than the idea that sexuality might be fluid or involve an element of choice.

## References

- Aguero, J. E, Bloch, L. & Bryne, D. (1984). The relationships among sexual beliefs, attitudes, experience and homophobia. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 10(1-2), 95-107.
- Altman, D. (1971). *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey.
- Billig, M. (1987). *Arguing and Thinking: a rhetorical approach to social psychology, revised edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. (1997). Rhetorical and discursive analysis: How families talk about the royal family. In N. Hayes (Ed.) *Doing qualitative analysis in psychology* (pp. 39-54) London: Psychology Press.
- Billig, M. (2009). Discursive psychology, rhetoric and the issue of agency. *Semen*, 27, 157-



184.

Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. (1988).

*Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. London: Sage.

Byne, W. (1995) Science and belief. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 28(3-4): 303-344.

D’Cruz, C. (2014). Commemorating Homosexual: Rethinking experience and the disaffected through the legacies of the Gay Liberation Movement. *Sexualities*, 17(3), 291-309.

Diamond, L. (2008). *Sexual fluidity: Understanding women’s love and desire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Duffy, N. (2014, July 4). Julie Bindel: You can choose to be gay – I chose to live my life as a lesbian. *Pink News*. Available at: <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/07/04/julie-bindel-being-gay-is-a-choice-i-chose-to-live-my-life-as-a-lesbian/> (accessed 26 March 2016)

Ernulf, K. E., Innala, S. M., & Whitam, F. L. (1989). Biological explanation, psychological explanation and tolerance of homosexuals: a cross-national analysis of beliefs and attitudes. *Psychological Reports* 65(3), 1003-1010.

Funke, J. (2013). ‘We cannot be Greek now’: Age differences, corruption of youth and the making of sexual inversion. *English Studies*, 94(2), 139-153.

Goodine, R. (2015) The Silent B: The Erasure of Bisexuality. In B. O’Neill, T. A. Swan, N. J. Mulé, (Eds.) *LGBTQ People and Social Work: Intersectional Perspectives* (pp. 107-126). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.

Grindley, L. (2012, January). Cynthia Nixon: Being bisexual ‘Is not a choice’. *The Advocate*. Available at: <http://www.advocate.com/news/daily-news/2012/01/30/cynthia-nixon-being-bisexual-not-choice> (accessed 23 November 2015)

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

- Haider-Markel, D. P. & Joslyn, M. R. (2008). Beliefs about the origins of homosexuality and support for gay rights: An empirical test of attribution theory. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72(2), 291-310.
- Haslam, N. & Levy, S. R. (2006). Essentialist beliefs about homosexuality: structure and implications for prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 32(4), 471 – 485.
- Hegarty, P. (1997). Materializing the hypothalamus: A performative account of the ‘gay man’. *Feminism & Psychology*, 7(3), 355-372.
- Hegarty, P. (2002). ‘It's not a choice, it's the way we're built’: symbolic beliefs about sexual orientation in the US and Britain. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 12(3), 153-166.
- Hegarty, P. & Pratto, F. (2001). Sexual orientation beliefs: Their relationship to anti-gay attitudes and biological determinist arguments. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 41(1), 121-135.
- Herek, G. M. & Capitanio, J. P. (1995). Black heterosexuals’ attitudes toward lesbians and gay men in the United States. *Journal of Sex Research*, 32(2), 95-105.
- Herrn, R. (1995). On the history of biological theories of homosexuality. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 28(1-2), 31-56.
- Howitt, D., Billig, M., Cramer, D., Edwards, D., Kniveton, B., Potter, J. & Radley, A. (1989). *Social Psychology: Conflicts and continuities*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Hubbard, K. & de Visser, R. O. (2015). Not just bi the bi: The relationship between essentialist beliefs and attitudes about bisexuality. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 6(3), 258-274.
- Hubbard, K. & Hegarty, P. (2014). Why is the history of heterosexuality essential? Beliefs

