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## **The Social Construction of Lesbianism: A Reappraisal** **Edited by Elizabeth Peel and Victoria Clarke**

### **Editors' Introduction**

**Celia Kitzinger: Speaking Radically about Lesbianism**  
**Victoria Clarke and Elizabeth Peel**

The commentators in this reappraisal describe *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* as 'classic' (Coyle<sup>i</sup>), 'exciting' (Tiefer), 'important', (MacBride-Stewart), 'fascinating' (Snelling), a 'remarkable achievement' (Snelling), and an 'engagingly-written, political *tour de force*' (Coyle). Like some of the commentators (Coyle, Snelling), one of us (VC) owns a well-read copy of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, highlighted in all the colours of the rainbow and covered in (now) rather cryptic notes. This was the copy that passed back and forth between us as we completed our PhDs in lesbian and gay psychology, both of which were supervised by Celia Kitzinger. As young lesbian feminists, we were drawn to Celia's radicalism and uncompromising political commitment. She was an inspiring, challenging, passionate and energetic PhD supervisor, and we are honoured and privileged to edit this reappraisal of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, a book based on her PhD.

As Celia Kitzinger recounted in the introduction to *Changing our Minds* (Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993: 13), at the age of 16 when she involved for the first time in a sexual relationship with another woman she 'read every psychology book I could find. It was the early 1970s, and virtually all the books I consulted told me I was sick'. She was 'angry and wanted to make a difference'<sup>ii</sup>. She obtained a place at the University of Oxford and chose to study experimental psychology and 'much to my naive surprise, I soon discovered that lesbianism didn't feature on the syllabus' (1993: 14). After completing her undergraduate degree she worked as a volunteer for London Friend, a lesbian and gay counselling and befriending organisation, and got involved in lesbian feminist politics – 'discover[ing] feminism in a much more powerful way than I had done before'. In 1980, she returned to academia to do her doctoral research. It was 'very hard to get a PhD place. People said they would supervise me if I did not study *that*'. She owes 'a big debt' to her PhD supervisor Rex Stainton-Rogers who 'took me on... [because] he was on the side of anything that was going to be radical and different, and attack or deflate psychology's pretensions'.

In *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, Celia Kitzinger launched a provocative critique of the then emerging field of 'gay affirmative' psychology. She documented a shift from a pathological to a gay affirmative model of lesbianism, arguing that gay affirmative research represented a new development in the oppression of lesbians. She maintained that liberal humanist ideology when used in support of lesbianism prevents women from recognising their power and identifying their oppression. She called for lesbian and gay psychologists to reject the traditional model of science, deconstruct liberal humanist ideology, and examine their own rhetoric and political commitments. Often overlooked is that the empirical chapters of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* were based on interviews with one hundred and twenty lesbians, an impressive sample even now. As Celia Kitzinger argued, just as mainstream psychology focused on male experience, so 'gay affirmative' psychology focused on gay male experience. *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* was one of the first significant psychological studies to concentrate specifically on lesbian identities and incorporates one of the first sustained discussions of methodology in lesbian research. According to Esther Rothblum the book 'heralded in an era of research about lesbians by lesbians'.

One of the unique aspects of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* was the combination of radical lesbian feminist politics with social constructionist theory and with 'gay affirmative' psychology. The book has made significant and important contributions both to critical psychology and to lesbian and gay psychology. The publication of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* was 'a signal event in the struggle to develop a viable alternative to traditional empiricist psychology' (Russell and Gergen). It was the first volume in the Sage 'inquiries in social construction series' edited by Kenneth Gergen and John Shotter, which as Glenda Russell and Kenneth Gergen note in their commentary, ultimately formed a series of 22 volumes.

