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**“QUEER IS A STATE OF MIND”**

**IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS OF SELF-IDENTIFIED QUEER PEOPLE  
IN RELATION TO LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

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## **Abstract**

'Queer' can refer to a noun, adjective, verb and adverb (Giffney, 2009). Although in the English-speaking world probably most known as derogatory term for (mainly) gay men, 'queer' has been used in numerous ways. Associated with a U.S. and UK queer movement, it has been a reclaimed term signalling a politics radically different from 'mainstream' lesbian and gay politics. Furthermore, it has made its way into academics under the umbrella of 'queer theory' which aim is said "to make theory queer, not just to have a theory about queers" (Warner, 1993: xxvi). However, a relative neglect becomes apparent when reading into all these stories about queer; namely regarding those people who (nowadays) claim a queer identity. Though sociology has taken up queer theory's 'challenges', and sometimes adds the 'Q' onto the more well-known abbreviation of LGBT; a gap in empirical research exists regarding self-identified queer people. This dissertation explores 'queer' through the eyes of self-identified queer people by asking how they construct their identities in relation to lived experiences of gender and sexuality. A theoretical background lays out queer's multiple meanings, or status as 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie, 1956), and provides a background to how 'queer' has been approached in both queer theory and sociology. Following the cross-sectional research design of this study; fourteen face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out with people self-identified as queer. A central aspect of the methodology is a focus on how participants gave meaning to their identification, and narrated 'difference' in their stories, in relation to lived experiences of gender and sexuality. The data-analysis made visible the way participants gave meaning to their queer identification, through a refusal of stable 'boxes' and through accounts of queer 'freedom'. Furthermore, the relational aspects of queer are stressed; both with regards to other labels or terms, with regard to coming to a queer self-understanding, and in differentiating between queer and non-queer spaces and scenes. Some frictions around social norms within the queer community, as well as critiques regarding its potential for political and social change question the 'radical' potential of queer; as addressed in the conclusion.

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## Introduction

“Queer is a word, it’s just a word, [it depends on] what we make out of it”, answered one of the participants (Cem<sup>1</sup>) in this study when asked to elaborate on what queer means to him. Indeed, ‘queer’ has been used in different ways and thus numerous stories can be told about its meaning. Firstly, it could be told how it has been used in the queer political movement taking shape from around the late eighties of the last century, by ‘members’ of groups as Queer Nation (Slagle, 1995). However, it can also be noted how ‘queer’ has been embraced by gay men before that time (Chauncey, 1994), how gay and lesbian people have used it to challenge ‘mainstream’ gay politics (Warner, 1993), or how – amongst others – bisexual and transgender people have used queer to claim inclusion into gay and lesbian communities and politics (Giffney, 2009). Secondly, it can be told how ‘queer’ came to be known in academia as queer studies or ‘queer theory’: an umbrella term for an enormous and important body of work (Corber & Vallochi, 2003). Part of this story would be to reference its key texts (e.g. Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990), and to note how most of these were written before the term ‘queer theory’ was coined by de Lauretis (1991); who later distanced herself from it by stating that it had become “a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry” (1994: 296). Furthermore, it can be told how sociological insights are sometimes intertwined with queer theory, as well as how queer theoretical challenges have been accounted for in sociology; resulting in new approaches around ‘queer sociology’ (Gamson & Moon, 2004). However, a striking absence in all of these (partial) stories around queer is an account of how people affirming a queer identity nowadays give meaning to this word.

This absence, whereby queers or queer people are mentioned but their lives and experiences, including the (multiple) ways in which they use ‘queer’, are often left unexamined, might seem curious but is understandable in light of queer theory’s project to disrupt identity categories (Seidman, 1995). Or, as Edelman states, “queerness can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one” (2004: 17). Nevertheless, sufficient evidence exists that people are taking on queer as identity; sometimes only noticed when researchers actively recruit queer identified individuals (Levy & Johnson, 2011) or when researchers’ focus on LGBT people is challenged by participants claiming a queer identity (Binnie & Klesse, 2012). The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to filling this gap in research, by analysing how queer people themselves construct their identity; why they

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<sup>1</sup> All names of participants have been changed.

identify as queer, what queer means to them, and how 'being' queer might be different from identifying as LGBT, straight, female, male or else. In other words, the purpose of this study is to answer the question that Cem's statement triggers; namely, what do queer people make out of this word? Or, more specifically:

How do people who self-identify as queer construct their identities in relation to (their lived experiences of) gender and sexuality?

Understanding how queer people construct their identities allows for deeper insights into what it means to be 'queer' and how gender and sexuality, possibly among other 'intersections', are narrated through and intertwined with (coming to) a queer self-understanding. Thus, rather than being drawn back by the "uncertainty of working with a population" whose identities have no fixed definitions (Levy & Johnson, 2011: 135), the purpose of this research is examining and understanding how the – according to the latter authors – increasing number of people identifying as queer give meaning to their identity in relation to lived experiences of gender and sexuality.

Chapter 1 provides a literature review both as background to this study as well as to inform the course of this project. Section 1.1 and 1.2 will firstly explore queer as 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie, 1956). By addressing its multiple meanings and usages, the centrality of gender and sexual meanings in this concept will become clear. Secondly, the ways in which queer has been approached in academia, with a focus on queer theory and sociology, will be outlined in section 1.3 and 1.4 to signal gaps in research. This in turn underscores the need for explorative empirical work on queer people's identification in relation to gender and sexuality. Chapter 2 will outline the methodology used in this dissertation, after shortly (re)stating the most important aims as derived from the literature review. Section 2.1 will briefly explore some theoretical commitments guiding the empirical research, before turning to the research design of this study in section 2.2. Section 2.3 will outline the way in which data collection was carried out, after which the process of data analysis will be addressed in section 2.4. Chapter 3 consists of the empirical part of this project, and will explore the several ways in which people's gender and sexuality are connected to their queer identification. Themes around queer meanings (section 3.1 and 3.2) will be followed by an analysis of themes around queer as anti-identity (section 3.3 and 3.4), while some queer frictions, apparent in participant's narratives around queer identification; will be outlined in section 3.5. Finally, the conclusion will draw these themes

together and answer the research question by pointing to the main insights of this research project. In addition, some frictions and possible limitation of queer as (anti) identity will be discussed.



## **Chapter 1: Literature review**

In this chapter, a narrative review of the literature (Jones, 2004) will be conducted in order to achieve a couple of aims. Firstly, different meanings and usages of the term queer will be explored in section 1.1 to get a grasp of what is already known in the area of queer subjects and their identity 'constructions'. As will be shown, queer is a shifting term with multiple meanings that simultaneously exists in society. Indeed, it could be argued that the term queer is an essentially contested concept "the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie, 1956: 169). This notion recognises the lack of an *inherent* meaning of the term queer, though it could be debated whether or not (disputes around) 'queer' consists of all seven of Gallie's (1956) features of essentially contested concepts. Furthermore, queer is not only an ambiguous concept entailing multiple meanings, but it is often used "against other uses" (idem: 172). Critiques voiced regarding one or more of queer's (changing) usages will be explored in section 1.2, to reveal some of the term's frictions as well as its multiple meanings; since different usages are relational and critiques on (other) usages inevitably shape the term's meaning. Secondly, it will be explored how queer subjects and meanings have been taken up in research to put this project in an academic context. As will be shown, queer has been approached quite differently in relevant academic disciplines. Queer theory, as originally within the realm of cultural and literary studies, as well as philosophy, arguably pays limited attention to 'queer' subjects and their lived experiences (Seidman, 1997). Moreover, the discipline of sociology has a longer tradition in the more empirical field of gender and sexuality studies, including those lived experiences, but has also in some ways omitted the 'queer' subject in favour of (mainly) lesbian and gay subjects. Section 1.3 and 1.4 will review literature and research in both of these fields, to show how queer has been approached in these two broad disciplines and to signal gaps in research informing the course of this project.

### **1.1. Queer meanings**

To answer the question as to how queer people construct their identities, it is helpful to explore the different meanings of the term 'queer' in both (western) society and academia. Though in this section the focus will lie on the former, it must be pointed out that the way

in which queer has been taken up in society in general and in queer politics in particular, is often related to its use in academics (Epstein, 1996; Seidman, 1993).

The usage of the term queer in the English language dates back to the fourteenth century when queer was used as a verb meaning 'to ask, inquire, question' (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). From the beginning of the sixteenth century it was used as adjective; meaning in one sense 'bad, contemptible, worthless' and in another 'strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric'. In today's English Oxford Dictionary parts of the latter definition are still listed (Stevenson, 2010). However, at the beginning of the twentieth century queer also became to be used as a derogatory term for (primarily) gay men and/or effeminacy (Callis, 2012). Only at the end of the 1980s then, queer was 'taken up' by lesbians and gay people to deprive it from its negative connotations. Furthermore, bisexual and transgender people sometimes used queer to critique lesbian and gay discourses since they "were often denigrated when not elided altogether by lesbian and gay communities" (Giffney, 2009: 5). Though, as Chauncey (1994) points out in the context of the male gay community in New York, especially middle-class men called themselves 'queer' as early as the 1910s to signal their homosexual desires and often to distance themselves from an effeminate or womanlike gender status. Nevertheless, associated with the coalition politics emerging after the AIDS crisis in the 1980s; queer was used to celebrate difference from the 'norm' "when the oppressiveness and implicated violence of that norm was clear and undeniable" (D. Hall, 2003: 54). It was preferred over the word gay, which marginalised women, and replaced 'lesbian and gay', which emphasises gender differences (Epstein, 1996). It is important to point out that many scholars use the term 'queer' mainly to refer to lesbian and gay people, identities and experiences. Even when other identifications, as most commonly bisexual and transgender, are added; it is often only done in passing.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, queer is used more and more to refer to "all people who are attracted to others of the same sex or whose bodies or sexual desires do not fit dominant standards of gender and/or sexuality" (Beemyn & Eliason, 1996a: 5). This means that queer becomes a shorthand for a range of different identities captured under the (still growing) 'alphabet soup' (Callis, 2012: 22) of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, asexual, ally, pansexual and more (LGBTIQQAAP+). However, a broader definition of queer is sometimes adopted rather than the umbrella term that synthesises

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<sup>2</sup> These include, amongst others, some of the most influential texts in the field of queer theory as Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) and *The Trouble With Normal* (1999) and Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

the 'alphabet soup'. Namely, queer can include all nonnormative sexualities such as S/M practices and intergenerational desires (Grace *et al.*, 2004), whereby simultaneously the foregrounding of sexuality as defined through gender is questioned. This also means that queer communities cannot longer be defined "solely by the gender of its members' sexual partners" (Duggan, 1992: 223). Relatedly, queer can be used to "express many intersecting queer selves" (Goldman, 1996: 170) such as those in terms of race, class, age and (dis)ability (Seidman, 1996).