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

- about the history of sexuality and their relationship to sexual prejudice. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61(4), 471-490.
- Jowett, A. (2015). A case for using online discussion forums in critical psychological research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 21(3), 287–297.
- Kahn, K. B. & Fingerhut, A. W. (2011). Essentialist beliefs and sexual prejudice against gay men: Divergence at the levels of categories versus traits. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2(2), 137-146.
- Kimmel, M. S. (1993). Sexual balkanisation: Gender and sexuality as the new ethnicities. *Social Research*, 60, 571-587.
- Kitzinger, C. (1987). *The social construction of lesbianism*. London: Sage.
- Kitzinger, C. & Wilkinson, S. (1995). Transitions from heterosexuality to lesbianism: The discursive production of lesbian identities. *Developmental Psychology*, 31(1): 95-104.
- Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1981). 'Political lesbianism: the case against heterosexuality'. In: Onlywomen Press *Love Your Enemy: The Debate between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*. London: Onlywomen Press.
- McCormick, J. P. (2012, January 24). Cynthia Nixon: My homosexuality is a choice. *Pink News*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2012/01/24/cynthia-nixon-my-homosexuality-is-a-choice/> (accessed 26 March 2016)
- Morrison, T. G., Harrington, R. & McDermott, D. T. (2010). Bi now, gay later: Implicit and explicit binegativity among Irish students. *Journal of Bisexuality* 10(3): 211-232.
- Moscovici, S. (1983). The phenomenon of social representations. In R. M. Farr & S. Moscovici (Eds.) *Social Representations* (pp. 3-69). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peplau, L. A. & Garnets, L. D. (2000). A new paradigm for understanding women's

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

sexuality and sexual orientation. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56(2), 330-350.

Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*.

London: Sage.

Potter, J. & Edwards, D. (1990) Nigel Lawson's tent: Discourse analysis, attribution theory and the social psychology of fact. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 20(5), 405-424.

Potter, J. & Hepburn, A. (2005). Qualitative interviews in psychology: Problems and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2(4), 281-307.

Schegloff, E. A. (2007). A tutorial on membership categorization. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 462-482

Sheldon, J. P., Pfeffer, C. A., Jayaratne, T. E., Feldbaum, M., & Petty, E. M. (2007). Beliefs about etiology of homosexuality and about the ramifications of discovering its possible genetic origin. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 52(3-4), 111-150.

Sinfield A (1994) *The Wilde Century: effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the queer moment*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Smith, R. R. & Windes, R. R. (2000). *Progay/antigay: The rhetorical war over sexuality*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Smith, S. J., Zanotti, D. C., Axelton, A. M. & Saucier, D. A. (2011). Individuals' Beliefs about the etiology of same-sex sexual orientation. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58(8), 1110-1131.

Speer, S. A. (2005). *Gender talk: Feminism, discourse and conversation analysis*.

London: Routledge.

Stein, E. (2014). Immutability and innateness arguments about lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, 89: 597.

Weiner, B., Perry, R., & Magnusson, J. (1988). An attributional analysis of reactions to

## Rhetoric and etiological beliefs

stigmas. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, 738-748.

Whisman, V. (1996). *Queer by choice: Lesbians, gay men and the politics of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Whitley, B. E. (1990). The relationship of heterosexuals' attributions for the causes of homosexuality to attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 16(2), 369-377.

Wilson, G. D. & Rahman, Q. (2005). *Born gay: The psychobiology of sex orientation*. London: Peter Owen.

Witchell, A. (2012). Life After 'Sex'. *New York Times Magazine*. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/magazine/cynthia-nixon-wit.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/magazine/cynthia-nixon-wit.html?_r=0)  
(accessed 23 November 2015)

Wood, P. B. & Bartkowski, J. P. (2004), Attribution style and public policy attitudes toward gay rights. *Social Science Quarterly* 85, 58-74.

Wittman, C. (1972). Refugees from Amerika: A gay manifesto. In J. A. McCaffrey (Ed.) *The homosexual dialectic*. (pp. 157-171) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, (Reprinted from the San Francisco Free Press, 1970, January 7)

---

<sup>i</sup> The US media coined the term 'twinky defense' during coverage of the trial of Dan White for several murders including the murder of Harvey Milk. White claimed diminished responsibility due to depression, of which a change in diet to sugary foods such as Twinkies was said to be a symptom. The term has since been used more widely to refer to any defense that seeks to evade personal responsibility.