

# Sex, Gender, and Identity: A Response to Christine Overall

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on two issues which lurk behind much feminist discussion of ascriptions of sexual orientation: (1) the relation between sexual orientation and gender, and (2) the relations between ascriptions of sexual orientation and ascriptions of sexual identity. In particular, I argue that once we attend to the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual identity it becomes clear that the self-acknowledgement interpretation, at least for the sexual orientation lesbian, has the theoretical and empirical justification most consistent with a feminist perspective.

## RESUME

Dans cet article, nous nous concentrons sur deux questions qui reviennent dans beaucoup des débats féministes sur l'attribution de l'orientation sexuelle: (1) le rapport entre celle-ci et le genre, et (2) les rapports entre l'attribution de l'orientation sexuelle et celle de l'identité sexuelle. En particulier, nous indiquons que lorsque l'on s'intéresse à la distinction entre orientation sexuelle et identité sexuelle, il est clair que c'est dans l'interprétation de la reconnaissance de soi, au moins pour la lesbienne d'orientation sexuelle, que l'on trouve la justification théorique et empirique qui est la plus compatible avec une perspective féministe.

Am I lesbian? Is it political cowardice that makes us heterosexuals? Do bisexuals exist? Does my sexual orientation tell you who I really am? Christine Overall's paper begins for us an unusual course in orienteering—personal and political orienteering in the hazardous but fascinating terrain of sexuality.

As with the rest of us, Overall's initial interest is in the ontological and epistemological questions, "What is a lesbian (a heterosexual, a bisexual)?" and "How would I know if I or anyone else was one?". She observes that the fundamental question seems to be a conceptual one, "What is *meant* or might be meant by saying that someone is a lesbian (a heterosexual, a bisexual)?" However, Overall also astutely notices that, in this case, the question of meaning is not a "simple matter of definition" for feminists. She underlines Adrienne Rich's remark "the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action." In a word, "What is a lesbian?" is a political question.

Overall explores current theories about the meanings of ascriptions of sexual orientations as a route to understanding their ethical, ontological and political underpinnings. In the end, without completely settling the question, her aim is "to contribute to ways of interpreting ascriptions of sexual orientation which have some theoretical and

empirical justification consistent with a feminist perspective." That, too, is my aim as I join her in the enterprise of assessing alternative interpretations of ascriptions of sexual orientation. I propose to contribute to the conversation she has initiated as an unabashed enthusiast for one of the interpretations she rejects.

In my commentary I will discuss two issues which lurk behind much feminist discussion of ascriptions of sexual orientation:

- (1) the relation between sexual orientation and gender; and
- (2) the relation between ascriptions of sexual orientation and ascriptions of sexual identity.

## The Relation Between Sexual Orientation and Gender

Early in her paper, Overall argues for the importance of distinguishing sexual orientation from both biological sex and gender. She is initially concerned with rejecting historical clinical definitions which conflated sexual orientation and gender so that

A heterosexual woman was thought to be a woman who assumed the appropriate gender role as a feminine woman; a lesbian was a woman who rejected her gender role, and wanted to be male.<sup>1</sup>

She observes, as does Marilyn Frye, that still the popular image of the lesbian is that of a woman who does not fit the patterns of gender imposed on the sexes. Rather, "She is seen as a female who is not feminine...."<sup>2</sup>

Overall notes that these connotations of the term "lesbian" are still used to denigrate lesbian women and to keep heterosexual women in their place. Thus she urges,

Only persistent feminist criticism can help to make it clear that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are not inextricably linked; that gender and sexual orientation may vary independently of one another and that stereotyping by gender or sexual orientation is morally opprobrious.

It is clear what Overall has in mind. Not all lesbians are women who are masculine or want to be male. Empirical research bears her out on this point.<sup>3</sup>

I share Overall's concern to reject inaccurate historical clinical definitions and to reject stereotypes associated with sexual orientations. However, I think it useful to separately address the two issues involved in her discussion. Does lesbianism involve gender deviance? How should we evaluate it if it does?

