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# Speaking of science and politics: Meg Barker interviews Peter Hegarty

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## **Queer Politics, Queer Science? Meg Barker in conversation with Peter Hegarty**

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In January 2004 Peter Hegarty was elected as Chair of the British Psychological Society (BPS) Lesbian and Gay Psychology (LGP) Section Committee. Since that time the Section Committee has gone from strength to strength - convening workshops and streams of events at BPS conferences, reconsidering the name of the Section to make it more inclusive, and voicing concerns over the representation of sexualities in psychological and medical journals. The Section publication, *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, is now published three times a year with recent, very full, special issues on challenging homophobia, the social construction of lesbianism, and sadomasochism.

Peter obtained his Ph.D. in experimental social psychology from Stanford University in the US, as well as being an accomplished experimentalist, Peter also writes as a constructionist social psychologist on such topics as objective and projective testing (Hegarty, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), biological theories of sexual orientation (Hegarty, 1997, 2003a), psychoanalysis (2004a), intersex (Hegarty & Chase, 2000) and the psychology of prejudice (Hegarty, 2001; Hegarty & Massey, in press). As a relatively new member of the LGP Section Committee, I wanted to ask about Peter's vision for the future of the Section. As Peter has placed himself very deliberately on both sides of quantitative/qualitative, constructionist/positivist divides, I was also curious to hear his opinions on debates about science and politics in the psychology of sexuality and gender. I began by asking Peter about his vision for the Section.

**PH:** The Section was set up in a very hostile environment, and that struggle has been well-described by others (Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002; Wilkinson, 1999). When I became Chair of the LGP Section in 2004 it was the first time that the Section's Committee contained none of its founding members, but luckily there was a diverse range of experience and perspectives represented on the new committee. It seemed like an opportune time to move the Section on from the difficult history that formed it in the 1990s. The first thing that I did was to write a short position piece for *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* suggesting a new vision. I argued that lesbian and gay psychology needed to form thicker connections with LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> work in other sectors, with like-minded psychologists, and with people doing critical work on gender and sexuality in other disciplines (Hegarty, 2004b).

**MB:** 'Lesbian and gay psychology' – Is that the best term to describe the field that the Section represents?

**PH:** Probably not. It's important that 'psychology' is in there, as many people outside the Section continue to think we are a support group for psychologists who are lesbian or gay rather than an organization dedicated to research, clinical expertise, and policy. Many people hold the misconception that you have to be lesbian or gay to join the Section, so we had a recent edition of *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* devoted to the experiences of heterosexual people working in the field. Maybe the word 'psychologies' would be better than 'psychology', because we are far from agreement within the Section as to what psychology is, and whether it can or should be a science. However, the term 'lesbian and gay' is becoming increasingly inaccurate, and its exclusions are being more keenly felt with time. Some of the most active members of the Section – such as yourself – work less on 'lesbian' or 'gay' issues and on bisexuality, transgender, transsexual, intersex, S/M. It's getting harder to name the area that the Section coheres around without either being exclusionary on the one hand, or flattening out important differences on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. This is the broader, more inclusive, term that the LGP section is currently considering using in place of just Lesbian and Gay.

**MB:** What about ‘queer’? How does that fit into the Section’s agenda?

**PH:** Maybe the role of queer is not so much to ‘fit in’ as to remind us of the limits of whatever form of inclusiveness the Section accomplishes. I would like to see psychologists engage with queer theory at a more substantial level. That could be a really useful exchange.

**MB:** How might queer theory impact on the discussion about what the Section should be called?

**PH:** I don’t think that queer theory would give us any easy answers about how to name our field, but it does provide some non-obvious ways of thinking about that question. Judith Butler’s (1990) argument from *Gender Trouble* might be useful here. There she points out how political categories such as ‘women’ or ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ invariably create divisions among the peoples they are supposed to unify. Instead of evaluating such categories in terms of their accuracy, Butler suggests that we look at what categories do - at what their performative effects might be. Accordingly, it’s useful to think of the name of the Section as a tool for doing things with. What can be done with a psychology Section that is called ‘lesbian and gay’ or one that also has words like ‘bisexual’, ‘trans’ and ‘queer’ in the title? Which title is more useful, and for doing what?