*The Social Construction of Lesbianism* is a 'pivotal text in lesbian and gay psychology' (MacBride-Stewart). Although it was pre-dated by June Hopkins' *The Lesbian Personality* (1969; see Clarke, 2003) and John Hart's and Diane Richardson's (1981) *The Theory and Practice of Homosexuality*, arguably no other text has been as important to the development of British lesbian and gay psychology. Social constructionism is – as Adrian Coyle notes in his commentary – a defining feature of British lesbian and gay psychology and one that differentiates it from USA lesbian and gay psychology. There is no doubt that British lesbian and gay psychology might now look rather different were it not for *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. As Sara MacBride-Stewart notes, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* was as 'a provocative initiation towards a critical lesbian and gay psychology', and the book remains 'an excellent example of critical work on lesbianism' (Coyle).

One of the defining qualities of Celia Kitzinger's work and of Celia herself (a quality that inspired and scared us in equal measure when we were her students!) is fearlessness. She encouraged us not to shy away from asking difficult but (politically) necessary questions, nor from self-examination. And throughout her career, she has asked testing (and, it has proved, critically important) questions. With regard to feminist psychology and lesbian and gay psychology, Celia Kitzinger has highlighted the uneasy relationship between these two fields. As she noted recently, each field 'proceeds without much awareness of advances in the other, and there is an extraordinary lack of cross-referencing' (2001: 272). Lesbian and gay psychology is in general not informed by feminist concerns and Celia Kitzinger is one of the few feminists to work within the field (along with commentators Esther Rothblum and Leonore Tiefer). Concurrently, as Celia Kitzinger (1996) argued in *The Token Lesbian Chapter*, most feminist psychology assumes a generic heterosexual woman and glosses over or ignores lesbian issues. In feminist psychology textbooks, lesbians are typically discussed only in a chapter on sexuality and disregarded in the rest of the book (Peel, 2001). Lesbians are rarely discussed in relation to topics such as motherhood, ageing, relationships and so on.

In *Heterosexuality*, Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (1993) asked heterosexual feminists questions which psychology has traditionally addressed to lesbianism, such as: 'What is heterosexuality and why is it so common?' As they noted responses ranged from delight to fear and hostility. Their aim was to 'foreground heterosexuality as requiring analytic attention (1993: 1). In *Changing Our Minds* (1993), co-authored with Rachel Perkins, Celia Kitzinger continued the project launched in *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* critiquing the ways psychological discourses contribute to the depoliticisation of lesbianism.

Celia Kitzinger's courageous and challenging contributions to lesbian and gay psychology and to feminist psychology have been internationally recognised. In 1989, she won the USA Association for Women in Psychology's distinguished publication award for *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. Four years later, she was awarded a Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award by Division 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues) of the American Psychological Association for her 'major contributions to the understanding of lesbian issues'. In 2000, she was elected a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (Division 44) for her 'outstanding and unusual contributions to the science and profession of lesbian, gay and bisexual psychology'. Ironically, despite or indeed because of her attempts to deflate psychology's pretensions, Celia Kitzinger's contributions to psychology as a whole have also been recognised. In 1997, she was elected a fellow of the British Psychological Society for her 'ground-breaking contributions to... [the] understanding of women's sexuality... outstanding scholarship and original thinking'.

This readiness to recognise individual contributions such as Celia's has not – in the UK at least – been matched by a readiness to formally recognise lesbian and gay psychology as an area of legitimate psychological inquiry. This is demonstrated by the struggle to establish a Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section within the British Psychological Society (see Wilkinson, 1999). Unsurprisingly, Celia Kitzinger was at the forefront of this struggle, which was eventually successful more than a decade after the publication of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. The founding of a Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section in 1998 marked the culmination of nearly a decade of campaigning (including three rejected proposals). The final push for a Section took place when we were at the start of our PhDs. We witnessed Celia's extraordinary tenacity when she incorporated hate mail sent to her and to other members of

the working party by Society members (e.g., 'don't solicit bitch', 'your lot disgust me', 'lesbians do not need psychology, they need a good stiff all round talking to') into a campaigning leaflet for the Section.