An important aspect of the term queer is that it is often used not only to refer to certain identities/practices; but that it also indicates a new kind of politics (Epstein, 1996; Levy & Johnson, 2011). In particular, normative assumptions regarding gender and sexuality are challenged or, as Warner puts it more forcefully, queer can object to "not just the normal behavior of the social but the *idea* of normal behavior" (1993: xxvii). In this sense, queer stands for anything which is "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin, 1995: 62). Queer as a political strategy celebrates difference; it asks for political room by embracing outsider status (Gamson, 1996). Deliberately affirming the 'abnormal' stands in sharp contrast to more conventional civil-rights strategies of LGBT liberationists that are fought on the basis of sameness (with heterosexual/cisgendered<sup>3</sup> people) and by claiming 'normality' or even naturalness. A politics of tolerance or political representation is seen as too limited; 'regimes of the normal' are to be challenged since it is not simply 'intolerance' that is the problem but processes of normalisation itself (Warner, 1993: xxvi). Often a confrontational politics is chosen which not only intends to show pride in difference, but which seeks to transform conventional norms (Epstein, 1996).

Another aspect of queer is its emphasis on fluidity and change in sexual and gendered selves (Duggan, 1992). Queer not only questions identity politics but advocates "a politics against identity per se" (Seidman, 1993: 133). Seidman (1993) argues that the radical separatism of queer is bound up with a refusal of identity and its opposition to (identity-based) assimilationist gay politics: it is assumed that the destabilisation of identity can serve to oppose normalising social forces. Queer means a refusal of commitment to particular labels and/or desires by "recognising identity as a historically-contingent and socially-constructed fiction that prescribes and proscribes against certain feelings and actions" (Giffney, 2009: 2). To solve the (potential) tension between queer as identity and its simultaneous rejection of identity, queer is described as fluid, changing and ambiguous;

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<sup>3</sup> Cisgender is used to refer to "individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity" (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009: 461).

it is “a shifting and changing way of knowing the world and being in it” (Grace *et al.*, 2004: 303).

There is often hesitance to define queer, because its potential to be subversive of gender and sexual norms is assumed to be greatest if the term is left open (Halperin, 2003). Furthermore, since queer as a political term could be aimed at challenging normalisation in every aspect of the social; to define a population whose interests are at stake in queer politics is almost impossible (Warner, 1993). This also means that, contrary to the way in which Warner uses the term queer (namely as euphemism for lesbians and gay men), the term can be claimed by potentially anyone who is marginalised by and stands in opposition to ‘the normal’ (Halperin, 1995). More controversially, those belonging to the mainstream who subscribe a queer politics could also lay claim to a queer identity; note the development of the ‘straight queer’ which could – as some critics fear – open up a “Pandora’s box of queerdom” (Humphrey, 1999: 242).

As seen in this section, the term queer has multiple meanings, sometimes building on each other and sometimes in contradiction with each other. Where for some queer is simply another term for lesbian and gay, others see queer as signalling the shared dissent from norms around gender and sexuality, or see it as a deeply political term indicating fluidity of all identities. Furthermore, any attempt to define queer can be seen as “immediately problematic” (Angelides, 2001: 163), since it is supposed to be left open to allow for transformation. How the various usages (and users) or ‘queer’ have been critiqued, will be discussed below.

## **1.2. Queer Frictions**

The above section, in which different meanings of queer and queer identity were explored, revealed the multiplicity, fluidity and changing character of queer. Apart from some of its different usages and meanings being contradictory, some criticisms and concerns are voiced regarding the term; which will be discussed in this section.

A first criticism of queer is that the term, in a similar way to the term gay, can become to stand for the most privileged within this group; namely ‘white’, middle-class gay men (Warner, 1993; Goldman, 1996). Warner (1993) points out that gay culture has often been market-based; which means that ‘membership’ and access can become privileged to those with capital. The latter has been confirmed by Taylor’s (2007) research on working-class lesbian women. However, since the queer community is more associated with

decentralised, militant and anarchistic 'organisations' as Queer Nation (Duggan, 1992), this 'effect' might be minimised compared to 'mainstream' gay culture. Nevertheless, Taylor (2009) critiques the lack of attention to 'the material' in queer theory and activism and questions whether queer identity is available for people from a working-class background. Kirsch takes these observations further by arguing that true resistance and social change through queer politics (and theory) is held back because queer as a celebration of difference and refusal of identity is "supportive of the same ideal of the individual as self that capitalism has created" (2000: 43).

Besides materialist-informed critiques, one of the main criticisms on queer remains that "a generic masculinity may be reinstalled at the heart of the ostensible gender-neutral queer" (Jagose, 1996: 3). This critique is especially expressed by lesbian feminists, as for example Jeffreys (2003), who see the very appropriation of the term queer as a move backwards to masculinised gay politics. Indeed, Gamson (1996) suggests that for lesbians to be visible and to gain political ground they might actually benefit from a clear male/female and straight/gay divide. A related critique is that queer is structured around whiteness: Erel *et al.* argue not only that political activism and knowledge production of marginalised groups as queers of colour have been silenced, but even that the "historiography of queer as progressively including ever more diverse margins may in fact have been written by the relatively powerful" (2008: 277/8). Taking this argument further, Puar suggests that the very meaning of queer as transgressive anti-identity makes it "the modernity through which "freedom from norms" becomes a regulatory queer ideal that demarcates the ideal queer" (2007: 22). She argues that queer, especially in the context of Islamophobia, can become a homonationalist project through judging which subjects are more 'free' than others by understanding 'resistance to norms' as the ultimate form of individual freedom. Queer then, can (unintentionally) make the 'white', non-religious, male gay 'standard' and thereby work to further marginalise the most marginalised within this group.

Relatedly, queer can lead to a denial of differences "by either submerging them in an undifferentiated oppositional mass or by blocking the development of individual and social differences through the disciplining compulsory imperative to remain undifferentiated" (Seidman, 1993: 133). Queer can homogenise and erase differences by lumping together people from different ethnicities, classes and so forth who might have little in common in terms of identities, experiences and political needs (Goldman, 1996). As Namaste (1996a) argues; a denial of difference is reinforced when queer is simply seen as synonym for lesbian and gay. Contrastingly, the umbrella function of the term is sometimes

regarded as problematic, because of its “potential to work against lesbian and gay specificity” (Jagose, 1996: 112). Queer is then seen as “a means of de-gaying gayness”, by desexualising the lesbian and gay subject and by leaving it open for anyone claiming a non-heterosexual (but not gay) identity (Halperin, 1995: 65).

Moreover, despite queer’s commitment to challenge identity, it can actually be used as just another identity category (Giffney, 2004). As such it has the potential to become essentialist or even, as noted regarding the term Queer Nation, nationalist (Duggan, 1992; Epstein, 1996). However, more often it is questioned whether its politics against identity are effective as a political strategy; since identities can be productive means for political agency (Seidman, 1993). Indeed, questions are raised whether queer can be used as political strategy to improve the material conditions under which many lesbians and gay men, among others, live; as well as whether queer can effectively challenge cultural, economic and political oppression (Hennessy, 1995; Edwards, 1998). Moreover, critics question whether queer’s deliberate choice to stay within the marginalised, and to operate outside established power structures, can have a substantial political influence (Jagose, 1996). Edwards goes as far as to call queer politics ‘a politics of lifestyle’, which risks fragmenting the more communitarian gay and lesbian politics to a politics of ‘radical individualism’ (1998: 479). Moreover, he argues that the emphasis on celebration of difference can reduce queer politics to those of ‘a minority of a minority’; namely young, affluent people living in major cities who are willing to adopt queer identity as a central part of their life (idem: 480).

In conclusion, critiques on the term queer have been primarily aimed at the people, subject positions and experiences it includes or becomes to exclude; for example regarding the invisibility of more marginalised groups and regarding the prevalence of equating queer with merely lesbian and gay. Furthermore, the radical potential of queer as a political strategy has been questioned; firstly because queer has been adopted in similar ways as other identity categories, and secondly because its politics against identity could not only be exclusionary to some (less articulate, non-urban) people but also might simply prove to be an ineffective political strategy.

### **1.3. The missing ‘queer’ in queer theory**

To explore how ‘queer’ and queer subjects have been taken up in academia, this section will consider the body of work called ‘queer theory’; since it developed almost

simultaneously with and in relation to queer politics (D. Hall, 2003). In this section, the 'origin' and major implications of queer theory will be discussed, before turning to some of the critiques on and limitations of queer theory.

The term 'queer theory' as coined by de Lauretis in 1990, at a conference held at the University of California, was intended both jokingly and provocatively (Halperin, 2003). As de Lauretis explains in the introduction of the journal *differences* (1991), which bundles the essays presented at the conference, the purpose was to question the status of homosexuality as the deviant or transgressive form of a dominant, stable and natural heterosexuality. Furthermore, she hoped that 'queer theory' would be able to critically investigate some of the discourses and 'constructed silences' apparent in the field of lesbian and gay studies (*idem*: iii). In particular, de Lauretis questioned the way in which differences between lesbians and gay men are often taken for granted, and the relative lack of attention to other 'differences'; especially those in terms of ethnicity and 'race' but also in terms of class, generational, geographical and socio-political location. By addressing these and other discourses and silences regarding lesbian and gay subjectivities and cultural forms, while escaping white, male, middle-class bias, de Lauretis hoped that queer theory could rethink the sexual in multiple discourses, across disciplinary fields and through different critical methodologies.

Though the term queer theory was coined in 1990 (and published in 1991) by de Lauretis, several scholars who published before that time have come to be seen as founding queer theorists. In particular, Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990) are often seen as "most eminent and influential queer theorists" (Edwards, 1998: 474). However, work from Fuss (1989; 1991) is a part of queer theory's 'canonical texts' (Jackson & Scott, 2010: 19), while the influence of Foucault (1978) on queer theoretical thought cannot be overstated (Halperin, 1995). Queer theory then first of all challenges the assumption of any stable, unitary or natural identity; including a unified homosexual identity (Seidman, 1996). All identities are potentially scrutinised, though the focus lies with sexual and gender categories (Stein & Plummer, 1996). De-essentialising identity (Halperin, 1995) is seen as important not only because identities are always multiple and unstable, but also because they can work as "instruments of regulatory regimes" (Butler, 1991: 13). Furthermore, identities are almost never-ending, and any expression of identity leaves out combining or interesting identities or selves; as nationality, age, (dis)ability and class (Seidman, 1996). Secondly, this also means that practices, desires and identities often do not match up; rather they are merely presented as stable (Corber & Vallochi, 2003). This is particularly

important regarding homosexuality, since (the perceived stability of) this category helps “to stabilise heterosexuality by functioning as its binary opposite” (idem: 3). Thirdly and relatedly, the stability and coherence between sex, gender and desire (the ‘heterosexual matrix’ [Butler, 1990: 194]), is questioned by queer theorists. This means that not only the naturalness of heterosexuality is challenged, but also seemingly unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (Jagose, 1996: 3). Queer theorists then are mainly concerned with the (hetero)sexualisation of all aspects of social life: “expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides” (Stein & Plummer, 1996: 134). Queer theory wants to expand the study of sexuality from a focus on ‘minorities’ to a focus on power structures, in particular the heterosexual/homosexual divide, that shape institutions, practices and beliefs of the society as a whole. When queer theory studies marginal experience, it is to “expose the deeper contours of the whole society and the mechanisms of its functioning” (Epstein, 1996: 156). Referring back to meanings of queer outside, but inevitably intertwined with, academia; queer theory is thus “a theoretical perspective from which to challenge the normative” (Goldman, 1996: 170).