The fact that not all lesbians exhibit certain forms of gender deviance such as masculine behavior or the desire to be male is insufficient reason to reject the claim that lesbianism involves gender deviance. There is a variety of forms of gender deviance which might be involved. We can distinguish at least two broad categories of gender deviance: gender-identity deviance and gender-role deviance. Gender identity is, loosely speaking, one's sense of oneself as a woman or a man, a girl or a boy.<sup>4</sup> Gender-identity deviance for a woman might consist of not thinking of oneself as a woman, or not wanting to be a woman; but, this need not entail wanting to be a man. Gender-role deviance would consist of rejecting feminine attitudes, behavior, or appearance which are associated with gender role for women.

Examples of gender-role deviance for white, middle class women in this culture might include refusing to make oneself attractive to men, showing no interest in nurturance, advocating that women should hold the highest positions of authority in our social institutions, or initiating sexual relations with women. Notice that one can exhibit gender-role deviance as a woman and still not be masculine in appearance nor want to be a man. Certainly desiring to have, or having sexual relations with

women is, in this culture, clearly gender deviant for women.

The question of the valuation of lesbianism needs to be distinguished from the question of gender deviance. Many contemporary lesbians understand lesbianism to involve gender deviance, both gender-identity deviance and gender-role deviance, but they value it positively. Indeed, they often use their gender deviance as a prod or challenge to heterosexual women to question their own identification with the (male-constructed) gender woman, and with the gender role prescribed for women.<sup>5</sup> Consider Jeffner Allen's proud remark:

I break with reproductive memory. I no longer claim to be woman, the counter part of man, she who is possessed by men. *I posit my own freedom. I place myself with all who would be women no longer: lesbians.*<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not a lesbian sexual orientation can or should be interpreted as involving gender deviance depends upon the meaning of the term "woman" in a given culture, and upon the understanding of the role prescribed for women as women. In short, it depends upon the interpretation of the gender woman, and the gender role for women. This is telling and directs our attention to one of Overall's fundamental assertions, the claim that there is not an inextricable link between gender, sex and sexual orientation.

Contra Overall, I think there is an inextricable link between gender and the sexual orientation lesbian. If there were not, one could plausibly say that someone could be a lesbian and a man; or, when we say of someone that the person is a lesbian, we should not know, from that ascription alone, whether the person is male or female. All the viable different interpretations of lesbian have one thing in common: the individual to whom the sexual orientation is ascribed is a woman. Consider: a lesbian is a woman who wants to be a man; a lesbian is a woman who has sexual relations with other women; a lesbian is a woman who has erotic feelings for women; a lesbian is a woman who has certain political commitments to women.

There is an interesting asymmetry between lesbian sexual orientation and other sexual orientations in this regard. In ascribing the sexual orientation lesbian to someone, we also thereby ascribe the gender *woman* to her. No other ascription of a sexual orientation involves the ascription of a particular gender. In ascribing the sexual orientation heterosexual or bisexual, we do not thereby ascribe a gender. The sexual orientation *homo-*

*sexual* is somewhat ambiguous because the term homosexual, like the term man, has been used in a generic sense. In knowing that someone is homosexual, we can not be sure from that description alone that s/he is male, though we would likely think so.

Thus, the sexual orientation *lesbian* is unique among sexual orientations in that it is inextricably linked with gender.<sup>7</sup> The fact that this sexual orientation alone involves a gender ascription lends some plausibility to the gender deviance interpretation. In this one case, at least, the historical connection between sexual orientation and gender is not spurious.

### Sexual Orientation and Sexual Identity

Much of Overall's attention is devoted to a consideration of two other interpretations of the sexual orientation lesbian, interpretations which arise in contemporary debate of two questions. Should the ascription of the sexual orientation lesbian have something to do with sexuality or can one define a lesbian solely in terms of her political commitments to women? Should the term lesbian be interpreted in such a way that self-acknowledgement is part of the meaning of the ascription "She's a lesbian?"