There is no doubt then that another of the defining features of Celia Kitzinger's career is pioneering. Celia Kitzinger was at the forefront of the 'turn to discourse' in feminist psychology and lesbian and gay psychology, and is now Professor of conversation analysis, gender and sexuality at the University of York. Her current work asks the questions 'how does the ordinary, everyday, mundane social world produce us as lesbians, as gay men and as heterosexuals? How are we implicated in that? How do we resist that? How do we challenge that? And how does mundane heterosexism get produced and reproduced through ordinary, everyday actions?' She is drawn to conversation analysis because it provides a concrete way of answering questions about 'why we're oppressed... and how we're oppressed'.

This reappraisal of Celia Kitzinger's *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* includes a reprint of selected excerpts from the book, commentaries by Leonore Tiefer, Esther Rothblum, Adrian Coyle, Susan Snelling, Sara MacBride-Stewart, Glenda Russell and Kenneth Gergen, and an 'afterword' by Celia Kitzinger. Many of the commentators emphasise the 'deep and lasting' contributions (Snelling) of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, a book that was 'ahead of its time' (Coyle, Tiefer). Susan Snelling comments that when she read the book for the first time, everything she had heard about it— 'feminist, radical, original, fascinating, exciting' – was true, 'what is more, I find that it is still true on re-reading the book some 15 years later'. Adrian Coyle asks: 'how many other classic texts can be said to have been so far ahead of their time that, 17 years after being published, they still have such clear contemporary rather than historical utility?'

This is particularly evident in Glenda Russell's and Kenneth Gergen's contribution, where they argue that 'the full force of Kitzinger's challenge has yet to be realised' in USA lesbian and gay psychology. Lesbian and gay psychology in the USA is 'very much at odds with Kitzinger's critiques, especially her more radical ones', because it embraces realist, positivist and essentialist assumptions. They explore the conflict between Celia Kitzinger's central arguments and lesbian and gay psychology in the USA, highlighting the drive to counterbalance the controversial status of lesbian and gay psychology by pursuing research that relies on the assumptions and methodologies embraced by the dominant voice of USA psychology. Esther Rothblum's commentary celebrates Celia Kitzinger's contribution to the development of research about lesbians by lesbians. She suggests that Celia Kitzinger's argument that liberal humanist psychology represents a new development in the oppression of lesbians is as relevant today as it was in the mid-1980s. She highlights the need to keep listening to and publicise lesbian voices, and to not dilute research by combining lesbians with the experiences of others. Adrian Coyle returns to the comments he wrote about *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* as a PhD student. The comments reveal 'the extent to which I had been rattled by Kitzinger's analysis'. For him, 'the prime merit of the book was that it began to prod the development of my own ideas so that the 23-year-old who was so passionate about the value of scientific psychology now seems like a stranger to me!' Susan Snelling, a Q-methodologist, explores the book's methodological contributions, and its importance as a 'manual in the technical aspects of' Q-methodology. Sara Mac-Bride Stewart focuses on Celia Kitzinger's critique of liberal humanistic accounts of lesbianism and its implications for research in lesbian health. Leonore Tiefer also comments on Celia Kitzinger's critique of the dangers of lesbianism being sucked into liberal mainstream thinking, as well as on the importance of her critique of the rhetoric of science and her uncompromising radicalism, energy and anger.

In her Afterword, Celia Kitzinger highlights both continuities and new directions in her intellectual and political commitments. She remains enthusiastic about the analysis of the rhetoric of science in *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, its social constructionist approach and its rejection of liberalism. However, the tools of conversation analysis have opened up for her a different perspective on the challenges faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and the transgender (LGBT) people, and she now actively employs the concepts and language of human rights rather than attempting to deconstruct them. Throughout her career Celia Kitzinger has been committed to creating 'freedom and social justice for us all' and is

hopeful that younger generations of LGBT scholars will continue the struggle within and beyond psychology.

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<sup>i</sup> Unattributed quotations from contributors to this Special Feature are taken from their contributions to this volume.

<sup>i</sup> All unattributed quotations from Celia Kitzinger are drawn from an interview Elizabeth Peel conducted with her on 18 February 2003.

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