However, despite queer theory’s prevalence in the study of gender and sexuality since the 1990s, it has been heavily criticised for a number of reasons. A main critique on queer theory is regarding its focus on gay and lesbian subjectivities to the exclusion of other identities, viewpoints and experiences. This critique is twofold: on the one hand it has been pointed out that queer theory, despite its claims of intersectionality and its original formulations by de Lauretis (1991), has created some of its own ‘constructed silences’ around issues of race, disability, class and so forth (Giffney, 2009; Goldman, 1996). On the other hand it is argued that the focus on a heterosexual/homosexual definition and gender ‘performativity’ results in a lack of attention to bisexual, (certain) transgender positionings and – as could be added – (certain) queer subjectivities. For example, Namaste argues that despite an explosion of work on transgender in queer theory, the way in which this topic is discussed is limited with very little consideration of “the implications of an enforced sex/gender system for people who live outside it” (1996b: 183). Critiquing Butler’s consideration of drag in *Gender Trouble*, he also suggests that queer theoretical analysis often lacks in situating subjects in their social, historical and political context. This leads to another major critique on queer theory; namely regarding its “overly textual orientation, an underdeveloped concept of the social, and a lack of engagement with ‘real’ material, everyday life and social practices and processes” (Roseneil, 2000: para. 2.2.). Thus, queer theory with its poststructuralist tradition is said to lack in empirical investigation of gender



and sexuality and in engaging with individual 'queer' experience (Plummer, 2003; Sullivan, 2003; Beemyn & Eliason, 1996b), favouring a more abstract analysis of cultural texts driven by the method of deconstruction (Namaste, 1996b; Seidman, 1997). Especially scholars coming from a social science tradition critique queer theory; not just for its so-called 'textualism' (Seidman, 1997: 161) which prevails U.S. (and to a lesser extent British) humanities-based writings that sometimes fail to consider the social, material and political context and consequences of possessing a certain 'non-normative' identity, but also because its major theoretical claims have some parallels with social constructionist thought rooted in sociology that often go unacknowledged (Stein & Plummer, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Jackson & Scott, 2010). This sociological tradition in the field of gender and sexuality will be considered in the subsequent section.

#### **1.4. 'Queer' and sociology**

As seen in the last section, one of the main critiques on queer theory is aimed at its relative lack in engaging with lived experiences of gender and sexuality through empirical research. Sociologists often claim to have a longer empirical tradition which could contribute to the research field that largely became dominated by queer theoretical approaches in the 1990s, sometimes proposing a 'queer sociological analysis' that would benefit from both fields (e.g. Vallochi, 2005). In this section, sociology's approach in the field of sexuality will first briefly be discussed, before turning to a consideration of some of its recent empirical work to consider how 'queer' has been taken up in this discipline.

Despite sociology's tradition as a 'de-naturalising force', sociologists – including classical thinkers as Marx and Weber – left the field of sexuality almost completely untouched until the 1960s (Seidman, 1996). The most 'radical' thought on sexuality until that time derived from psychoanalytical theories; sexuality was seen as natural force that was socially repressed and constrained (Jackson & Scott, 2010). It was only around the 1960s that sociology started theorizing sexuality; producing some major accounts which questioned the naturalness of sexuality in general and of homosexuality in particular. Though Gagnon & Simon (1973) were the first to develop a full theoretical account of the social construction of sexuality, McIntosh (1968) was one of the first thinkers to challenge homosexuality as a condition and the (male) homosexual as a unique type of person (Seidman, 1996). The sociology of sexuality then became by large the sociology of homosexuality; other important accounts such as work from Jeffrey Weeks and Ken

Plummer, though with different emphasis on the subject, also focused on the social formation of homosexual identity. Though later critiqued for a 'minoritising' view that made 'the homosexual' the abnormal from heterosexuals, in these works identity is often carefully approached not as a natural fact but as a "social construction of meanings around that [homosexual] activity" (Weeks, 1981: 117). These social constructionist perspectives thus contributed to questioning the naturalness and uniformity of sexual and gender categories. Nevertheless, categories as 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' were not always critically investigated in sociological accounts of the last century (Seidman, 1997), thereby sometimes reproducing them by "treating the categories and the normative relationship among them as the starting assumption on which research is based and the major lens through which we interpret our data" (Vallochi, 2005: 752). Furthermore, fields as women studies, anti-racism studies, transgender studies and disability studies challenged some of the norms and silences within sociological/social science research around sexuality and gender. This resulted, at least in part, in greater attention to other 'differences' within and beyond sexualities (e.g. Weeks *et al.*, 2003) and more explicit 'intersectional' analysis (e.g. Taylor *et al.*, 2011).

But how has 'queer' been approached in empirical sociological analysis? Has the queer challenge also resulted in attention to queer individuals and queer as (anti-)identity, or merely to a more queer theoretical approach? A database search has been conducted to gain insight into how queer has been taken up in sociological (and social science) research. This search, using the Science Citation Index (Thomson Reuters Web of Science), suggested that in the last ten years (2003- 2013) the word 'queer' appeared in 1.640 articles while the search terms 'queer' and 'people' only came up in 131 articles published in journals as *Sexualities*, *Gender and Society*, *Journal of Homosexuality* and *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, amongst many others.<sup>4</sup> While reading through the abstracts and articles, it was established that 44 were not concerned with empirical research or, by analysing literature or other cultural texts, were deemed irrelevant to the purpose of this database search (aimed at gaining insight in how queer people's lived experiences have been taken up in social science research). From the 87 articles that conducted some kind of empirical research, 49 articles used queer theory and/or focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people only. For example, where Nusser & Anacker (2012) explicitly state using the term 'queer' interchangeably with LGBT, Gorman-Murray & Wait use queer "as pragmatic shorthand for same-sex-attracted people with nonheteronormative identities, particularly gay men and

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<sup>4</sup> Search conducted in July 2013 using the database Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI).

lesbians” (2009: 2855). In many of these articles ‘queer’ was used merely as umbrella term, thus leaving out the possibility of distinct queer subjectivities. In the other 38 articles, queer was often used along other identifications (as most commonly LGBT); thus only a small number of self-identified queer people participated in these studies (e.g. Logie & Gibson, 2013; Mai, 2012; Willis, 2009). Similarly, queer was sometimes only added along other identifications during the course of the research. For example, Binnie & Klesse decided to include ‘queer’ along LGBT because it was “claimed as stimulus or identity by many activists in our study” (2012: 445), while a quantitative study on smoking behaviour added queer and genderqueer identifications after it was claimed by participants through (open-field) ‘other’ categories (Clarke & Coughlin, 2012). From the 38 articles that included queer subject positions, there were only three articles whose *main* focus was on queer people or subjectivities (Hines, 2010; Levy & Johnson; 2011; J. Taylor, 2010). While the former two articles focus on queer subjectivities but only had some self-identified queer participants in their studies, the latter study focuses on (middle-aged) queer identities in relation to music scene participation. This database search although – important to stress – limited to a certain time frame and search terms, thus suggests that the focus in this study, aimed at understanding how people self-identified as queer construct their identities, is unique. The next chapter will lay out the methodology used for answering the research question.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

The last chapter highlighted both the multiple meanings of the term 'queer' and (critiques on) its usages, as the way in which queer has been approached in the field of queer theory and sociology or social sciences more broadly. A couple of aims regarding the empirical part of this study can now be detected. Firstly, this study intends to contribute to the relative neglect of 'queer people' in (empirical) research. Though the literature review suggested the 'existence' of people calling themselves 'queer' for a variety of reasons, there has been little engagement with queer people and their experiences in both queer theory *and* sociology. Indeed, the database search (section 1.4) suggested that the little empirical research that seemed to include queer people (49 out of 87 articles), often used queer as synonym for LGBT. When queer was added as distinct identity, there were often only a few participants who identified this way. Therefore, contributing to this under-researched area by giving voice to queer people is the first aim of this research. Secondly, the literature review suggested that 'queer' has been taken up by people in both society and academia in multiple (contrasting) ways. It also showed that these meanings have changed over time, and that critiques have been voiced regarding one or more of these usages which shape the term's meaning; especially when accepted as essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1956). This research aims to analyse how queer people *themselves* give meaning to their 'identity' (Khayatt, 2002); what queer means to them, how they negotiate frictions around different usages, and how their identification as queer relates to their gender and sexuality. As the database search suggested, queer people's identification *as* queer have not been researched before. Therefore, this research will be the first to explore this topic and to investigate how queer people construct their identities. Below, the methodology used to reach these two broad aims will be explained.

### 2.1 Theoretical underpinnings

As outlined before, it is researched how people who self-identify as queer construct their identities in relation to (lived experiences of) gender and sexuality. There are several theoretical elements or assumptions important regarding this research question; which shaped the research design and thus guided the empirical research. These will be outlined below.

Firstly, there is an emphasis on 'construction of identities' rather than on providing facts or absolute truths about queer people's 'inner nature'. Thus, following Plummer, people "construct... tales of the intimate self, which may or may not bear a relationship to a truth" (1995: 34). Once moving away from the idea that stories about 'the self' provide an unproblematic or absolute truth, these processes of identification through sexual (and gendered) stories "can be seen as issues to be investigated in their own right" (idem: 5). Secondly, the research question addresses how lived experiences of gender and sexuality stand in relation to people's identity construction (and stories) as queer. It is important to emphasise that both gender and sexuality are not seen as natural and merely 'internal'. On the other hand, following Gagnon & Simon (1973) as first sociologists "to radically question the biologism, the naturalism and the essentialism" of previous thought on sexuality (Plummer, 2001: 131), sexuality *and* gender can be seen as social. Seeing gender and sexuality as social, through notions as scripting and performance, and their interrelationship as matter for investigation is however not enough considering that "patterns of sexual conduct and identity formation intersect with other markers of social difference" (Epstein, 1996: 158). Intersectionality, a term first coined by Crenshaw (1989), refers to "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall, 2005: 1771). Following intersectionality, an endless list of differences influences people's experiences and subject positions, from 'race' to (dis)ability and from age to geographical location; a principle now widely accepted in feminist research and beyond (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). However, accepting intersectionality's implications gives rise to some methodological complexities (McCall, 2005). For example, researchers usually prioritise some 'differences' over others, since including an 'endless list' is almost impossible. Therefore, the main focus on gender and sexuality in queer identity formations, though based on the literature review suggesting these social dimensions to be at the core of queer meanings and identities, entails important limitations to this study. For example, a consideration of intersections between disability and queer is not at the core of this study; even though literature suggests these intersections to be relevant (e.g. Ramlow, 2009). Finally, following Brubaker & Cooper's critiques on the term identity as an *analytical category*, which becomes either too 'soft' when talking about constructed, fluid and multiple identities or too 'hard' in essentialist claims of unitary identity politics, the terms 'construct identities' are used in the sense of a processual, social notion of 'identification' (2000: 14). Thus, identity can be seen as in production, often through re-telling the past, and does never consists of a single experience (Hall, 1990).