Of course, this is a much more future-oriented question than the one that the BPS would have us ask in thinking about the Section’s name. When the Section was set up, the BPS required that its founders demonstrate that there was a body of lesbian and gay psychological work already being done in Britain. Engagement with queer theory might challenge that criterion and optimistically ask instead the question ‘what might this Section become?’

**MB:** Has queer theory influenced your own work?

**PH:** From the outset. The first article I published used Butler’s work to critique biological theories of sexual orientation (Hegarty, 1997), and I still find Butler to be really useful in making visible heteronormative assumptions. These days, I’m most

interested in explicitly historical work. I am using the tensions between Foucault's work (1978, 1988), actor-network theory (Law & Hassard, 1999) and feminist work in science and technology studies (e.g., Haraway, 1991) to think about how psychologists position themselves as 'objective' in their work, and how those positions serve to bolster their claims that their opponents are not objective knowers of psychological knowledge but known objects of psychological knowledge (Hegarty, 2003b).

**MB:** Can you say more about your understanding of the tensions between Foucault and feminism?

First, I think it's worth pointing to some areas of overlap. Both feminist work and Foucauldian work and Marx also of course - realize that the category of 'nature' is not the limit of power, or of social construction, but the area where power is most entrenched, to the point of appearing uncontested. Both point to disciplines such as medicine and biology as places where 'the natural' is made up, and prompt contestations of that power. However, some early feminist work imagined a domain of the natural, or of 'women's experience' or some similar category (e.g., mothering, an ethic of care, or lesbian sexuality) that was beyond the effects of power. Foucault (1988) saw claims for liberation as intrinsic parts of the workings of power, and rejected liberatory and utopian narratives, and made us sceptical about such politics. This has been a point of division in feminist thought. Some think that Foucault consequently has no politics and proscribes quietism, while others, like Donna Haraway (1991) and Judith Butler (1990), for example, advance a much more sceptical approach to the natural or the experiential. It all depends on how the category of the political is defined.

There is also the problem of androcentrism in Foucault's work. *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1979), for example, described the invention of 'sexuality' as a medical and a political category in the nineteenth century. But the sexualities that Foucault concentrated on are largely those of men, or of hermaphrodites. There is scant attention to the materialization of prostitution as a medical category, a medicalization that was very much bound up with Eurocentric views about proper female

embodiment. Feminist contemporaries of Foucault - such as Judith Walkowitz (1989) - gave us a much less androcentric view of the Victorian era's sexual 'others'.

**MB:** I can see how queer theory would be useful for your critical historical work, but isn't it a bit hypocritical to continue to do experiments at the same time?

**PH:** Hmm. I get that one a lot, and I have to say that the answer has changed over the years. One of the reasons that I moved to the UK from the USA is because constructionist work is so under-valued in the US - I really was beginning to feel like I was living a curious double-life! Ten years ago I would have described myself as a very reluctant experimentalist. I was extremely alienated from the experimental department where I did my PhD for multiple reasons. By the time I was finished, I was describing experiments as kinds of gender performances that can both re-inscribe and disrupt masculinist norms in psychological science (Hegarty, 2001). I still think that that is right, and it's a way for experimentalists to start to do reflexivity which is not something experimentalists are trained to do. But in and of itself that's not a good enough reason to start doing experiments.

I think there is an implicit norm in your question: that constructionists shouldn't do science! I find this powerful norm to be almost as damaging as the experimentalists' idea that knowledge consists only of variables. Felicia Pratto and I published a paper last year in which we argued that experiments could be used to support constructivist arguments, and reported an experiment to show what we meant (Hegarty & Pratto, 2004). This was a difficult paper to get accepted because of one reviewer who kept arguing that we could report experimental findings, or we could make a constructivist argument, but we couldn't do both in the one paper. Maybe it is queer to do experiments when they call attention to the constructedness of scientific knowledge, and to submit these arguments to the peer review process in the more experimental journals. Certainly that subverts any easy binary between 'mainstream' and 'critical' psychology, or 'essentialism' and 'constructionism.' I couldn't say that I always know how to categorize my own work in those terms.

