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Elizabeth Peel

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Lesbian and Gay Psychology

Elizabeth PEEL

H. Besner and C. Spungin: *Gay and Lesbian Students*. Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis, 1995. 174pp. \$17.95, ISBN 1-56032-337 (pbk).

M. Hall: *The Lesbian Love Companion*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1998. 223pp. \$15.00, ISBN 0-06-251431-8 (pbk).

A. Stein: *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 256 pp. \$13.95, ISBN 0-520-20674-6 (pbk).

P. Stern (ed.): *Lesbian Health: What are the Issues?* Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis, 1993. 256 pp. £14.00, ISBN 1-56032-299-3 (pbk).

J. Weinstock and E. Rothblum (eds): *Lesbian Friendships: For Ourselves and Each Other*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 310 pp. \$18.95, ISBN 0-8147-7473-3 (pbk).

K. Weston: *Longslowburn: Sexuality and Social Science*. New York: Routledge, 1998. 265 pp. £12.99, ISBN 0-415-92044-2 (pbk).

Lesbian and gay social science is now a burgeoning and diverse field and it is heartening and long overdue to see a wide selection of texts placing lesbians, and lesbian issues, centre stage. These books cut across this broad area and give a flavour of the diversity of contemporary theory and research in lesbian and gay social science generally, and psychology in particular. With the advent of the new Lesbian and Gay Psychology section of the British Psychology Society in 1998 (the BPS 'section' is equivalent to the American Psychological Association division 44 for the study of lesbian and gay issues, approved back in 1984), these books represent the tip of the iceberg of an advancing field in a multidisciplinary context. Given the breadth and complexity of lesbian and lesbian feminist psychology, it is no longer appropriate to limit lesbianism to 'the token chapter', paragraph or sentence (Kitzinger, 1996). Lesbians can no longer be simply added into (predominantly heterosexual) feminist psychology.

Marny Hall's, *The Lesbian Love Companion* and Jacqueline Weinstock and Esther Rothblum's *Lesbian Friendships* focus on the personal relationships and friendship

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aspects of lesbian lives. The former brings a discourse/narrative approach to self-help and psychotherapy in lesbian love relationships; the latter offers a serious and committed psychological exploration of lesbian friendships, a long-neglected area. Both, in my view, are innovative and exciting additions to the area. In the applied field, Hilda Besner and Charlotte Spungin's *Gay and Lesbian Students* and Phyllis Stern's *Lesbian Health: What Are the Issues?* tackle education from educational and clinical psychological stances, and health from nursing perspectives, respectively. These books demonstrate the applied nature of lesbian research: they address 'real world' issues of coming out and heterosexist assumptions, and take seriously the needs of lesbian and gay students and lesbians accessing health services. Lastly, Kath Weston's *Longsloeburn: Sexuality and Social Science* and Arlene Stein's *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* embrace queer theory and lesbian feminism from anthropological and sociological perspective(s) in turn. Their projects, to 'reposition sexuality at the heart of the social sciences' (Weston, p. 3), and to 'delve . . . into the origins and legacy of lesbian feminism' (Stein, p. 4) are ambitious and bear witness to the centrality of lesbian sexuality and sexual identity.

Within feminist psychology, lesbians have been relegated to the margins of the discipline: an extensive body of lesbian psychological work has been ignored and rendered 'invisible', and lesbian issues only appear in discussions of 'diversity' or 'difference'. An incorporation of this collection of (North American) books, into feminist psychology, goes some way to redress this imbalance. Weston's ultimate aim to reposition sexuality at the centre of the social sciences is mirrored in different ways in all of these texts. Weston highlights that 'it's one thing to study sexuality as an entity unto itself – it's quite another to infuse sexuality into the very pursuit of knowledge' (p. 3). This pervasive theme of heterosexism and active marginalization is highlighted by Weinstock and Rothblum in their introductory chapter when they acknowledge that: 'Most academic literature on women's friendships has not included much attention to lesbians' friendships with each other nor to friendships between lesbians and nonlesbians' (p. 4). They go on to write: 'We have been particularly struck by the absence of explorations into conceptions of friendships . . . ' and surmise 'Perhaps this is in part because such questions may be less crucial to heterosexual women and men' (p. 4).

Weinstock and Rothblum aim to fill such gaps in the literature through their diverse collection of friendship-related papers, whereas Hall's account celebrates the intricate and persistent ability lesbian couples have in telling their stories, filling the gaps perpetuated by institutional heterosexism. Hall writes: ' . . . lesbian couples are gifted storytellers. It was this storytelling ability, developed out of necessity in a straight and often hostile world, that strengthened these couples' partnerships' (p. 2). Again the need to fill a void is emphasized in Besner and Spungin's *Gay and Lesbian Students*. They state emphatically: 'The purpose of this book is to promote awareness of the problems encountered by gay and lesbian adolescents in the educational setting . . . ' (p. xii), a noble stand in pro-Section 28 (a British law which bans the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools) cultural times. In Stern's *Lesbian Health: What Are the Issues?* Patricia Stevens presents a comprehensive critical review of lesbian health-care research from 1970 to 1990 (Chapter 1), comprising more than 20 specifically lesbian research studies spanning these two decades. Interestingly, Stern's edited collection stems directly from being challenged about heterosexism at a New Zealand Women's Health congress ' . . . a striking young woman mounts the platform and

demands to know why we failed to include lesbian issues in the program' (p. xi). So, for many reasons, lesbians, lesbianism and sexuality are primary.