## 2.2 Research design

Since the character of the research is explorative, aimed at examining, describing and understanding a relative under-researched phenomenon, a cross-sectional research design was chosen; which is particularly suitable for descriptive rather than causal analysis (de Vaus, 2001). This design allows for exploring queer people's identity formations at a single point in time and for gaining insights into how (lived experiences of) gender and sexuality relate to people's identification as queer. In order to answer the research question, a qualitative approach was chosen based on semi-structured interviews. It was hoped that such an approach would be useful for exploring the construction of subjects and identities through language (Cant & Taket, 2008) and to uncover the complexity of meanings around identification by allowing for the 'development of narratives' around queer life and experiences (Heaphy *et al.*, 1998: 455). This emphasis on narratives and stories reflects the theoretical commitments outlined above.

Since it was impossible to map 'the' queer population to engage in probability sampling, and since (due to design and scale of this project) no generalizing claims beyond the sample are made, a purposive sampling strategy was chosen (Miller & Salkind, 2002). This sampling approach' power "lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study" (Layder, 1998: 46). Specifically, a theoretical sampling strategy was chosen in order to maximise diversity within the group of 'queer people', by purposively selecting people on the basis of a range of variables deemed relevant in line with the literature review (e.g. gender, sexuality, geographical location, age and ethnicity). The criteria for inclusion in the sample was that people called themselves or identified as queer and that they were currently living in the Netherlands<sup>5</sup>. The latter criterion was chosen not only because of practical concerns (e.g. time constraints would have made it difficult to gain access into a relative 'underground' queer scene in a – to me – foreign country), but also because the design of this research was cross-sectional rather than comparative. The aim was to develop a rich and in-depth understanding of a relatively diverse sample in one context, rather than to develop a thinner understanding of a much less diverse sample in two or more contexts. The former criterion was chosen because the research question was aimed at capturing identity constructions of people self-identified as queer. This question was in

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<sup>5</sup> I decided to formulate my call for participants as 'people living in the Netherlands' rather than 'Dutch people' to resist excluding foreign-born people living in the Netherlands.

turn based on the literature review which suggested the 'existence' of people calling themselves queer for a variety of reasons, but which also made clear the relative lack of investigation into this phenomenon. No other criteria were used, to resist judging from 'above' who would be 'queer enough' (Haritaworn, 2007) and to resist excluding people or stories for the sake of narrative coherence (Heaphy, 2012). However, in practice quite some people (in conversations and five through e-mail) indicated to be willing to participate because they felt somehow connected to queer even though they did not identify as queer. I decided to interview one of them, but left out their data because to include it would entail reshaping the entire research (since it aims to explore people's identity construction *as queer*). Nevertheless, it is important to take into account that 'queer thought' exists without people affirming a queer identity.

An interview guide was created based on the research questions and literature review, and adjusted on the basis of a pilot interview conducted in May. The first question asked people to describe themselves and picked up on whether or not people used the term queer and any gender/sexuality description in this 'introduction'. The interviews always ended with a question whether people wanted to add anything on a topic or issue not (extensively enough) discussed.<sup>6</sup> Because of emphasis on flexibility, interviews progressed differently according to the interviewee's answers and stories. Influenced by Haritaworn (2007), attention was paid to 'positionality' or to the kind of discourse participants used to communicate shared experiences or differences regarding others who are not or differently 'queer'.

### **2.3 Data collection**

The research data consisted of interviews conducted with fourteen people who self-identified as queer.<sup>7</sup> The sample was reached through different methods; some queer organisations/pages were contacted who put out a call for participants on Facebook, flyers were distributed (mainly in Amsterdam and Utrecht) in queer and/or LGBT stores, bars, clubs and other spaces. Besides, in the month of June I attended a range of different 'queer events' such as discussions and debates, film screenings, workshops, social gatherings and parties, and an exposition. At these spaces, I usually left some flyers, told people that I was doing research and looking for participants identified as queer, and once I made a short

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 2 for interview guide including interview themes.

<sup>7</sup> See appendix 1 for brief biographies of participants.

public announcement during a film screening/debate. Four people responded through online Facebook calls for participants, four people responded through flyers (one picked up a flyer in a bookstore, others in events), the other six were contacted by me (usually through e-mail) after talking to them about the research in just mentioned gatherings and events. By using different recruitment methods, I aimed to avoid concerns of exclusions associated with 'snowball sampling' (Browne, 2005) and instead made an effort to include people from different geographical locations as well as with different experiences and social positionings (e.g. both active 'members' of a queer community as 'loose' individuals).

The participants were selected purposively on basis of a range of variables, most importantly regarding their gender and sexuality but also in relation to age, ethnicity and geographical location. Regarding age, a couple potential 'older' participants did not reply to interview requests or did not meet the criteria for inclusion; thus most people are in their twenties (7) and in their thirties (5). In terms of ethnicity most participants self-identified as 'white' Dutch. The interviews were structured around 'whiteness' in a way that being 'white' was taken for granted (Taylor, 2010). A relative diversity was reached in terms of geographical location: seven participants lived in Amsterdam, three in Utrecht, two in Nijmegen, one in Rotterdam and one in a city in North-Holland. It could be argued that the geographical location of participants reflects the clustering of queer people or a queer scene to the more urban areas, and the association of queer with a particular urban lifestyle; as outlined in the literature review.

From the fourteen participants, five people described their gender as male/female or man/woman in a somewhat straightforward manner and nine described their gender in more complicated terms as in between, not-important and so forth. Three people (also) used terms as transgender when talking about their gender identity. Though participants (indicated that they) sometimes used words as lesbian, gay or bisexual when talking about their sexuality, all but one of the participants described their sexuality in more complex terms. Questions about socio-economic and class background were interpreted differently by participants, some mentioned education of parents and/or own education while others mentioned terms as 'middle-class' or 'working-class'; thus affirming Weeks *et al.* observation that "class categories should, therefore, be understood as an (inadequate) reduction of often detailed and complex discussion" (2001: 203). Overall it can be stated that most people self-identified as middle-class or noted a higher educated background, though two participants explicitly claimed working-class backgrounds.



Interviews were conducted face-to-face usually in a public place and sometimes in participant's homes. Interviews lasted on average about an hour and eight minutes: the shortest lasting 47:06 minutes and the longest 1 hour and 47 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured, since the aim was to 'capture the meaning of experience' in queer people's own words (Marshall & Rosmann, 1995: 55). The emphasis on stories as narrative truth (Plummer, 1995) shaped the way in which interviews were conducted. I took a 'narrative approach' to not only acknowledge that a story is constructed rather than a neutral account on a pre-existing truth, but also to leave the interview agenda open to allow for development and change depending on the narrator's experiences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 30/1). Before each interview, in line with the ethical commitments of this project, participants were given a Plain Language Statement (appendix 3) and given time to raise any questions. Interview transcripts, as well as the short biographies (appendix 1), were sent back to participants for verification after which some participants made changes. Twelve interviews were conducted in Dutch; quotes used from these transcripts were translated in English and revised by two people to ensure proper translation without changing participant's own words.

My own position as a researcher needs to be taken into account, since who we are and what we are doing affects the research as a whole (Letherby, 2003). I decided not to share any of my own identifications with (potential) participants before the interview took place, though my relative familiarity with 'queer thought' and my involvement in 'queer' gatherings during the research probably gave me somewhat of an 'insider' status. For example, I often indicated my familiarity some of the queer festivals and spaces that people mentioned during interviews. My own – as I would call it – critical appreciation of queer possibly helped to remain critical while not putting participants "on the spot to explain their 'oddity'" (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003: 495). I often shared some features with participants, especially 'being' Dutch was an often shared commonality, though these shared 'positionings' or 'insider' status should not be overestimated (Song & Parker, 2003: 244; Almack, 2008). Indeed, my position as a 'white' student-researcher might have facilitated some of the 'silences' noted on 'race' before; when participants "take whiteness for granted in conversation with a white researcher" (Erel *et al.*, 2008: 286).

## 2.4 Data analysis

After interviews were fully transcribed and sent back to participants for verification, they were entered in NVivo 10 (research software facilitating the analysis of qualitative data). In the first step of analysis, interview transcripts were coded on the basis of themes informed by the research question and literature review. For example, any reference to gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so forth were coded, as well as any emergent meanings around queer and queer identification. This led to some initial themes around gender and sexual identification, references to other queer 'intersections' and passages on 'queer meanings'. In the second step of data-analysis, themes emerging from the data were added and grouped under different codes. Hereby, notes made shortly after each interview and during the interview phase (including transcribing), which consisted of themes and references that caught the attention, were used to facilitate the coding process. Furthermore, these first two steps of analysis involved reading the interview transcripts over again and again, in order to group initial and emergent themes under different nodes (codes). In particular, the way people gave meaning to (their identification as) queer was grouped under different nodes that consisted of themes and words/labels that powerfully came across; as 'boxes', 'freedom', 'search/process' and comparisons between 'queer and LGBT terms'. Other passages that seemed meaningful to participants, as on a queer scene/community, were also coded which resulted in a total of thirty-six nodes. In the third step of analysis, the thirty-six nodes were ordered on relevance (amount of references) in NVivo and described in one sentence (e.g. 'Politics: Participants talk about whether or not they see queer as something political'). It was then assessed what differences and similarities existed between different nodes, in order to categorise them in broader conceptual themes (Dacin *et al.*, 2010). This process of interpretation was guided not only by the research question and literature review, but also by the theoretical commitments outlined above (section 2.1). For example, nodes were grouped together under the theme 'queer as anti-identity' which consisted of references in which the (queer) self or queer meanings were related to other (non-queer) people, subject positions or wider society. Two other themes emerged: 'queer meanings' and 'queer frictions'. Though due to limits in space not every node can be discussed, the next chapter will lay out these three broad themes and discuss the data most pressing and intriguing in participant's accounts of their identification as queer in relation to (lived experiences of) gender and sexuality.

## Chapter 3: Analysis

The last chapter highlighted the methodology used in this project, one of its distinct aspects an emphasis on self-definition; to allow participants to narrate their experiences rather than to impose a certain definition on them and analyse how their experiences (did not) fit this concept (Khayatt, 2002). This chapter will discuss the main findings of this research. Section 3.1 and 3.2 will explore the themes that most powerfully came across in how participants gave meaning to the term queer which – as will be discussed – are intertwined with participants’ sexual and gender identities, practices and experiences. Section 3.3 will explore queer as anti-identity and stress the relational aspects of this identification for many participants. Section 3.4 will discuss some of the paradoxes that became apparent in how participants gave meaning to queer; both regarding its construction as (anti) identity and regarding the (potential) inclusiveness of the term. Finally, section 3.5 will (further) explore queer ‘frictions’; thus pointing to some (possible) limitations of queer which will also be addressed in the conclusion.