**MB:** One of the topics that you address in your experiments is normativity, particularly the tendency to take straight people as the norm for larger social

categories. Of course 'heteronormativity' has been the central object of queer theory. I wondered if there a link there?

**PH:** Very much so. One of the reasons that I started working on norm theory was because of the similarity between Kahneman and Miller's (1986) cognitive account of what they called 'category norms' and Judith Butler's (1993) account of performativity as citationality. Kahneman and Miller's (1986) work takes off from the limitations of prototype models to account for creative human thinking and the phenomenon of surprise. It's a cognitive theory of how we construct mental representations on-the-fly in potentially new ways in different situations. Butler's (1990) work also is about taking political advantage of moments where traditionally categories appear to lose their ground. Both theories give us ways of thinking about how the normativity of maleness, Whiteness, straightness, etc. *might* be contested but often is not contested and usually goes unnoticed. It was also useful that what little empirical work had been done on category norm focused on the construction of explanations for gender differences (Miller, Taylor, & Buck, 1991). Extending that work allowed my colleagues and I to put experimental findings and a critique of sexology together, and to talk about heteronormativity in a language with which social cognition researchers can engage (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001a, 2004, Hegarty, Pratto, & Lemieux, 2004).

The same dissatisfaction with heteronormativity has driven a lot of my critical interest in biological accounts of sexual orientation. It is not that I see sexual orientation (whatever that may be) as a product of nurture rather than nature. For what it's worth, I could write my own story either way by emphasizing some details and overlooking others. Rather, it is that the theories of nature that we currently have, routinely take the bodies of heterosexuals to be normative and those of gay men and (less explicitly) lesbians to be deviations, while leaving bisexual orientations off the map entirely. The papers that I've written using a discursive framework address this topic (Hegarty, 1997, 2003a). Because I was in such a quantitative department when I got interested in this, I also began to do survey research that looked at essentialism (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001b), and research that questioned attribution theory's claim that biological determinist beliefs about sexual orientation mitigate prejudice (Hegarty, 2002). Again,

I was less interested in epistemological purity than in talking to multiple audiences in psychology about heteronormativity in the biological theories.

**MB:** I can see how your own interests are formed by queer theory, but what of the rest of traditional social psychology? Is there anything else that it can learn from queer theory?

**PH:** I think we could tell the history of social psychology very differently from a queer perspective. Imagine a book like Frances Cherry's (1995) book *The stubborn particulars of social psychology* that focused on queer issues, such as Kitty Genovese's murder being a homophobic hate crime. I think queer theory would have us think about the affective nature of experimental work. Lubek and Stam (1995) have done some work on the masculinist pleasures of abusive cognitive dissonance experiments. But there must be dozens of queer stories in there, what with all of that dressing up and pretending in laboratories. I certainly feel that I am doing gender differently when I talk about experiments to colleagues than when I talk about constructionism. Putting on a lab coat – literally or figuratively - is a highly gendered act. Haraway (1991) talks about scientific cultures as places where new ways of doing gender are invented. That would be a useful way to think about the history of social psychology research practices.

**MB:** And what might an engagement with queer theory produce for future social psychologies?

One of queer theory's most important contributions was to call attention to the ways that modern epistemologies flip back and forth between conceptualizing sexuality as an act and as an identity in ways that create discriminatory effects (e.g., Butler, 1996; Halley, 1993; Rollins, 2004; Sedgwick, 1990). Sean Massey and I describe how the act/identity distinction opens up new ways of reading the experimental literature on heterosexism (Hegarty & Massey, in press). Let me give you an example.

