UTILISING A SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

On its own, mainstream sociological thought is inadequate because there is an implicit denial of the lesbian community as a community.

Though foundational to the formation of Sociology, the theories of Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel are inadequate when describing that which lies outside of normative concepts of gender. An overall focus on the heteropatriarchal family in sociological study, in addition to the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis (Millett 1970) on the sociological schools in the United States, leads to heterosexist definitions of community.

Post-1900 sociological definitions of community become gender-dependent when conceived of mainstream (or male stream) sociological thought. For an examination of lesbian community, a view focused on the image of the 1950s nuclear family would lead to warped interpretations of community structure.

REFERENCES

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THE DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS (DOB)

The DOB formed in 1955 and published The Ladder. Historically grouped with male homophile organisations, including the Mattachine Society and One, Inc., the DOB initially sought integrationist strategies, minimising the publicly perceived difference between lesbians and straight women, before allying ‘with the militant segment of the homophile movement’ in the 1960s (Esterberg 1994, pp.426-427). In the context of homosexual and communist persecution of the McCarthy Era (Esterberg 1994 and Schultz 2001) it was perhaps necessary for the DOB to ‘sacrifice’ lesbian sexuality to protect its members’ (Schultz 2001, p.385). While the actions of Homophile organisations seem lack-lustre in comparison to their successors in the gay civil rights movement, groups like the DOB and their publications show substantial proof of community formation around a readership.

GROUPS FORMED AFTER 1960

Radicalesbians (1970-1971): published The Woman Identified Woman. 1970. They argued that women (and lesbians) needed to free themselves through looking within the self, and not through internalised male culture.


Redstockings (1969 – Present): radical feminist group. Believe women are an oppressed class, regardless of racial background. Believe male supremacy was the root of all forms of oppression. Women do not need to change, but men do.


COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

Adrienne Rich’s oft-mentioned article ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1980) highlights the dire need for feminist theorists to incorporate lesbian experience in their attempts to question and counter-act patriarchy. ‘Compulsory heterosexuality’ not only creates bias within mainstream (or ‘malestream’) sociology, but also inflicts feminist theory that questions it. Just as mainstream sociological theory has a history of ignoring feminist theory (Chaftez, 1997), so too does feminist theory have a history of ignoring or misappropriating lesbian experience.

CONCLUSIONS

The definition of community need not adhere to the confines of geographical space. Epistolary contact and mass-produced publication allowed individuals (lesbians) to be part of a community; though physically separated, print culture allowed for emotionally fulfilling connections between lesbians to be formed. Through the theories of feminist groups in the 1970s, community has come to mean: a network of individuals who provide emotional guidance and support for others; a group that helps the individual feel less isolated and alone in the face of adversity. This community operates on notions of equality and egalitarian relationships. Using this definition, I will be able to conduct further textual analysis of the portrayal of lesbian community and the characterization of lesbian identity in my primary texts; I will be able to investigate the function of space (or lack of space) in lesbian pulp fiction and other lesbian narratives disseminated in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s.