### 3.1 Queer: ‘break[ing] the boxes altogether’<sup>8</sup>

A most overwhelming strain of thought around queer laid in reference to ‘boxes’ and/or labels, which most participants (13 out of 14) mentioned usually several times (in total 47 passages). The way boxes related to participants’ identification as queer and the way they gave meaning to the term queer is threefold. Firstly, participants usually mentioned how boxes (in society) are rigidly defined. They did not just oppose to the inflexibility of these boxes as a statement, but they often talked about their own experiences of ‘not fitting in’ any boxes or as Floor puts it “I think I fit in every box a little bit but never entirely, and to me that is more queer”. Secondly, as seen in the latter quote, they connected the term ‘queer’ itself to boxes; and talked about how queer was *different* from these other labels. Rik compares ‘queer’ to his previous identification as ‘gay’ and says “I’ve always considered it a pleasant term [since] you don’t fix yourself in one box”. Thirdly, they acknowledged that ‘queer’, when used in the ‘wrong’ way, could become just another box or identity label. Participants opposed to the latter, which could be seen in a refusal to clearly define the term and in their hesitance to explicitly claim a queer identity. To this will be returned in section 3.4.

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<sup>8</sup> Reference by Lacey.

The following quote is representational for the way many participants connected queer to boxes/labels. As Beau puts it:

I found queer an attractive term because it was an anti-label, so it isn't defined, or at least not clearly defined. And I noticed that every time I claimed a new label, or when I thought 'that's it, this is who I am, or this fits', that it became strictly defined and I didn't fit in anymore. So in the bisexual community I noticed, yeah I might be bi, but I don't think that strictly in femininity and masculinity and that those should be fixed, for example that masculinity only fits with men and femininity only with women. (..) So I thought the bi-label doesn't fit [me]. And then I started searching for other labels and queer was the most free label, and I found that most appealing.

As Beau described not fitting in with the bi-community (amongst other scenes/communities) because of a certain rigidity in how bi (in relation to gender) was defined, and feeling that 'queer' on the other hand is a more free term, Dani described not feeling comfortable with the term 'lesbian'. She feels not only that 'lesbian' has limitations because she would have to explain her relationships with men in the past (and possibly in the future) but also because of her own gender identity as "fluid" and her attraction to different gendered (masculine and feminine) women. Mentioning a conversation with a friend, she tells:

I sometimes date a girl who looks quite like a boy, and her [the friend's] first response was like 'but she is just like a boy so you're actually straight, why don't you just have a relationship with a *normal* boy?' And then I was like 'what? No, that's not it'. (...) [So] can you call yourself lesbian when you are with someone who actually looks like a boy, and well, for me queer is pretty easy because then that is actually all possible. Then you don't have to explain everything.

These quotes reflect that coming to a queer identification is not only something personal, in feeling that other labels 'don't fit', but also relational in that other people have certain ideas about what it is to be 'bi' or to be 'lesbian'. Relatedly, Floor describes herself "pretty deliberately not as woman, because I associate 'woman' very much with adult behaviour, (...) the role that society expects from women". This resonates with J. Taylor's research on middle-aged queers who suggests that queer people problematize "normative transmissions into adulthood and maturity" which place them "outside many categories of age-appropriate behaviour" (2010: 894).

For some participants the inadequacy of other labels is related to the way in which sexual and gendered terms are interrelated or, more specifically, to the way in which sexuality is defined through gender (Connell, 2005). Nieke, who sees herself as

androgynous or genderqueer, observes: “the moment I identify as woman and have a girlfriend then I belong in the box lesbian. I already find that difficult because yeah, then I have to identify as woman otherwise it doesn’t match”. Another element becomes apparent in these examples; namely that especially people with gender expressions beyond or in-between male and female described the uneasiness of available terms as ‘lesbian’ or ‘bisexual’, that assume a binary relation to gender not just on the part of (potential) partners but also on the part of the self. In a different way, Joyce also questioned the conflation of gender and sexuality in relation to her preference for the term ‘queer’:

I also kind of have an interest in BDSM, I am also exhibitionistic in some ways, I find men attractive, I find women [attractive]; I like people. So no, it’s always a bit puzzling; I have always been a bit puzzled by it. And especially, I’ve been non-monogamous for a very long time and I think that makes it hard for me to fit in a lesbian, hetero, bi thingy, because I feel like my sexuality is not only about my sexual preference but also about how I want to shape my sexual live and intimate live.

Besides Joyce, six other people mentioned non-monogamy or polyamory when talking about their sexuality or in relation to the way they gave meaning to queer. By describing sexuality in more complex terms than a definite preference for one or two genders, many participants questioned the conflation of sexuality with gender *and* the assumed stability of sexuality (and sometimes gender) instead emphasising fluidity and change (Duggan, 1992). A first *personal* meaning of queer is thus characterised by an opposition to common gender and/or sexual terms that, for many participants, signify stable, normative and rigid ‘boxes’ in which people’s own experiences of gender and sexuality do not fit. Below, narratives around queer as more ‘free’ term will be explored.

### **3.2 A queer search for freedom**

As seen in the last section, Beau described a ‘search’ through different communities and labels, before ‘finding’ queer as more ‘free’ term. Narratives around ‘freedom’ or even liberation came across powerfully in many participants’ accounts of queer identification (22 references over 10 transcripts), as will be discussed below.

The theme ‘freedom’ through ‘finding’ queer often consisted of a recollection of a certain struggle with norms in society, or normative expectations from others, sometimes related to a (critique on) rigidly defined boxes discussed above. For example, asking Aafke what queer means to her, she replies: “for me it’s just more, I think a sort of freedom, a

sort of peace” which she connects to a “fuck the rest of the people attitude as well, because other people do actually constantly ask you to make a choice”; here referring to people’s questions about her sexual and gender identifications. Thus, for Aafke, queer fits with her refusal to choose, both for personal reasons feeling that her sexuality is “variable” and her gender expression differs per day, as well as for (possibly) political reasons when critiquing the idea that other people or society are entitled to these questions (and answers).

Though Aafke expressed that queer felt ‘logical’ with her – already established – feeling of being more comfortable when not “pressured to choose”, some participants expressed that queer in some ways ‘solved’ a struggle around normative expectations. The following excerpt is illustrative for this kind of narrative:

It did give me peace in a certain search, in the heteronormative image, men who like football and beer (...) I could never relate to that. That’s why [I mentioned] the narrow-minded village at the beginning of the story. I never felt at home there (...). At first I thought maybe it’s about my sexuality, that I can’t fit in the male testosterone club. But when the term queer came it gave me a sort of box in which I could feel free.

This quote has several elements; Casper describes not being able to relate to certain heteronormative expectations, which at first made him question his own (hetero)sexuality and, as he elsewhere mentioned, made him in some ways feel more in place with the LGBT scene. Queer, however, gave him ‘peace’ in this *search* because it allowed him to both think differently about gender norms and roles and act differently by being able to ‘play’ with gender. Furthermore, he connects feeling ‘free’ to a past in a ‘narrow-minded village’. Besides Casper, six other participants placed queer in context of the city; thus signalling what Halberstam observes as the “essential characterizations of queer life as urban” (2005: 15). However, sometimes it was noted in more nuanced ways that (certain) cities are or can be a facilitator for ‘being’ queer or having queer initiatives and scenes.

Regarding both gender and sexuality, participants’ narratives showed that this ‘freedom’ can take some fairly concrete forms. Rik for example, who sees queer as a way of saying that “it doesn’t matter whether you’re bisexual, transgender, gay or whatever, but [what matters is] that you’re human”, connects his involvement in the queer scene in the last years with a recent “metamorphosis from masculine to feminine”. He explains how – at a gay party – he took on different (masculine and feminine) appearances to spread confusion and to get across a message; relating queer to a freedom to play with gender(roles) in these ways. Furthermore, he remarks:

I also notice that I'm pushing my limits a bit more, [that I'm] letting go of all kinds of stigmas, like top, bottom. That I'm allowing myself some more freedom, in a sexual sense, yes".

Thus, for Rik, his involvement in the queer scene, through conversations and meeting new people, allowed him to play "with the feminine side in my maleness" as well as allowed him to be more open sexually; even noting a changing attitude towards women as potential sex partners. Noteworthy is that nearly all participants shared this (potential) openness to more than one gender, also those previously or usually noting same-sex or other-sex attractions. For some, this potential openness entails a (recent) change, as for Floor who notes that her best friend's transsexuality made her realise "if I were to have... [a relationship] with a woman who for example also discovers that she, he then, is transsexual, then I wouldn't run away from it. It actually doesn't really matter to me". Realising that her sexuality as lesbian is thus "transformable", in turn strengthened her 'queer feeling'.

Freedom (through a search/process) is connected to both sexuality and gender usually in two different ways. Firstly, it is narrated in a 'performative' or more experimental way. For example, Stefan sees his gender as "completely male" but plays with feminine touches in his daily appearances and also sees this as a statement. Secondly, it is narrated as a way of coming 'to peace' with oneself. For example, Alex relates queer to a struggle around hir<sup>9</sup> gender identity and discomfort with terms as 'lesbian', 'man' and 'woman'. Alex response to the question why s/he calls himself queer, is illustrative for the several themes discussed so far and thus worth quoting at length:

Well, that was a long journey, search I undertook before I came to that term. (...) But I indeed describe myself like that because I found out that all existing boxes didn't fit. And I started studying queer theory myself, gender studies, and then I came across that term. And it really intrigued me and there I actually found something, in a sort of non-identification I found my identity. (...) And I am very happy I developed this these last years, and that I feel comfortable with it and that the struggle mostly disappeared. But it was hard to come to - yes of course it's not a label - but to come to that consciousness.

Alex does not only prefer 'queer' because those other boxes do not 'fit', but also stresses that meeting other queer people and developing a queer 'consciousness' was helpful to solve (part of) this struggle around both hir gender and sexual identity; thus connecting queer to a – new found – sense of freedom. The conception of queer as a form of

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<sup>9</sup> S/he, hir and himself are gender neutral pronouns (which were preferred by Alex).

'consciousness', which this quote highlights, will be discussed in the subsequent section.

### 3.3 A queer mindset

So far, narratives around 'labels' and 'freedom' were often linked to people's own experiences of 'not fitting in' and struggle with norms and normative expectations in society. However, the question remains what 'queer' is or signifies and how it is different from those (other) labels. As will be discussed in this section, queer is often seen as anti-identity since it is constructed beyond 'real-life' (e.g. bodily) signifiers as a way of *thinking* rather than *being*. Indeed, eight people explicitly referred to queer as a mindset and/or consciousness; a significant theme to arise which will be addressed below. But first, it will briefly be explored how participants narrate difference between LGBT terms and queer.

