

## Chapter 2

# The Mis-education of Lady Gaga: Confronting Essentialist Claims in the Sex and Gender Classroom

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### 2.1 Context

As the “go-to” professor who teaches all things “sex, gender and sexuality” at my small, private liberal arts institution I am often asked by students if we are born with our sexual identity. I find this comment intriguing for a few reasons. First, my students are extremely savvy when it comes to the social construction of gender. They know the limits of the heterosexual matrix and they realize that gender is something that society created to enact boundaries. Second, students who were initially able to engage in a critical analysis regarding the social construction of gender seem to lose this insight when it comes to discussing sexuality. This point is not lost on me as the classroom instructor, for it is a common belief among Westerners that “being gay” is something that exists naturally in the U.S. population (Blank 2012, p. 152). The understandings students take away regarding the social impact on gender slips away as they attempt to confront sexual identity categories in the United States that have long believed homosexuality to be natural or instinctual, even though most of what our bodies actually do is social. Even when students accept that the categories themselves (e.g. “gay” or “straight”) have been socially constructed they are not willing to extend this line of thought to what actual bodies do or desire. Indeed, many students fear that if they acknowledge their gender or sexual identity as a social construction, and not something solely rooted in biology, then their identity is simply a matter of choice with no real social consequences.

My challenge at the start of the semester is to posit the discourse of sexuality as social, much like I do with any explanations of sex and gender. This idea can be off-putting because mass media content and general student education presumes a “born this way” trope. The “born this way” trope popularized (at least in my

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students' minds) by pop singer Lady Gaga acts as a nascent starting point in my endeavor to uncover the origin stories of sexuality as purely "natural" or "biological" that have been passed along to us. By using Lady Gaga's song as an exemplar students more easily permit themselves (and me) to investigate the rich intersections of gender and sexuality that no doubt play a role in how individuals see themselves as sexual beings. From my perspective as the "classroom navigator," waiting to see whether sexual identity is the product of biological essentialism or social constructionism seems unproductive. Like most social phenomena, I want my students to consider that it is likely a combination of both.

In this essay I discuss various class strategies I have found successful to confront this biological or "born this way" trope with regard to sexual identity. One of the most successful strategies I employ with students is to help them trace the current sexuo-political landscape in U.S. society. Since this landscape is usually rooted in the idea of nature or the natural, I use this as my starting point. As Lenore Tiefer (2004) writes on the topic of human sexuality, "... by reducing sexuality to the biological, I think we've got the cart before the horse..." (p. 3) And so my role as educator is to at least disassemble the cart (human sexuality) before we even think about finding a horse to pull it. To be sure, discussions on human sexuality as something that is *not* instinctual or a biological given is no easy task—but it can be accomplished by reminding our students that what is done with whom and why is mostly an aspect of the social world, and has very little to do with biology. It is pertinent that we remind students that while categories are powerful, they are also socially constructed and thus, can be socially dismantled. Like Tiefer (2004), Halberstam (2012) also tells us that there are no "essential sets of traits, desires, or indications" that define gender—today available gender categories are inadequate (p. 71). This is the discourse we can use in the classroom to counter essentialist theories of sex and gender.

To counter this essentialist (biological) discourse, I introduce the concept of "choice" in relation to social constructionism in an attempt to critically engage meaning-making systems. In other words, if we want to describe the sexual identity "bisexual" we might fill this category with social understandings of what we think a bisexual person is. Because these ideologies are the result of social processes and not a process of say, neuroscience or genetics, students come to think about categories as rooted in social meanings that may or may not include biological components. More specifically, if my students believe that sexuality is unchangeable, fated, or predetermined then they will develop little insight into how sexual identities are largely predicated on heteronormativity; and heteronormativity remains unexamined. Further, because heterosexuality is not viewed as a "choice," non-straight (les/bi/gay) who attempt to describe their identity by using "choice" language are considered abject in a society that emphasizes heterosexuality as naturally occurring and normative.

## 2.2 “Born This Way” Anthem

Since its release on February 11, 2011, the “Born this Way” (Lady Gaga) album and song acted as the premier anthem to many lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual youth and adults. Selling over one million copies in the first week, and six million worldwide ([www.billboard.com](http://www.billboard.com)), this feel-good anthem of empowerment and identity recognition is no doubt powerful as told in the following lyrics:

A different lover is not a sin  
Believe capital H-I-M (hey, hey, hey)  
I love my life, I love this record and  
Mi amore vole fe yah (love needs faith)

I’m beautiful in my way  
‘Cause God makes no mistakes  
I’m on the right track, baby  
I was born this way

Don’t hide yourself in regret  
Just love yourself and you’re set  
I’m on the right track, baby  
I was born this way

