

# The social construction of sexual practice: setting, sexual culture and the body in casual sex between men

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March 2001

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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*Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning, concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.*

Hume, D. (1748). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sec. 12, pt III.

It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 79.

Anyway, he slid his hand inside his pants and started playing with himself. He had a hardon, you could see that as plain as day. I did the same and changed position on the rock so he could see me, you know, opened my legs a bit, sort of face on. You're enjoying this, aren't you? (All in the name of science. Do go on.)

Interview quoted in: Dowsett, G.W. (1996). *Practicing Desire: Homosexual Sex in the Era of AIDS*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 145.



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## **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to the then Department of Public Health, University of Sydney, for appointing me to a lectureship in 1992, thereby enabling me to enrol for a PhD. I had applied for an editorial job with the World Health Organization at the same time, so were it not for DPH's promptness and the exceeding slowness of WHO bureaucracy I might never have embarked on an academic career.

My supervisor Professor Charles Kerr has always encouraged me, sometimes with stinging criticism. His erudition and unerring intellectual crap-detector have saved me from many a cliché of thought and expression (except, of course, in these acknowledgments). My first co-supervisor, Dr Janet George in the Department of Social Work, Social Policy and Sociology, guided me through learning the basics of sociology and encouraged me to develop a topic I really cared about rather than a quick and cynical one. After helping me arrive at my central concern—the social construction of sexual practice (as distinct from sexual identity)—she then modestly declared it to be out of her field. During the following years my new co-supervisor, Rebecca Albury in the School of Sociology, University of Wollongong, directed my reading, asked me searching questions and periodically got me newly enthused when the demands of teaching at Sydney and later conducting research projects and co-editing a journal in the National Centre in HIV Social Research threatened to entirely take over my PhD research. Her input and ideas, especially on issues around heterosexuality, were stimulating and valuable. When I realised I was trying to write two theses at once, one on homosexual and one on heterosexual encounters, I chose to focus on the homosexual; this means that less of the benefit of her earlier assistance is apparent in these pages than is usual for a supervisor.

I am grateful to the director of the National Centre, Professor Susan Kippax, for making National Centre data from the Seroconversion and Sites projects available to me, for sympathetic advice and for being flexible with leave and work demands to accommodate the final slog of writing up. Various parts of draft versions were read and helpfully commented on by Dr June Crawford, Dr Roland Fletcher, Professor Adrian Colman, Jason Grossman, Gary Smith and Dr Ivan Crozier. June was

especially encouraging when my internal editor was being paralytically critical of all I produced. Roland's structural advice has also been very much appreciated. No one could have said 'chuck all this stuff out' more tactfully. I also owe thanks to my mother, Maureen Colman, who came out of retirement for a long hard day's work to relieve me of a professional task while I was in the final throes of thesis writing. Most of all I thank Alan Whelan, who kept me company on many long studious evenings and has written three books during the time it has taken me to write this one. As well as providing emotional support he has been an able and challenging opponent in debate. Despite my harangues he has remained resolutely essentialist about sexuality, or so he allows me to believe.

*Juliet Richters*

*March 2001*



## **Author's contribution**

The conception of this study was my own. The empirical component of this thesis is based on analysis of data sets from three different research projects: Negotiating Sex, the Sites study, and the Seroconversion study. I ran Negotiating Sex in 1998 and 1999 while employed by the National Centre in HIV Social Research (NCHSR). Of the nine interviews with gay men, four were done by me and the other five by two interviewers, Colin Bisset and Max Hopwood, under my direction.

The Sites project was initiated and designed by Michael Bartos, former research fellow at NCHSR, in 1996. The fieldwork and interviews, supported by an Australian Research Council grant, were carried out by research officer Hédimo Santana in 1997, supervised by research fellow Erica Southgate at NCHSR. The analysis reported in *Sites of Sexual Activities among Men: Sex-on-Premises Venues in Sydney* (Santana and Richters 1998) was done by Hédimo; I assisted with the structuring and writing up of the report. For the study reported here I reanalysed his interview transcripts with a different focus.