An important difference made between 'old' and 'new' terms evolved around the issue of change (explicitly mentioned by eight people). As touched upon before, many participants expressed refusing to choose or fixing themselves, since "I simply cannot know that I would be attracted to a woman or not tomorrow, it's just like that, it changes" (Cem). Thus, as Joyce mentions "I think I can hold on to the term queer for a very long time, even when my sexual preferences or sexual interests change". Contrastingly, Nieke explains using the term genderqueer deliberately to get across a message that she does not fit in "society's image of transsexuality"; here referring to the idea that all transgender people move from one 'box' to another and "are happy in this new box and fit in with society again". Thus, again, queer critiques become apparent which questioned the way terms as LGBT are currently enacted in society. Relatedly, four participants more explicitly critiqued 'homonormativity' or, in Duggan's words, participants questioned how certain terms and politics upholds and sustains "heteronormative assumptions and institutions" (2003: 50). For example, Stefan feels gay "fits in [with] the rigid ideas people have, at least in the Netherlands; gay is actually pretty incorporated in those strict male/female relations", while Alex critiques how homosexuality is used in political debates about migration thereby questioning 'homonationalism'. Asking people with sexual attractions for more than one gender how they felt 'bisexual' is different from 'queer', many mentioned stigmas or stereotypes around bisexuality in society (Klesse, 2011). Here, parallels can be found with Ault's work on bisexual women, whereby some of her participants did not only prefer queer for its different meaning or for political purposes, but also for 'strategic' purposes to make it "more difficult to single out or categorically marginalize" bisexuals (1996: 323). Thus,



while Lacey uses queer because of its “multilayered effect” which can describe both her personal life and political viewpoints, she notes how it also allows her to “kind of just hide under a bigger umbrella, so part of it is definitely [escaping] the biphobia”.

Martin’s response to a question about the difference between queer and ‘non-queer’ people, signals another important theme around queer as anti-identity: “I especially think that people who are queer are more conscious of those boxes, (...) that actually everyone in some way does not exactly fit in these boxes. I think it’s mainly a form of consciousness”. A first element of queer as a way of thinking, consciousness or mindset is that it entails a radical break with ‘old’ identity categories as ‘man’, ‘woman’ or ‘gay’, as can be seen in the following quote by Dani:

I think you need to let go of certain patterns of thinking that you grew up with. When you’re born, you don’t think ‘I’m queer’. Yes, I think it’s very much about letting go of things you were taught or what you see around you. And I think you can only [start] do[ing] that when you’re in puberty or early twenties.

Here, though not explicitly as opposed to other terms, queer is narrated as a way of *thinking* (rather than *being*) which most people develop later in life. Thus, where the homosexual category has often been naturalized through medical or biological claims (McIntosh, 1968), a queer self-understanding – in the narratives of many participants – emphasises *choice*. Indeed, stories on queer identification are characterised by fluidity, change and fragmentation rather than by the more linear progression of gay and lesbian coming-out narratives evolving around discovering one’s ‘core’ or ‘truth’ (Plummer, 1995); also signalling parallels with Storr’s (1999) work, who suggests bisexual narratives to be postmodern rather than modernist.

A construction of queer as a way of thinking, whether explicitly as ‘mindset’ or more implicitly, might play into critics of queer who suggests it merely exists ‘in the head’ (Halperin, 1995). However, a queer self-understanding does have real-life consequences in terms of gender and sexual identities and expressions, as seen in people’s accounts of greater ‘freedom’. Furthermore, when Beau expresses “I think I identify as queer and also live very queer (...) [regarding] sexuality and also politics”, it is emphasised that queer is not just a way of thinking but also a way of living or *doing*. The way queer as *thinking* and *doing* merge, is observable in Cem’s narrative around queer:

It’s about the ability to change yourself and accepting any difference, for instance; what makes me queer in the first place is practicing polyamory (...) I have two boyfriends, lovely boyfriends, I love them both they love me both, they know each other and they respect each other (...) This is being totally queer to me, I mean it’s beyond sexuality, it’s just

breaking the very structure, the very perception of relationship[s], the perception of marriage of one love and one home and loyalty (...) it's just for me in that way I'm very queer from the rest of the population, to accept that loyalty is not actually not having sex except with your partner but just being true to your partner at all times. I've changed myself in this way, and I'm gay in this way, that makes me queer.

Thus, though Cem stresses that – to him – queer is “a state of mind” and that this mindset is both ‘different’ and ‘changing’, he points out the real-life signifiers of this state of mind which ‘makes’ him queer. In particular, his changing or different perceptions around loyalty are connected to ‘being’ queer in the way he practices polyamory. Finally, where the last sections emphasised the *personal* aspects of ‘letting go’ of norms around gender and sexuality; a ‘queer consciousness’ (though not always framed in these terms) is sometimes seen as statement or *politics* as well (eleven people). As Stefan remarks:

For me it is an ideal that you support and that you thus won't hide (...) so for example my mom saw me wearing lipstick and asked ‘yes but won't you be beaten up in the street?’, those kind of things won't hold me back (...) I can't imagine queers in general being very quietly queer (...) it's a kind of an in-your-face thing.

Though Stefan discusses queer here as statement, and even notes that he sees queer as “inherent[ly]” political, most participants emphasise the personal aspects of queer (eight out of eleven people). These participants thus recognized political aspects but highlighted their personal motivations for a queer identification. For example, while Beau asserts queer is “political because there is no other option”, Rik sees queer at this moment of his life as “very personal”. Nevertheless, Rik – as well as other participants emphasising the personal aspects of queer – still give accounts of trying to create awareness or getting across a message to other people.

### **3.4 Queer paradoxes**

Narratives of queer identification were on the one hand centred around giving meaning to the term, with notions like ‘boxes’, openness and freedom, while on the other hand people recognized the contradictions in defining a term deemed indefinable. Furthermore, while ‘queer’ was mostly established in inclusive terms, value-judgements about non-queer people or people ‘not queer enough’ were especially encountered in narratives around people's own experiences within the queer community or scene. These two topics will be discussed below.

In general, most participants (nine) said they rarely called themselves queer to other (non-queer) people for example “because a lot of people just don’t really know what it is” (Stefan). This relative unknown status of queer in society suggests that, at least in the Netherlands, queer functions not so much as ‘reclaimed’ term as in the English-speaking world. Furthermore, it corresponds with Sanger’s findings around transgender identities; who notes that articulating one-self can be problematic due to risks of misunderstandings in a society employed with “binary understanding of identity” (2010: 266). However, participants also expressed hesitance to call themselves queer for other reasons. Firstly, some people did not call themselves queer because “then you put yourself in a sort of box again” (Aafke). Relatedly, many participants stressed the ‘different’ meaning of queer in that it is supposed to be a term not rigidly defined, or “a table is a table, but queer is fill in blank” (Casper). The following quote illustrates this:

Usually I also tell people; yes I am (name) because that’s my name. Because the moment I would say to people ‘I am queer’, and they don’t know me, then they want to know the boundaries and definition of that box while there isn’t really one, it is really free. I mean, if you’re straight you can also call yourself queer. It’s such a mixed group. (Nieke)

Thus, as Nieke’s quote reflects, calling yourself queer could contradict its meaning (as anti-identity) with no rigid definitions *and* could falsely imply a homogenous group of queers to those people not familiar with queer or the queer scene. Rather, many people chose to explain views on (their) gender and/or sexuality, as well as tried to create awareness of ‘queer’ issues through discussions and/or statements, without necessary mentioning queer as term. Contrastingly, some people did use queer as identification more consistently to other (non-queer) people; usually those leaning heavier on the political aspects of queer. For instance, Lacey asserts that she calls herself queer “98% of the time” while using it deliberately in different ways, for example as a political statement in opposing to questions about her sexuality or “flaunting the personal side” when socializing in a bar. Different strategies are thus used to solve the tension, noticed by Escoffier & Bérubé in their account on Queer Nation (in Duggan, 1992: 228), between affirming queer as new identity while simultaneously rejecting restrictive identities.

The way participants narrated queer as inclusive term entails a second potential paradox to explore. Many participants stressed that queer can potentially include anyone *regardless* of gender, sexuality or other ‘differences’. Indeed, most participants asserted that straight (cisgendered) people can be queer too. For example, Lacey explains: “I used to say, straight people can be queer, cause to me it’s a mindset, (...) it’s a perspective, it’s not

necessarily something that has to be so personal". Here, she relates the inclusiveness of the term with its definition as 'mindset' which potentially anyone can 'possess'. Though Lacey claimed that judging whether or not others are queer "ruins the entire nature of the idea", most participants mentioned some 'conditions' for people to be queer usually framed in terms of "openness" (Dani) or an "appreciation of difference" (Cem). However, two annotations have to be made questioning the inclusiveness of queer. Firstly, a conception of queer as state of mind or consciousness can carry a value judgement about non-queer people or people 'not queer enough'. Beau recognized this by noting:

Queers can bash against the outside world, and then they can become very know-it-all and critique other people for not being open-minded. But then I think, wait a second, can you understand these people's perspective?

Beau's story, also mentioning how some queer people attack others for "speaking from privilege", resonates with Puar's argument that queer can become regulatory (for example) by equating queerness with transgression (2007: 11-24). Secondly, on a more theoretical level it can be questioned whether 'queer' is accessible to all people. Many people in this study were not only 'white' but also belonged to the middle-class and were high educated. Indeed, Floor feels that within the queer scene "a certain level of academic thinking" is sometimes expected. Thus, though the queer initiatives and scenes people talked about where usually non-commercial spaces, it could be argued that 'cultural capital' is vital in accessing queer 'thought' and spaces (Bourdieu, 1986). This corresponds with narratives around norms *within* the queer community or scene; whereby some participants mentioned norms around looks (six people), and also around a certain way of *thinking* and *being* (five people). Observations of social norms around looks in the queer scene connect to Taylor's argument that queer identity, especially when associated with a certain performativity signified through appearance, might only be available for those with "the social, cultural and economic capital to decode and decipher and even degrade these appearances" (2009: 202). Furthermore, experiences or observations of participants around these social norms within the queer scene, including bi- and heterophobia (Lacey and Beau), lends support to Kirsch' (2000) suggestions that for *some* people queer might be a 'resistance identity' (derived from Castells, 2004) which allows excluding people based on their style of clothing to gender (of partners). In the following extract, Lacey discusses several social norms in the queer scene:

L. Realistically I think we all do this, we want to find people that are like us, and being like us is sharing qualities, and so, there's a particular kind of stereotype of the Amsterdam queer, but I don't think it's a vast set of rules.

R. But it's more about your looks then, those social norms, or is there something else as well?

L. It's probably more on looks, I'm sure there are a couple other social norms, but yeah I don't know.

R. Like what?

L. It's like this expectation of being a certain, being so progressive or a certain version of liberal, (pause) how do I put it? I don't want to, I feel like I'm just going to start queer bashing, I'm not trying to do that because again I think to some extent it's normal. But as a good queer you need to be totally liberated, and be able to run around naked, and be able to do all these kind of crazy things, and you need to be able to be open, and maybe kissing multiple people, can at least discuss polyamory in your relationship. Kind of stuff like that, where you're supposed to assume all of these things, where I don't think any individual necessarily should.