In her discussion of these questions Overall argues for what I shall call the erotic interpretation; she claims that the term lesbian ought to keep its connections with sexuality. She argues against what I shall call the self-acknowledgement interpretation. We can allow that identifying oneself as a lesbian is a sufficient condition for being a lesbian, but, Overall contends, self-acknowledgement cannot be a necessary condition.

Given her conviction that the question, "What is a lesbian?" is a political question, I confess to a certain surprise at Overall's rejection of the self-acknowledgement interpretation since it seems to better suit her own declared feminist political perspective and feminist goals than the alternative. I propose to argue that her dismissal of the self-acknowledgement interpretation is too hasty, that it is based on a misinterpretation and possible ignorance of the consequences of the rejection of this view for our ascriptions of sexual identity.

Overall considers the self-acknowledgement interpretation as it is advanced in the debate between Adrienne Rich and Ann Ferguson. Ferguson claims that "It is not meaningful to conjecture that someone is a lesbian who refuses to acknowledge herself as such."<sup>8</sup> She also urges the significance of making this choice of sexual orientation within

the context of community. As Overall sees it, the view under consideration is one that holds that

an individual cannot be said to have a sexual identity or orientation without the presence of a community of others who think of themselves as having that identity.

Overall rejects the view which would make self-conscious choice within the content of a self-conscious community a necessary condition of the ascription of the sexual orientation lesbian. Her arguments seem reasonable enough. She contends that the view would: (1) leave us with the complicated problem of determining which comes first—self-defined lesbians or a lesbian community; and (2) it would entail the implausible consequence that we would have to say that prior to the late eighteenth century lesbians or heterosexuals did not exist. She further claims that, pace Ferguson, we can think of counter examples, cases in which it is meaningful to say that someone is a lesbian who has not acknowledged herself as such. Overall offers us such a counter example—"She's a real closet case herself."<sup>9</sup>

Overall's observations about Ann Ferguson's view concerning the ascription of the sexual orientation lesbian are somewhat persuasive until one recognizes that Overall and Ferguson are speaking about different uses of the term "lesbian." Overall is wanting to reject self-acknowledgement as a necessary condition of the ascription of the sexual *orientation* lesbian while Ferguson is arguing for self-acknowledgement as a necessary condition of the ascription of the sexual *identity* lesbian.

I am reluctant to accept Overall's arguments because I think what Ferguson says is correct, if we are talking about ascribing a sexual identity to someone. The truth of her observation lies with the notion of what it is to have an identity. It implies a self-consciousness. Given what Overall thinks is implied in having an orientation, it is possible to have a sexual orientation without a similar sort of self-consciousness.

Following Marilyn Frye, Overall claims that an orientation is "a focus of attention; the focus of one's alignment, bearings and inclinations in life." This may suggest that an orientation involves a consciousness, perhaps even a choice about how one directs one's attention. However, Overall deliberately chooses the word "orientation" in order not to beg any questions about the possibility of choosing one's sexual orientation. Thus, she points out that "orientation" has the negative connotations of being "one's adjustment, adaptation, accommodation, habitua-

tion and conditioning in life." Agreeing with Adrienne Rich, she pointedly claims that an orientation can be something that is, or has to be, "imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, maintained by force."

Thus, it is abundantly clear that a sexual orientation is something one can have unconsciously. It is something that need not involve any self-awareness and there need not be others with the same orientation. It is not plausible to say this of one's identity. As Sartre remarks:

What confers personal existence on a being is not the possession of an ego—which is only the sign of personality—but it is the fact that the being exists for itself.<sup>10</sup>

This feature of identity does not preclude there being aspects of identity that are a result of conditioning and habituation. It is to take note that, in some important sense, who we are is how we respond to what we are.