The Seroconversion study was initiated in 1993 by Professor John Kaldor at the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research (NCHECR) and Professor Susan Kippax, director of NCHSR, and is still in progress. All the interviews were done by Olympia Hendry of NCHECR.

The analysis of the data, the structuring and writing up of the thesis were done by me alone.

*Juliet Richters*

## Abstract

Human sexual behaviour is highly variable and not tightly linked to biological reproduction. However, it has not been studied as social behaviour until the last 40 years and until recently it is largely deviant behaviour that has gained the attention of sociologists. Sociology has adopted an unnecessarily antibiologicistic position and consequently neglected the body. In reviewing sociological approaches to sex I draw on social constructionism, particularly the work of Gagnon and Simon (1974) and their notion of scripts; these can be interpreted as discursive structures defining sexual acts and sexual actors at both the individual and societal level. I outline a range of social constructionist positions in relation to sexuality and adopt a moderately radical but realist one that concedes some place for the physiology of arousal linking the elements of the discursive realm of the sexual in social life. Finding the basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism a fruitful base from which to approach sexual conduct I reject the concept of 'desire' as too complex and obscure to serve as a starting point in understanding the social organisation of sex.

A review of the ethnographic observational studies of settings in which men have casual sex shows that beats (public places such as parks and toilets) operate in a similar manner in many countries. Commercial sex venues are more varied. They are safer and more comfortable than beats and may offer private rooms and facilities for esoteric sex such as bondage. Sex in such settings is impersonal and anonymous, costs little effort, time or money, and offers a variety of partners. Interaction is largely nonverbal. Interview studies of men who have casual sex with other men tend to undersample men who are not gay-identified, but they offer insights into men's motivations and understandings. Both kinds of research are necessary.

The empirical component of the thesis is a thematic analysis of transcripts from three interview studies of gay men in Sydney done between 1993 and 1997: *Negotiating Sex* ( $n = 9$ ), the *Sites* study ( $n = 21$ ) and the *Seroconversion* study ( $n = 70$ ). All involved detailed narratives of sexual encounters. The analysis takes a situational interactionist approach with a specific focus on practice. Central questions asked are:

how does the setting (beat, sex venue, home) affect what happens? What does sex mean to the men, and how does this affect what they do? How do men's sexual skills, tastes and experience relate to their practice? How do men's bodies and their understandings of the body affect their practice? What do different sexual practices mean and how are they organised and negotiated within the encounter? How (if at all) do men integrate considerations of safe sex into their practice?

Physical surroundings were found to have a profound effect on practice. Sex venues as cultural institutions enable patterns of practice that do not occur elsewhere. Physical arrangements within beats and venues encourage or enable particular practices, such as oral sex or group sex.

Motivations for and meanings of sex to the participants varied widely; these were related to practice within the men's own accounts but not in any clear predictive way. Men's sexual skills, tastes and preferences, which were also very varied, related to their practice. Men made trade-offs between risk and pleasure. Men looked for a range of features in casual partners. Suppression of social cues restricted the range of criteria on which partners were selected, enabling wider choice.

Men's bodies affected their practice most strikingly in the issue of erection or the lack of it. Understandings of the body and physiological processes affected men's interpretations of information about HIV risk.

These men have a vocabulary of sexual practices within which some common practices are less salient. These practices are socially patterned in ways that benefit men with certain tastes and abilities and frustrate those with others. Safe sex considerations are routinely integrated into sexual practice but in a way that leaves room for considerable risk of HIV transmission.

In conclusion I argue that conceptualising sex between men exclusively in terms of gay identity and culture is inappropriate. The outcome of the empirical work confirms the theoretical analysis that found it necessary to incorporate some physiological notions, such as 'libido', into a social constructionist view of sex. The findings and their interpretations have important implications for framing effective HIV prevention programs. Some specific suggestions are made for how this might be done.