Traditionally, social psychology experiments on prejudice have used confederates or vignettes to establish that the 'target' of the study is either gay/lesbian or straight. This is often done by having the target mention a same-sex relationship, membership in a gay/lesbian student group, or wearing an item of clothing that signals their sexual orientation clearly. different reactions to such targets are read as evidence of



discrimination based on sexual *identity*. However we could also read them as different reactions to different identity *performances*. Just because someone is lesbian or gay doesn't mean they always wear a t-shirt that tells you so! Indeed mentioning a relationship, involvement in a club, or wearing a t-shirt might be all very different kinds of identity performance; there is no reason to assume their psychological equivalence. Shouldn't we then have experiments that look not only at 'gay' and 'straight' targets but also at different reactions to different kinds of enactments of these sexual identities? This in turn makes us ask: what differences would be most important to study? This is the kind of thing queer theory can do in psychology; take a body of seemingly factual knowledge, unpack its implicit assumptions, make available alternative readings, and open up new lines of inquiry that were not obvious before.

**MB:** That doesn't sound too radical.

**PH:** The Foucauldian in me is very suspicious of things that announce their radicalness. Gil Scott-Heron sang that the revolution will not be televised, but some people still seem to think it will be published in a psychology journal.

**MB:** We have talked a lot about research on prejudice. But, of course, experiments provide very little room for reflecting on potential researcher prejudice. Do you think prejudice is still commonplace in psychology?

**PH:** Heterosexism – prejudice against sexual minorities - is very much alive and well. But it often goes undetected because of its subtlety. If you look at shifts in public opinion over the last twenty years there has been a clear increase in straight people's endorsement of the abstract principles of equality and equal rights around sexual orientation (Yang, 1999). However, by other measures, heterosexuals still hold quite negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (and probably towards bisexual people too who are less often mentioned by the pollsters). In social psychological terms, we could say that heterosexism is *modernizing*; more and more heterosexual people are caught in an ideological dilemma between principles of equality and a residual dislike of lesbians and gay men. In a discourse analytic study, Elizabeth Peel (2001) called this kind of prejudice 'mundane heterosexism' and other discourse

analysts have examined how people inoculate themselves against the charge of heterosexism when they are expressing potentially controversial views (e.g., Gough, 2002; Speer & Potter, 2000?). Similarly, experimental findings in recent years have shown that heterosexuals still discriminate against lesbians and gay men, but only when their discrimination is likely to go undetected (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; Hegarty et al., 2004; Moreno & Bodenhausen, 2001; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Swim, Ferguson & Hyers, 1999). I think researchers working within very different traditions are all picking up on this now (Hodges & Peel, 2004).

Within psychology, mundane, modern, subtle heterosexism is also very much in force. In the two and a half years that I've been in the UK, I've seen numerous academic psychologists pepper their talks with comments like 'odds and sods' or 'bugger this' or talk of how a problem will 'bite you on the arse' with absolutely no reflexivity that their idiomatic language abjects some of the most crucial ways that many gay men (and many many others) have sex. This is part of a broader dynamic of heteronormativity. In spite of decades of work in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer studies, academics still often talk as if we had somehow all been magically transported into a world where everyone is always unproblematically straight, and we have all signed a contract agreeing to abject same-sex practices in banal ways throughout the day. It is that tendency to take heterosexuality as the norm, always and everywhere, that makes 'lesbian and gay psychology' seem like 'specialized' or 'applied' work. I think that lesbian and gay psychologists and feminist psychologists are similar in this regard. That's why the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section and POWS will always be important.

**MB:** Just as you were taking over as Chair there was a major debate in the letters page of *The Psychologist* concerning evolutionary psychology and sexual orientation. First let's review what happened. A letter was published in October 2003 arguing for the consideration of an evolutionary hypothesis about homophobia – the author suggested that homophobia was ending and that this would lead to fewer lesbians and gay men being forced into marriages out of social convention such that homosexuality might die out in a few generations. A group of clinical psychologists wrote to complain about the letter and called attention to its stigmatizing effects. A huge amount of space was given over to letters that replicated each other and tended to

argue that the second letter was censoring the first. You and I were both involved in writing a response from the Section Committee defending the right to speak out against homophobic science on the grounds that standards for objectivity in psychology are contested. The whole debate casts a shadow over a Special Issue of *The Psychologist* on sexuality, which Catherine Butler, Lyndsey Moon and I are co-editing. What was your take on this?