The point of this discussion of the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual identity is this: once the distinction is clearly drawn, we realize that we cannot conflate the two notions and we cannot use the terms "sexual orientation" and "sexual identity" interchangeably. More significantly, we cannot both reject the self-acknowledgement interpretation and presume that ascriptions of sexual orientation are linked with or interchangeable with ascriptions of sexual identity. Indeed, failure to realize this point may be the cause of much of the acrimonious disagreement about ascriptions of sexual orientation that Overall finds morally objectionable.

If we think that sexual orientation can be unconscious and can be given an interpretation which has no reference to an individual's sense of herself, then we are bound to run into trouble if it is also presumed that in ascribing a sexual orientation to others we are also, thereby, ascribing to them a sexual identity. Our identities are very much tied up with who we think we are and any ascription of an identity which fails to take account of what we think is involved in our identity will provoke anger, resentment, and charges of serious misunderstanding.<sup>11</sup>

So now we must ask the question directly. Should we interpret ascriptions of sexual orientation so that they are (or can be) linked with ascriptions of sexual identity? What considerations can be advanced that would help us decide?

We should first note that the problem is immensely complicated by the fact that there is already a clear asym-

metry between first and third person ascriptions of sexual orientation. First person ascriptions of sexual orientation, "I am a lesbian," entail ascriptions of sexual identity. Third person ascriptions of sexual orientation, "She is a lesbian," are assumed to be interchangeable with ascriptions of sexual identity in their paradigmatic uses. However, third person ascriptions of sexual orientation *need not* be so interpreted. If we do not interpret them as ascriptions of sexual identity, we will fly in the face of conventional practice and the question then arises as to whether we can then be saying anything important about an individual when we say "She is a lesbian" or "She's a heterosexual."

I am not at all certain what Overall's answer would be to the direct question, "Should we interpret ascriptions of sexual orientation as ascriptions of sexual identity?" There are hints that she might not want to try to make them align for she minimizes the significance of assertions about our sexuality as claims about our identity. She also insists that in declaring of someone, "She's a real closet case herself," we are saying something important about her.

Trying to guess at her answer to the direct question is not a simple matter nor useful, for I suspect that Overall is not wholly aware of the available alternative views concerning the connections between sexual orientations and sexual identity. In her defense of the erotic interpretation of the sexual orientation lesbian, she strongly urges that we reject an essentialist view of sexuality that is sometimes associated with that interpretation. Her rejection of essentialism entails tacit assumptions about the relation between sexuality and identity, as well as assumptions about the relation between biological determination of sexuality and choice of sexual orientation. These assumptions, unfortunately, effectively camouflage defensible alternative interpretations of the connections between ascriptions of sexual orientation and ascriptions of sexual identity. Only if we are fully cognizant of available alternative views can we offer a considered answer to the direct question.

I mentioned previously that Overall's rejection of the self-acknowledgement interpretation is surprising given her feminist political perspective. Specifically, given her suggestion that our definition of the term "lesbian" should be interpreted in terms of a woman's erotic feelings and from "an internal, not an external perspective," that is, from the point of view of a woman's perspective on her own erotic feelings. It is also surprising given Overall's own defense of the positive evaluation that can be (or should be) associated with the sexual orientations heterosexuality and bisexuality.

Overall argues that with respect to all sexual orientations we have a choice, in the sense that we can take responsibility for our sexual orientation. She urges that we acknowledge this possibility, encourage people to exercise it, and value the transcendence the exercise of this responsibility makes possible. Clearly, we might expect her to consistently and strongly support the self-acknowledgement interpretation of sexual orientation, but she rejects it. I suspect it is because she tacitly assumes that if we adopt the view that sexual orientation holds the key to who or what we are, then we must adopt some form of essentialist view of sexuality. An essentialist's view of sexuality is something she clearly wants to reject.

In her argument for the erotic interpretation Overall urges that we understand an ascription of the sexual orientation lesbian to entail an ascription of erotic feeling to a woman. However, she also warns us that if we do adopt this interpretation,

It is important to avoid an essentialist's view of sexuality: in this case, the view that what we feel is the key to who or what we really are.