There are a couple elements in this quote worth discussing. Firstly, Lacey not only observes certain norms around looks resulting in a 'stereotype of the Amsterdam queer'; but also mentions normative expectations of thinking and being 'progressive' or liberated especially in a sexual sense. Secondly, there is a hesitance in her discussion of these topics in not wanting to 'start queer bashing', which was more often observable in other participant's answers around social norms in queer scenes or spaces. The four other participants also mentioning social norms (apart from looks) lend support to Lacey's observations; for example when Martin tells: "someone told that he was in a monogamous relationship and people were like, [even more] the fact that he had a relationship they thought was strange, and that it was monogamous (...) It's more that people were surprised than that it's totally unaccepted [but] I think there are certain expectations". Furthermore, Alex observes – what s/he calls – 'radical queers' sometimes expect others to rebel against "anything mainstream" such as "beauty-ideals or not wanting to work in the corporate world". The way Lacey explains these norms as 'something we all do' and as normal 'to some extent' could be seen as defensive, but is also nuanced and realistic; similar to how Alex ends his story about exclusions in the queer scene with "we're all still people".

### 3.5. Queer frictions

The last section ended with some possible ‘frictions’ or ‘silences’ around the issue of social norms within the queer scene or community. This section will explore some of these frictions further, with attention to individual differences between participants. Firstly, it will be discussed how participants distinguished between queer scenes and ‘mainstream’ gay scenes; which stands in sharp contrast to the way in which one of the participants not yet discussed (Ron) defines queer. Secondly, some frictions around queer as ‘intersectional’ and political will be explored.

Participants’ narratives discussed so far break with an ‘old’ definition of queer as synonym for lesbian and gay (and bisexual/transgender), sometimes explicitly as when Floor notes “I always felt queer but I called myself lesbian, because queer doesn’t define to whom you are attracted”. Indeed, some participants object to queer as (merely) euphemism for gay or as umbrella term by stating “nowadays it’s also kind of the new word for gay; queer is the new gay. And I find that a bit unfortunate because then the term dilutes and then I can’t use it as an anti-label anymore” (Beau). Furthermore, as discussed before, many participants felt that the term – especially when seen as ‘mindset’ – could apply to anyone regardless of sexual or gender identity. Thus, though all participants could probably ‘fit in’ with a queer definition referring to all nonnormative gender or sexual identities and practices, and though their experiences around gender and sexuality often led to a queer identification, in their narratives queer does not necessarily mean one *should* inhabit these ‘differences’. However, an important exception must be noted, since one participant (Ron) saw queer as “the same as gay or (...) GLBT, (...) in the past we were faggots; well actually to me it means the same”. Ron sees queer thus as term mainly taken on by a younger generation of gay and lesbian people who seek their identity in new words. Though identifying as LGBT is to him an inherent part of queer, he also notes being queer is “the way you shape your deviant orientation (...) it stops with being queer the moment you stop expressing who you are, then it’s not queer anymore”. Indeed, he stresses visibility and elsewhere argues that not only sexual preferences should be accepted but lifestyles that could “also be queer” because of their deviance. Nevertheless, Ron’s narrative is more structured around queer as gay, contrasting with most people in this study who did not only differ between queer and other terms; but also differed between gay and queer spaces or scenes. For example, Cem tells:

I first took him [a friend] to the most mainstream gay bar in Amsterdam, and that all the guys were like (...) from mid-twenties to mid-thirties, white, pumped-up, muscled, no hair, well shaved, well-shaped, (...), white tight T-shirts, and just looking to each other, rubbing to each other, I mean come on, and then I showed him that, and then luckily it was the [queer festival] (...) I told him, this is the mainstream Dutch gay bar, it was very mainstream right, and now I'm going to take you to another place and I just took him to [queer space], and he was amazed by the difference: all the same type of guys [versus] all the different kind of people; women, men, transgender, transsexual, drag, different colours, different people from different countries, different ethnicities, different accents, different smells, clothes you know. That was a very queer party in the [queer festival]. So yeah there I've seen the queer scene so to say.

Thus, queer spaces are here narrated as alternative as opposed to 'mainstream' gay spaces, underscoring Taylor's findings of the queer music scene in Brisbane (Australia), whereby queer was distinguished from gay by (for example) "visual style, politics, tastes, forms of cultural participation" and age (2000: 901). Overall, these narratives correspond with Hines empirical work on (queer) trans subjectivities in relation to space, who suggests that "identification is dependent upon disidentification" (2010: 606). Thus when these narratives of (dis)identification are connected with previous narratives around social norms within the queer scene; links can be made with Hines' finding that all spaces, whether the workplace or the own ('imagined') trans community, both constrain and enable queer subjectivities in different ways.

The literature review suggested that queer as term is also used to express 'intersecting selves' (Goldman, 1996). Though most participants' expressed an awareness of this definition, many also noted that they "focus mainly on gender and sexuality, because that has been a struggle for me personally" (Alex). Thus, asking Martin if he thought anything else was important besides gender and sexuality with regard to queer, he responded:

I would see thinking in boxes as very broad term. Queer is a bit overarching, but I usually don't use it like that, while racism and sexism should be out of the question. I don't use queer for those things necessarily, but it's all part of it in my opinion. But that's also because you shouldn't think in prejudices or boxes, also regarding skin colour or male/female.

Reference to ethnicity was usually only made when participants described the queer scene or community whereby, noteworthy, some people saw the queer scene as very diverse, also in terms of ethnicity or cultural backgrounds, while others noted this diversity to be limited. The relative silence on 'race' by most of the participants arguably lends support to

Rigg's argument that "the very fact that it is most often left *unsaid* represent the queer underpinnings of white hegemony – whiteness is queer in the sense that it relies upon being the unmarked norm, upon that which is *not* seen by those of us who are white, at the very same time as it is clearly enunciated and enacted in everyday life" (2010: 347). Furthermore, religion was rarely mentioned, except a few times when relating it to queer issues in negative terms or when relating 'being' queer to being non-religious. It could be questioned whether any conflation of queer as necessarily opposed to religion can be signalled here (Puar, 2007). Besides, disability was mentioned by two participants, one participant noted "diversity in abledness" to be part of queer; while Beau compared the Dutch queer scene to visiting American queer scenes and noticed in the latter a much stronger Disability Movement and more diversity in terms of people with disabilities. Lastly, in the following quote Lacey relates queer to worker's rights (movement):

It's more; it's looking at the intersections. Because it's not just I want the right to have whoever I want in my bedroom but knowing that the system, for instance marriage, is a little broken. (...) Queer challenges all of those structures not just one of them. In terms of boxes, I don't just want to fight so that we can have multiple genders, I don't just want to fight so that people can sleep with people of the same sex because it's bigger than that (...) [For example] there was a big thing on Labour Day about the worker's rights movements and why it's important as a queer community to support the worker's rights, and the domestic labour laws, and it's a critical intersection of these people to do that.

Lacey was one of the few participants to stress queer as 'intersectional' in this way. For most others, queer intersections were acknowledged but, besides those around gender and sexuality, were rarely elaborated upon or given as examples of queer meanings. It could thus be argued that, though there was a commitment on a 'theoretical' level to think intersectional and though some stressed that queer had implications beyond gender and sexuality, the latter two intersections were – usually given in from people's own experiences – mostly addressed.



## Conclusion

The objective of this dissertation was not to impose a predetermined meaning of queer on the participants in this study, but rather to provide an analysis of the ways in which queer people give meaning to a queer self-understanding in relation to lived experiences of gender and sexuality. Given in by the relative neglect of engaging with queer people's lived experiences in both queer theory and sociology, this study placed queer people at the core of its research. By investigating how participants construct their identities, it questioned what queer people make out of the multiple meanings or essentially contested status of 'queer', as well as how they negotiate possible tensions in claiming an identity deemed indefinable, fluid and always in formation (Jagose, 1996).

Narratives around queer identification were structured by the participants' experiences, identities, practices and expressions of gender and sexuality. This also means that most participants (thirteen) break with an 'old' definition of queer as synonym for gay. Rather, through opposing to 'boxes' and notions around 'freedom', queer is seen as radically different term which challenges "the very nature of sexual [and gender] identity categorization" (Levy & Johnson, 2011: 132). The way participants narrated experiences around 'not fitting in', freedom through a 'search' and accounts of 'change'; questioning the normative workings as well as the stability of gender and sexual categories. Furthermore, the participants did not only oppose to rigidly defined boxes or labels by giving account of their own 'unstable' gender identity or expressions and/or sexual identity or practices but also questioned the conflation of sexuality with gender by narrating sexuality in more complex term than 'merely' a preference for gender. Hall's observation that identity "only achieves its position through the narrow eye of the negative" thereby producing a "Manichean set of opposites" (1991: 21) was encountered in the way queer was narrated as opposed to other labels such as 'woman' or 'gay'. Queer was established as 'different' from those other labels, usually through constructions of queer as a way of thinking or a (more consciously developed) 'mindset'; thereby breaking with coming-out narratives evolving around a 'discovery' of one's inner nature (Plummer, 1995). This was reinforced in narratives of the participants who stressed the political aspects of queer, and who thereby broke with a conflation of queer as (merely) an umbrella term for a never-ending 'alphabet soup', instead underscoring the idea that queer people are "not united by any unitary identity but only by their opposition to disciplining normalizing social forces" (Seidman, 1993: 133).

Some limitations of queer identity, whether as encountered in this study or (partly) as due to limitations of this study, can be signalled. Firstly, some participants stressed the personal sides of queer which raises doubts whether “political organizing around a common identity” is achieved or even admired (Taylor & Whittier, 1992: 105). In other words, the political aspirations of queer people and the political potential of queer identity can be questioned, which plays into critiques of queer as individualised politics of lifestyle (Edwards, 1998) or what Halberstam called a form of individualised “transgressive exceptionalism” (2005: 19). Indeed, many participants seemed to have most difficulty with answering questions regarding whether they *do* anything different (since they identify) as queer. However, accounts of queer as ‘doing’ and living still became apparent in the participants’ narratives. Furthermore, the research design of this project, with its focus on identity through stories, may have facilitated this ‘silence’ on ‘doing’ queer. As Vallochi (2005) has argued, ethnographic research might be more enabling for an interrogation of individuals’ actual behaviour and, indeed, for an analysis of the incongruities between this ‘behaviour’ and people’s accounts around identification.

Secondly, an awareness of queer as an intersectional term and commitment to ‘intersectionality’ – at least on a ‘theoretical’ level – was witnessed. However, references in which participants opposed to dominant norms and constructions *outside* of gender and sexuality were rare. This may lend support to observations regarding the privileging of sexuality (and sometimes gender) in queer constructions of identity; as when Rigg’s (2010) argues that it might be possible for ‘white’ middle-class queers to focus upon the latter category mainly or only because of the privileged status of the former categories in society; and possibly even the assured status of ‘whiteness’ in queer constructions. Furthermore, Cohen argues that when people “activate only one characteristic of their identity, or a single perspective of consciousness” it is in fact limiting to “the comprehensive and transformational character of queer politics” (1997: 441). These concerns need to be taken into account; especially with an eye on the former ‘limitation’ questioning the political effectiveness of queer.