**PH:** There is much to say about this. The letter from the Section expressed many of my views. I am filled with collective shame for psychologists everywhere when colleagues leap to defend their rights to free speech as absolute and excuse themselves from listening to the people that they claim to represent in their theories. I think that what could not be said or heard in the pages of *The Psychologist*, but can be said here, is how masculinist this defence of ‘free speech’ can be. The treatment of people as objects of a natural science who do not get any voice in deciding how science about them might get done is a complete importation of a masculinist natural science model of argumentation into human affairs. It is radically undemocratic. Often its most determined advocates have been explicitly exclusionary. Consider Tichener who excluded women from The Experimentalists – a crucially important professional body in early 20<sup>th</sup> century American psychology - for twenty-five years so that he could have this kind of rugged no-nonsense talk about data with other boys (Furumoto, 1988). There is an ignorant belief in psychology that it is cleverer and more scientific to talk about people as if they were data, than to actually engage with them about what kinds of research they would like to see done. This is the kind of thinking that makes science exclusionary and creates the need to ‘give psychology away’ or ‘make it accessible.’

Feminists have always been ahead of more traditional psychologists in this area. The irony is that complete disregard for the views of the people that you write about, and the kinds of science that they might want to see crafted is put forward in the service of contesting ‘censorship.’ I am not arguing that experiments are wrong. How could I? But I am arguing that a mastery of issues of research design and statistics is not a complete training for doing science about meaningful human affairs.

**MB:** Let's return to the Section for a moment. What other changes would you like to see happen in UK psychology during your time as chair?

**PH:** I think that psychologists sell themselves short when they think that LGBTQ psychology is a 'niche market' that doesn't concern them. There was a really good example of this at a critical psychology conference at Bath University in 2003. Ian Hodges (2003) put together a very strong symposium that brought together social psychologists, clinical psychologists and one doctor to talk about homophobia, and everyone ended up talking to empty chairs. Then, throughout the conference people bemoaned that critical psychology often just preached to the choir and didn't engage with psychologists who worked with real distressed people day-to-day. It was a classic case of people assuming that there would be nothing theoretical going on at the LGBTQ session and so not bothering to go. The same thing happens when sessions are organized around disability, or even feminism. I am delighted that this dynamic didn't emerge at the sexuality sessions at the POWS annual conference in 2004. Those sessions were well-attended and the discussions were engaging.

**MB:** Are you aiming for new kinds of knowledges with last year's BPS funded workshop on building bridges between lesbian and gay psychologists and partners in the voluntary and community sector (University of Surrey, March 2004)?

**PH:** Certainly. And there was a lot of enthusiasm on the day about the potential for such links, but also a lot of evidence about how much work needs to be done to create such an understanding. Some people from the voluntary sector continue to fear involvement with academics who just use them to recruit subjects and don't see non-academics as a source of expert knowledge. There are also material differences in the ways we work. One of the delegates went to give me back some of the complimentary stationary that she had been given at the start of the day. Organizing and running the event was a learning experience for me about the privilege of being an academic, and the kinds of wastefulness that it encourages. However, I still hope that workshop will be the beginning of something larger.

**MB:** So in conclusion, what is the place of LGBTQ psychology in British psychology?

**PH:** LGBTQ Psychology can't remain as just an 'optional extra' or a minority voice that simply protests its victimization. To use Piaget's (1952) terms, I hope the changes are more about British psychology's accommodation than LGBTQ psychology's assimilation, because psychology's basic understanding of objectivity is heteronormative, and that costs everyone dearly. I also think it is becoming increasingly important to think about LGBTQ psychology globally as parallel groups have formed in Australia, Canada, and Europe and are likely to form elsewhere in the future. This is not an area of psychology where we should take our lead from the USA, where the political climate is so hostile that critical psychology is still underdeveloped. Finally, the Section needs to diversify. At the moment its membership is largely based in the South of England and is largely white and middle-class. If the Section still looks like that in ten years then we won't be doing our job properly.

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