Overall is insistent on this point. She contends that "sexuality is socially constructed; a social not a biological phenomenon." Admittedly, our sexuality may be experienced as "natural and inherent"; nevertheless, she claims that "sexual desire and attraction are as much cultural artifacts as are gender roles." Hence, she reiterates her claim that "erotic feeling should not be understood as being revelatory of what one really is," and more specifically:

Our search for meanings of ascriptions of sexual orientation ought not to imply a search for a fixed sexual essence of nature that lies buried beneath layers of social ordering in each of us.

Again, in defending her rejection of the self-acknowledgement interpretation she says of her counter example, "She's a real closet case herself":

Such an ascription does not lay claim to revealing the woman's inner essence of "true identity." It is not making a metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality....

From these passages it appears as though Overall is tacitly assuming that if we hold that sexual orientation or erotic feeling is the key to who or what we are, then we must hold that there is "a fixed sexual essence of nature that lies buried beneath layers of social ordering in each of us." These passages confound a number of separable issues:

- (1) nature *vs.* nurture, or biological *vs.* cultural determination of sexuality;
- (2) whether or not we have some choice about our sexuality in a casual sense (as opposed to the sense in which we can take responsibility for it);
- (3) whether, or to what extent, our sexuality is fixed or reversible;
- (4) whether, or to what extent, sexuality is central to our identity; and
- (5) whether what is revelatory of who we really are must be something that is fixed, immutable, natural.

Because these issues are conflated, there are a variety of possibilities that are ignored or camouflaged:<sup>12</sup>

- (1) that sexuality is culturally mediated and plays a central role in our identity (such that I can say that my erotic feelings do indicate who I really am);
- (2) that sexuality is a fixed biologically given nature and yet it plays little role in our identity;
- (3) that our sexuality is socially constructed (learned) and fixed (we might say in Overall's terms, a fixed sexual essence that lies buried in our layers of social ordering); and finally
- (4) that sexuality is biologically determined and culturally mediated, with parts of it fixed and parts of it not, and it still plays a central role in our identity.

Thus, I would argue, contrary to Overall's tacit assumption, that we can interpret ascriptions of sexual orientation in terms of erotic feelings and also claim that such ascriptions are, or may be, revelatory of who we really are. In short, I would claim that ascriptions of sexual orientation, interpreted in terms of our erotic feelings, may be ascriptions of sexual identity even though sexuality is (primarily) a cultural construct. There is a possibility that Overall seems not to see. We can accept the erotic interpretation, accept the self-acknowledgement interpretation and so have ascriptions of sexual orientation align with ascriptions of sexual identity, and still reject essentialism.

My own view is that our sexuality is probably biologically determined to some extent, and certainly culturally mediated. I suspect that some aspects of it are fixed and some are not. I think that, for some people, sexuality is a central part of their identity, and for others it is not.<sup>13</sup> The

point I am concerned to make in this commentary is that for many people, and perhaps especially for women, sexual orientation should not be viewed as easily separable from sexual identity.

### **Feminist Political Considerations for Adopting the Self-Acknowledgement Interpretation**

Overall insightfully recognizes that political considerations play a role in determining definitions. She herself offers clearly political reasons for maintaining the link between the term “lesbian” and sexuality. I offer the following empirical and political considerations consistent with a feminist perspective for adopting the self-acknowledgement interpretation of the sexual orientation lesbian.

First, an argument which should have special appeal for Overall. The self-acknowledgement interpretation best meets Overall’s wish to construct the meaning of the ascriptions of sexual orientation from a woman’s perspective on her own erotic feelings. If we reject the self-acknowledgement interpretation, we must give up the claim to be adopting an “internal perspective,” the perspective Overall, for good reasons, wanted to take initially.