All of these texts engage with current feminist psychological debates – for example, the relative merits of essentialist/foundationalist thought and social constructionism, postmodernism and relativism. In *Sex and Sensibility* Stein acknowledges both camps in her sociological ethnographic-interactionist life history approach. In an attempt at synthesis, which she achieves by considering the complexity of her lesbian informants' accounts of their sexuality, she employs 'a deeper conception of self-construction' (p. 19) and argues that 'the process of becoming lesbian is not simply a matter of discovering or reclaiming that which is "inside". . . . Nor is it solely a matter of conforming to external social roles or of enacting a performance' (p. 20). In her chapter 'Lesbian/gay Studies in the House of Anthropology', Weston discusses similar debates from an anthropological perspective by considering the pursuit of an understanding of sexuality by traditional anthropologists (for example, Malinowski) from a realist/empiricist position, in her words 'flora-and-fauna accounts' (p. 11). She explores the historical trend towards cultural relativism, employing queer theory to chart this territory.

Another 'broader' theme (Weston, p. 26) theme – also much discussed in feminist psychology – is that of the relationship between researcher and researched, reflexivity and the nature of subjectivity and objectivity. Stein discusses methodological issues in an appendix (which miraculously results in the main body of the text being accessible, cogent and relatively jargon free). She reflects on her own role as a lesbian researcher and the conflictual identification with some participants over others, and the 'insider' yet 'outsider' dilemma which surfaces in much feminist research when taking women's accounts seriously. She writes, 'I knew that my study was motivated and indeed shaped by the fact that I identify as a lesbian' (p. 204), and goes on to comment that 'Just as feminist researchers are coming to recognise that "gender is not enough" . . . so too sharing a stigmatized sexual preference does not override other life contexts' (p. 205). As well as tapping into feminist debates, the nature of researchers' own identity status and the research process has surfaced recently in discussions at the first symposium of the new British Psychological Society's Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section (BPS London Conference, December 1998). Questions of whether heterosexuals can and/or should study lesbians and gay men parallel similar heterosexual feminist debates.

Weston develops these themes, in often more abstracted terms, in her section 'The Virtual Anthropologist'. Using chemistry as a metaphor, she explicates the hybrid (rather than compound) position of 'Native Ethnographer' (p. 189), the one who studies "'her own", she attracts, disturbs, disorders' (p. 189), and she discusses the challenges and challenging attributes of this ambiguous researcher position. Within academia, as well, she reflects on the position that many psychologists share when their open 'minority status' converges with their research interests:

Reactions to the threat posed by the hybridity of the Native Ethnographer may be couched as expressions of concern: 'Some people (not me, of course, I'm your friend) think that if we were to offer you a job here, you would become an advocate.' (Don't we all advocate for something?) Then there is the repetitive deployment of that thoroughly neutral category, 'fit', as in, 'We love your work, but you just wouldn't fit into this department.' (Ever wondered why?) (p. 191).

Her ironicizing account lucidly highlights the dilemmas and marginalization that ensue. Professional and personal marginalization has been well documented in feminist psychology (for example, Nicolson, 1992).

Epistemology, the nature of knowledge claims, is explored in many forms. These books show diversity, from 'scientific' positivist and empirical research exemplified by Stern and Besner and Spungin's applied texts, to subjective 'stories' about the nature of lesbian relationships in Hall. The audiences invoked are very different: the former a professional (and probably predominantly heterosexual) readership, the latter, the lesbian community. Sharon Deevey and Lana Wall (Stern, Chapter 9) provide a model describing factors which 'may determine how shaming social environments may affect drinking behaviour and recovery in lesbian women' (p. 109) in their chapter entitled 'How do Lesbian Women Develop Serenity?'. Other key issues for lesbians: heterosexism and homophobia in traditional health care; alcohol problems; stereotypes held of lesbians by health professionals; and difficulties accessing health services are also addressed. Besner and Spungin outline hormonal, chromosomal and brain effects (among others) in a discussion of the origins of homosexuality. Although traditional in approach, they also address 'debunking myths about homosexuality' (p. 11), providing empirical evidence to refute claims such as 'acting like a "sissy" or a "tomboy" causes homosexuality' (p. 16) and give practical advice in identifying and understanding the needs of gay and lesbian teenagers. Parenthetically, worthy of note is the step-by-step workshop model on homophobia for educators which they include as an appendix, and their (North American) resource list.