Thirdly, though queer was mostly established in inclusive terms through notions as ‘mindset’, whereby boundaries of group identity were extended rather than fixed (Steinberg, 1998), observations and experiences around exclusions become apparent in participants’ narratives on social norms within the queer scene. As could be argued, queer as a resistance identity can become defensive in reversing “the value judgement while reinforcing the boundary” of excluders and excluded (Castells, 2004: 9). By taking into

account suggestions regarding the need of 'cultural capital' to access queer identity and spaces (Bourdieu, 1986; Taylor, 2009), the inclusivity of 'queer' is further challenged.

Nevertheless, queer as "a state of mind" – though not narrated by everyone in those terms – suggests a radical break with previous identity categories encompassing "defiance, celebration and refusal within its remit" (Giffney, 2009: 2). Indeed, perhaps contrary to the subtitle of this dissertation (which refers to identity twice); participants carefully narrated their queer self-understanding. Thus, when Judith Butler stated "I worry when 'queer' becomes an identity. It was never an identity. It was always a critique of identity, I think if it ceases to be a critique of identity, it's lost its critical edge" (2007: n.p.) this concern could – based on this research – possibly be eliminated. Rather, people's identity formations as queer are characterised by fragmentation and by an awareness of the paradoxes in defining queer and claiming a queer identity. It is questionable whether queer also signals a more 'collective identity' enabling transformation of the overall social structure (Castells, 2004), or whether it is used for "urgent and expanding political purposes" (Butler, 1993: 228). Nevertheless; at the very least queers' 'critical edge' is apparent in queer people's narratives around gender and sexuality, in which a queer self-understanding has played an enabling role for the participants in this study to question normative expectations from society and to incorporate those challenges in the way they think about and express their own 'queer' selves.

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## **Appendix 1: The participants**

Below are brief descriptions of the participants, based on the interviews but confirmed and sometimes changed by participants themselves. All names have been changed, occupations have been left out or slightly changed to more general terms for reasons of anonymity. Class and ethnicity are only listed when participants gave this information. Ages were given at the time of the interview (June/July 2013).

**Aafke** is a 25 year old university student who lives in Nijmegen. She describes her gender as 'I don't want to make that choice. I accepted I'm biologically a woman and I relate to myself as such but I like to bend the gender. I don't live up to the normative rules for boys or girls, as far as I know them anyway. One day I end up being more feminine, the other time more boyish. I feel comfortable with that, it's society who seems to be confused by it'. She describes her sexuality as 'it is the person I'm attracted to and not their sex'.

**Alex** is 26 years old and lives in Amsterdam with hir partner, with whom s/he has an open relationship. S/he works in the film industry. S/he is 'white' Dutch and from a middle class background. S/he describes hir gender as 'genderqueer, transgender, boi' and hir sexuality as 'queer or pansexual, with a preference for female bodies'.

**Beau** is 38 years old and lives in Amsterdam. Beau is 'white' and from a working-class background. Beau describes it's gender as 'I don't have a male or female identity, I have an it-identity, so I really cannot relate my own gender to men or women, I cannot relate to male or female. (...) So I think my gender identity is probably the most important, namely that I don't have one'. Beau describes it's sexuality as 'I am sexual'.

**Casper** is 23 years old and lives in Utrecht. He is translator. He describes his gender as 'male (...) cisgendered' and his sexuality as 'I find the term heterosexual appropriate for that, but it is not very rigid for me. Who knows, I might once meet that one guy, but yeah, I have to say that until now I have only been attracted to women. So that's closest to the truth'.

**Cem** is 28 years old and lives in Amsterdam. He is from Turkey, and has been living in the Netherlands for three years. He is in a polyamorous relationship with his two boyfriends. He describes his gender as 'male' and his sexuality as 'I don't have a sexuality,... (but) I am a sexual person'.

**Dani** is 30 years old and lives in Amsterdam. She is 'white' Dutch and from a middle-class background. She describes her gender as 'I feel like a woman but I interpret that freely (...) I actually feel more somewhere in between'. She is non-monogamous and describes her sexuality as 'I now have a preference for women, though they can be pretty masculine, or also very feminine, it is actually just very changeable'.

**Floor** is 38 years old and lives in Utrecht. She is 'white' Dutch and from an upper-middle class background. She describes her gender as 'I have difficulty with the role of or the concept of woman, because I feel more like a girl or a tomboy instead of a mature woman'. She describes her sexuality as 'lesbian... [although] transformable and adaptable'.

**Joyce** is 28 years old and lives in Amsterdam. She is 'white' Dutch and from a middle-class background. She is porn researcher and maker. She describes her gender as 'I am a woman, or they say so. I rather not describe my gender (...), I am happy with my body, but I find it unnecessary and stigmatizing to need to call it woman'. She is non-monogamous and describes her sexuality as 'developed, interested and it has a high priority in my life'.

**Lacey** is 25 years old and from New York. She is a 'white' American and from an upper middle-class background. She lives in Amsterdam to pursue her Master's degree, though she has been in the Netherlands for a total period of two years. She describes her gender as 'I consider myself a cisfemale, I'm female-bodied and I fit within the femininity spectrum'. She describes her sexuality as 'it's so cliché, I really like people and it doesn't really matter what bodies they're in as long as I enjoy the person. And it sounds so silly but I think that's pretty true'.



**Martin** is 33 years old and lives in Nijmegen. He is 'white' Dutch and from a middle class background. He works in the health care sector. He describes his gender as 'male (...) but I have to say I am really annoyed by people who say things have to be masculine (...) I really don't mind putting on a dress for parties, in that case I rather like being a man in a dress'. He describes his sexuality as 'I am mostly attracted to men (...) but I don't want to exclude anything'.

**Nieke** is a 37 year old artist who lives in Rotterdam. She describes her gender as 'it depends on the day. I think if I would really need to label it I would [choose] the androgynous label, because it gives a kind of space, it can be masculine, it can be feminine, it can be somewhere in between'. She describes her sexuality as 'I am attracted to women'.

**Rik** is 62 years old and lives in Amsterdam. He is a Caucasian Dutch man and from a middle class background. He describes his gender as 'I am born male, but I actually really like to show my feminine side every once in a while. Yes, I like to play with that, although I am totally happy with my body.' He describes his sexuality as 'I express my sexuality with men, but I don't exclude that the expression of my sexuality with women or transgender people might happen sometime in the future. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have thought of that'.

**Ron** is 46 years old and lives in a city in North-Holland. He is 'white' Dutch and belongs to the middle or upper middle class. He works in the health care sector and is father of two children. He describes his gender as 'male' and his sexuality as 'homosexual'.

**Stefan** is a 23 years old student and lives in Utrecht. He is 'white' Dutch and from a working-class background. He has a girlfriend with whom he has a 'hetero-monogamous and homo-polygamous' relationship. He describes his gender as 'masculine man playing with feminine contrasts' and his sexuality as 'heterosexual with a homosexual side'.

## Appendix 2: Interview guide

### Identification as queer

- Could you describe yourself?
- Why do you identify as queer?
- Since when / what made you identify this way? Particular event/person/or else?
- What does 'queer' mean to you?
- (How) is identifying as queer different for you than (previous) identifications as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or otherwise?
- Do you always identify this way? And/or only in certain contexts? And/or do you have other ways you identify or describe yourself?
- Do you have any particular political motives for identifying this way? Do you see queer as something political?
- Is there anything you *do* different as a queer person or since you identify this way? (what do you do/ actions)

### Relational aspect of identification as queer

- Could you describe others who identify as queer?
- Could you describe differences between queer people and other ('non-queer') people?

### Gender and sexuality

- How would you describe your gender?
- How would you describe your sexuality?

### Other social differences

- Could you think of anything else important regarding your identification as queer?
- E.g. 'Race'/ethnicity, class, occupation/education, disability, age, etc.

### Queer community

- Do you feel there is a queer community? Could you describe it?
- Do you feel you are part of this community?

- (How) was meeting other people important for you to identify this way?

#### Acceptance, discrimination and inequalities

- How is to be queer in your community (including friends, work and family)?
- How is it to be queer in larger society? Do you feel there are particular misunderstandings or stereotypes?
- (How) do you feel you have any difficulties because of your identification as queer?
- (How) do you feel you have ever been discriminated or treated differently than others?

Is there anything else you would like to add about your identification as queer?

## Appendix 3: Plain Language Statement and Consent Form



### Plain Language Statement

#### 1. Study title and Researcher Details

University:	University of Glasgow
School area:	School of Social and Political Sciences
Title project:	<b>Queer Identities</b>
Researcher details:	<b>Raisa Hehenkamp</b>
E-mail:	2054638h@student.gla.ac.uk
Phone number:	(+31) 0648472191
Supervisor details:	Dr. Matthew Waites
E-mail:	Matthew.Waites@glasgow.ac.uk
Phone number:	(+44) (0)1413304049
Degree for undertaken study:	Master of Science; Equality & Human Rights

#### 2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

#### 3. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to gain insights into how people who self-identify as 'queer' construct their identities. In particular, it is researched what being queer means to different people. The study will address how people understand 'queer'; what it means to them, why they identify this way and how it is different from or similar to other identifications. The focus is thus on your views, opinions, and experiences of identifying as queer.

The data collection will take place from 22/05/2013 until 31/08/2013 and the end date for this entire research project is 10/09/2013.

#### 4. Why have I been chosen?

You were one of the about 10-20 participants selected on basis of their identification as queer.

## **5. Do I have to take part?**

The decision to take part in this study is entirely voluntarily. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

## **6. What will happen to me if I take part?**

An interview will be conducted which will last for about an hour and which will be audio-taped. The researcher will ask you (open-ended) questions which you are free (not) to answer.

## **7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All information, which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by an ID number and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

## **8. What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results will be used for a publically accessible Master's dissertation. If desired, an electronic copy of the dissertation will be send to you after completion in September 2013. Only pseudonyms will be used and any information that might lead to your identification (e.g. occupation) will be removed or changed to ensure anonymity. Transcripts and research data will be destroyed after the research project is completed, and electronic data will be secured in an encrypted save to which no others than the researcher have access. If you participate, you should understand that your (anonymised) comments may be used in publications or a PhD project that might arise out of this project in the upcoming twenty years.

## **9. Who is organising the research?**

This research is carried out as part of the researcher's Master degree Equality & Human Rights.

## **10. Who has reviewed the study?**

This project has been reviewed by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

## **11. Contact for Further Information**

You can contact the researcher or supervisor via the contact details under question 1. If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research project that they can contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer by contacting Professor John McKernan at [John.McKernan@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:John.McKernan@glasgow.ac.uk).