The best reason, for all of us, to adopt this interpretation is that it would maximize the opportunity for women to define their own sexuality, to define themselves. Historically, women and their experience have been compulsively sexualized by men. The power of naming has belonged to men and as a consequence women have had little or no opportunity to know their own sexuality. We have had little or no opportunity to be self-determining in matters sexual. The adoption of the self-acknowledgement interpretation shifts the power of naming to the individual herself. Instead of labeling, we have requests for information. The opportunities for others to arrogate our identity are thereby reduced.

The self-acknowledgement interpretation has further benefits. It emphasizes that we can take responsibility for our sexuality, for our sexual orientation, and it directs our attention to this fact. Our assertions of sexual orientation are no longer presumed to occur in a context of discrimination or an investigation of pathology. The self-acknowledgement interpretation shifts our attention from the question of how one becomes a lesbian and places it on the sense in which we are, or can be, responsible for who we are. This shift in emphasis is cryptically noted by one young lesbian who, when asked about her sexual orientation, replied,

The question is not, Why am I gay? That’s like asking why am I smart?—The question is, What am I going to do about it?<sup>14</sup>

There is, in addition, an argument for the self-acknowledgement interpretation that can be made on the basis of empirical considerations concerning women’s reality. Overall correctly notes one kind of mistake that has been made in the past in interpretations of sexual orientation—the mistake of assuming that one’s sexual identity is the whole of one’s identity. She rightly rejects this assumption. However, there is another error that can occur in interpreting ascriptions of sexual orientation—the mistake of assuming that the whole of one’s identity has nothing to do with one’s sexual identity and, by extension, one’s sexual orientation. There is good reason to believe that our sexuality is significantly mediated by our gender, race, class, and culture, as well as by our own previous sexual history. As a consequence, we cannot define an individual’s sexual orientation, understanding it to be part of their identity, in isolation from their gender, race, class and culture because, as Vicky Spelman says, “Our identities just aren’t constructed and lived in that way.”<sup>15</sup> This seems especially true for women.

From what we know about women’s sexuality and their identity, in this culture, the self-acknowledgement interpretation of sexual orientation seems the most appropriate. The relevant and significant facts about the sexuality and identity of women we have studied are these:<sup>16</sup>

- (1) women’s sexuality is fluid and labile;
- (2) women’s sexuality is highly contextualized, that is, women experience their sexuality within the context of relationships and interpret their sexuality in terms of intimacy; that is, women’s sexuality is not easily separable from other aspects of their identity;
- (3) women’s identity is highly contextualized; that is, it is understood in terms of their relations with others.

It seems clear that women’s sexuality, especially, is not easily separable from other aspects of their identity. We can ascribe sexual orientation to women on the basis of their sexual activity or in terms of their erotic feelings, but research suggests that this is not how women themselves understand their own sexual orientation. Men, it seems, do use these same criteria to self-ascribe a sexual orientation, but not women.<sup>17</sup> Thus, we may need to differentiate interpretations of ascriptions of sexual orientation with respect to gender. Ascriptions of sexual orientation to women, to the extent that they are to align with ascrip-

tions of sexual identity, are a matter of enormous complexity. This complexity is best incorporated into our interpretations of ascriptions of sexual orientation through the condition of self-acknowledgement.

Given the contextualization of women's sexuality and their identity, we want to avoid situations which, as Jan Morris poignantly remarks, "I had no identity because I was not to others what I was to myself."<sup>18</sup>

In general, in matters of human concern, we should struggle to reduce the circumstances in which persons are not to others what they are to themselves. We should endeavor to maximize the opportunities to have persons themselves tell us who or what they are. Adopting the self-acknowledgement interpretation would allow this and, thereby, also reduce the mutual name-calling and disagreements that we all find somewhat objectionable.

Overall adopts the erotic interpretation of the sexual orientation lesbian because she rightly recognizes that the explicit acknowledgement of sexuality between women poses a serious challenge to the patriarchy and acknowledges the importance of the movement for sexual liberation for women. These same reasons underwrite the adoption of the self-acknowledgement interpretation of sexual orientations. I can imagine no greater challenge to the patriarchy than to have women themselves tell us what their sexual nature is. If one cares about the movement for sexual liberation, what more genuine sexual liberation is conceivable than to have the opportunity, and responsibility, to determine one's own sexual self-definition, to be *expected* to determine one's own sexual self-definition.