Hall's *The Lesbian Love Companion*, in contrast, has a self-help feel and is based on research undertaken with long-term lesbian couples motivated by Hall's personal/professional curiosity as a lesbian psychotherapist 'about their recipes for longevity' (p. 1). With ample extracts from professional practices and interviews Hall weaves together an accessible and often humorous story of lesbian coupledness, break-up, love and sex (plural), 'taming the green-eyed monster' ('Jealousy for Beginners', p. 120), and she mulls over the way of the storyteller. 'Even though therapists are second-rate sorcerers, they also rely on many stories: fables, called mental disorder. . . . And lesbian couples who aspire to storytell their way into story time need to know the forever-after and once-upon-a-time come in all shapes, sizes, and flavors' (pp. 220-1).

Weinstock and Rothblum's book tells a different tale of psychological research into friendship, friends as family, erotics in friendship, friendships across difference, personal stories, academic explorations and lesbian feminist politics. In *Lesbian Friendships: For Ourselves and Each Other* particular contributions (aside from the editors' contemplation of lesbians' friendships) stand out as scholarly or psychological in orientation or content: Jeanne Stanley's focus group exploration of 'The Lesbian's Experience of Friendship' (Chapter 3); Hilary Lapsley's portrait of the extraordinary friendship of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead (Chapter 5); Ruth Hall and Suzanna Rose's discussion of friendships between African-American and white lesbians (Chapter 12); and Cherie O'Boyle and Marie Thomas' multi-year investigation of friendships between lesbian and heterosexual women. These varied contributions, along with Celia Kitzinger's afterword on the politics of lesbian friendship, sit comfortably with many accessible personal testaments celebrating friendship. Often accounts reinvolve the well-worn feminist slogan 'the personal is political' in their tributes to friends and the lesbian community (for example, Linda Strega's lesbian

separatist 'A Lesbian Love Story', Chapter 22). Plurality of perspectives and ways of knowing friendship permeate the accounts here.

Diversity is also apparent in Stern's cohort of lesbian baby-boomers ('thirty-one subjects who were born between the years 1945 and 1961', p. 5) and her 10 interviewees who came to identify as lesbians later than the resurgence of early second-wave feminism. Stein's participants' 'self-stories' ('literally a story of and about the self in relation to an experience, in this case the development of a lesbian identity', p. 7) chart the creation of a lesbian feminist collective identity, the Lesbian Nation of the 1960s and 1970s, and document a 'decisive generation' (Marias, 1968, quoted in Stein, p. 14). Her excellently written account also gives consideration to historical change in the 1980s and 1990s. Critiquing the false universalism of the women's movement as challenged 'by women of color, and the rise of the "lipstick lesbian", it became more and more difficult to speak of one "lesbian community", one "lesbian world", and indeed one "feminism"' (p. 15). Stein paints a chronological picture of early lesbian feminism strongly rooted in the women's movement, through three women's stories about difference, desire and the self (Chapter 2) – 'Just the Way I Am' (p. 49), 'Coming Out through Feminism' (p. 53) and 'It's a Changeable Thing' (p. 57) – and ex-lesbians' reconstruction of identity (Chapter 6), to 'Seventies Questions for Nineties Women' and discussions of queer politics (Chapter 7). As a 1990s lesbian feminist/dyke/queer woman, the words of one of Stein's later cohort interviewees struck a chord with me:

I went through a period where I identified with 'sisterhood is powerful' and all . . . I think that there are some really positive things I can take from that. . . . When you read the literature from that period there are a lot of ways of being in the world, and not being in the world. And you fit the picture, or you don't. And that's a little too simplistic for me (p. 187).

The subtlety of perspectives and identities is also central for Weston, who intertwines nuanced analyses with hard-hitting polemics, in a lucid and highly engaging book. Although drawing primarily from the anthropological literature, her arguments are no less applicable to psychology as she 'stands against those who, in relegating scholarly treatments of sexuality to a passing fad, would wish to make it so' (p. 3). All these North American books, along with many others like them, such as Adria Schwartz's (1998) *Sexual Subjects: Lesbians, Gender and Psychoanalysis* or Martha Vicinus' (1996) *Lesbian Subjects*, show clearly that heterosexuality and heterosexual feminism is incomplete, partial and badly needs to take on these new developments: tokenism is not enough. Besner and Spungin, Hall, Stein, Stern, Weinstock and Rothblum and Weston all indicate that the margins of disciplines are diverse, innovative and challenging places to be, both for feminism and psychology. I look forward to similar proliferation and development (especially given the important academic forum provided by the BPS Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section), on this side of the Atlantic.

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ADDRESS: Elizabeth PEEL, Women's Studies Research Group, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK.
[email: E.A.Peel@lboro.ac.uk]