The last, and final, argument for the adoption of the self-acknowledgement interpretation is a simple one. There are no good reasons for persons ascribing non self-acknowledged sexual orientations to others.<sup>19</sup> As Florence Kennedy once remarked with respect to gender, "Why do they want to know? So they can discriminate?"

There are, as I have suggested, many good reasons for letting people themselves decide who or what they are.

#### NOTES

This essay has benefited from my discussions with Ann Diller and Barbara Brockelman.

1. Adrienne Rich. "It Is the Lesbian in Us..." in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979, p. 202.
2. Marilyn Frye. "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement: Another View of Male Supremacy, Another Separatism," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983, p. 129.

3. For an interesting summary of the literature on this question and an excellent critical review of the literature on lesbian adolescent development, see Elizabeth Brooks Heron, "Lesbian Adolescence: A Review of the Literature," unpublished Qualifying Paper submitted to Harvard University, 1983.
4. For a fuller discussion of the distinctions captured by the terms "gender identity," "core gender identity," and "gender-role identity," as well as "gender role," see Maryann Ayim and Barbara Houston, "The Epistemology of Gender Identity: Implications for Social Policy," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1985.
5. A clear and painful account of how this occurs can be found in Julia Penelope, "The Mystery of Lesbians," a two-part article printed in *Lesbian Ethics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 and No. 2, 1984, 1985.
6. Jeffner Allen. *Lesbian Philosophy: Explorations*. Palo Alto, California: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1986, p. 22, original italics.
7. There is a complication that I have ignored here. One might argue that the term "lesbian" is inextricably linked not with gender but with biological sex. It could be contended that a lesbian is not a woman, but a female. I think we can safely ignore the complication because my sense is that we only resort to this assertion if someone has changed their gender. For example, do we call René Richards (a noted "male to constructed-female" transsexual) a lesbian if she now has sexual relations with women? She has changed her gender from man to woman. If we acknowledge that a lesbian is someone of the gender woman, then we will call her a lesbian. However, if we feel reluctant to call her a lesbian, we may want to claim that a lesbian is not a woman but a female, and thus René Richards cannot be a lesbian simply by virtue of changing her gender. However, has she changed her gender or her sex; or has she changed both?

If we want to address this complication, we may put the point this way. The sexual orientation lesbian is inextricably tied to either biological sex or gender. In either case, we still have reason to query Overall's claim that "sex, gender, and sexual orientation are not inextricably linked." One or the other of gender or biological sex is inextricably linked to the sexual orientation lesbian.

8. Ann Ferguson. "Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution" in Nannerl O. Koehane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Barbara C. Gelpi, editors. *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 154.
9. Overall also objects to Ferguson's view on the grounds that it would sever the connection between eroticism and lesbianism. I am not persuaded of this, but it is somewhat beside the point to argue the issue here; hence, I have omitted this further argument of Overall's.
10. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by H. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
11. See Julia Penelope, "The Mystery of Lesbians," for illuminations of this point.
12. My grasping of the confounding of these several different issues was aided by my reading of Jean Kennard's extremely interesting paper, "Ourself behind Ourselves: A Theory for Lesbian Readers," in Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocino Schweickart, editors. *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 63-80.
13. My views on this matter are influenced by and similar to those expressed by Ethel Spector Person in "Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives," in Catharine Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person, editors. *Women: Sex and Sexuality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 36-61.

Consider the following poignant statement of a male homosexual which clearly indicates that for him, his sexuality is absolutely central to his identity. "If my homosexuality is wrong, the fact of my being is wrong. Because that's what I am." This quotation occurs in an article in *The Boston Globe*, September 16, 1986, on Carol Lynn Pearson's book, *Goodbye, I Love You*, published by Random House.