From this cursory read of some of Gaga’s lyrics—which reflect a discourse in broader society—it is clear why students might challenge my insistence that sexuality is social. If, as Gaga so aptly puts it, “‘Cause God makes no mistakes,” then how can the social environment and social structure play a role in one’s sexual identity? In other words, Lady Gaga’s lyrics exemplify the reductive, essentialist paradigm that sociologists have worked tirelessly to avoid. Conventional knowledge about sexuality, which Gaga’s song works off of, tends to locate one’s “true” sexual identity as being rooted in the “natural” or the “biological,” and thus authentic. Biological propositions are also a form of essentialism. Essentialist theories hold that: (1) one’s sexual identity is based on absolute “truths”; (2) sexual categories are based on the “natural” and are therefore fixed and unchanging; and (3) biological givens determine one’s “true” sexual identity (Seidman 2009). These essentialist conditions are not only prevalent in Gaga’s lyrics but in the minds of many undergraduate students. In order to contradict this ready script of essentialism the “Born this Way” anthem provokes, I point to social theorists like J. Jack Halberstam (2012) who sees Lady Gaga as combatting essentialist stereotypes. Halberstam reminds us that while Lady Gaga’s politics do not always debunk the status quo, her personae does. Halberstam posits something called “gaga feminism,” or a “hypothetical form of feminism” that resides in the crevices of the “what” and the “if” (p. 8). So while the “Born this Way” anthem may be politics as usual, Halberstam encourages questions that disrupt the neat binaries of sex and gender, much like Lady Gaga herself. Gaga feminists might ask, “What if we gendered people according to their behavior” or “What if gender shifted over the course of a lifetime” (Halberstam 2012, p. 8).

Using the “Born this Way” anthem to extoll essentialist claims, the task is then to move students to a different frame, or at least a frame that allows for a social interpretation of sexual identity. This is the work of the sociologist. Largely leaving

behind biological and reductionist paradigms, sociologists tend to look for alternatives to essentialist claims by turning to the lens of social constructionism. A social constructionist approach emphasizes the idea that sexual identity is influenced by beliefs and ideologies that come from broader social structures. In the next section I turn to how students might view sexuality as a social project (and not only a biological one) to uncover the social structures and meaning-making systems that influence sexualities.

## 2.3 Sexuality and Social Constructionism

While biological arguments should not be entirely dismissed, these explanations are largely inconsistent with how people come to understand their sexual identity, especially when one's sexual identity is examined within the two-and-only-two sex/gender/sexuality matrix that I explain next. Even though lived experience informs us that sexual (and gendered) lives are rarely so static, but are usually dynamic, these irregularities and inconsistencies are ignored. Instead they are summed up and assumed under binary, dichotomous, and "either/or" categories (Ault 1996; Butler 1993; Hemmings 2002; Lorber 1994, 1996). The intersection of gender and sexuality shows that these categories are insufficient.

Much of the current sociological research on sexuality calls into question the either/or dualism of sex, gender and sexuality or what is commonly referred to as a "two-and-only-two" system of gender stratification (Garfinkel 1967; Rubin 1975; Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lorber 1994, 1996) that renders gender as systematically and inherently related to one's sex and sexuality. For example, if one's biological sex is male, one's gender is assumed to be masculine and women are understood to be the focus of one's sexual desire. This concept works similarly for a biological female, as she learns that her femininity is associated with having sexual relationships exclusively with men. Hence, some logical (i.e., natural) connection between gender and sexuality is assumed to exist. These assumed connections between individual's sex, gender, and sexuality is called the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix, at first glance, seems to work easily enough: if your biological sex category is male, for example, then the heterosexual matrix predicts your gender presentation as masculine, and as a result you should be attracted to women. The matrix works similarly for biological females whose gender presentation is feminine and will thus be attracted to men. The heterosexual matrix makes the assumption that one's gender is somehow systematically or inherently related to one's biological sex and sexual identity. As Harold Garfinkel (1967) pointed out, at the end of the day, we see persons as either male or female, masculine or feminine, and consequently as heterosexual or homosexual. According to the work of sociologist Judith Lorber (1994, 1996), most sociological research designs tend to function within this contrived sex/gender/sexuality paradigm and, hence, assume that one's sex, gender, and sexuality remain both congruent and unchanged throughout one's life. This sex/gender/sexuality paradigm underpins much of how students connect

gendered understandings to sexual ones. This is best seen through the amount of time, research, and money invested in the science of “gaydar,” which I look at in the next section.

## 2.4 Biological Revivalism and the Science of “Gaydar”

Thinking back to Gaga’s anthem, the song ends with the following lyric repeated over and over—“Same DNA, I’m born this way/Same DNA, I’m born this way.” Gaga’s reference to DNA is not arbitrary to the discussion of sexuality. In fact, one of the major obstacles to teaching the idea that sexuality is a social phenomenon is that most students’ knowledge of sexuality has been rooted in a medicalized and biological model. This is ever-present in research that uses magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or brain scanning to determine one’s sexual identity. Students are also aware of the decade long human genome project which attempted (to no avail) to find a “gay gene.” Philosopher Hanne Blank’s research reminds us “no one knows whether heterosexuality is the result of nature or nurture” (2012, p. 41). If this were the case, then why would we know any different for homosexuality (or bisexuality, or lesbianism, etc.)? Why are we looking for a “gay gene” and not a “sexuality” or “straight gene”?

For research endeavors using neuroimaging or brain scanning to be valid, heterosexuality (or homosexuality) would have to be demonstrated in some objective way. In other words, we would need to quantify it in some measurable way without bias. Because live humans are always the subjects of these sorts of studies, it is impossible to remove the human bias. Critics might counteract that we could use brain studies to measure “homosexuality” or “heterosexuality,” but the same problem persists—in order for there to be a brain marked “gay” there must be a brain we can mark as “straight”—neither one has yet to be found (Blank 2012). While the latter logic may make sense on its face this does not keep scientists from attempting to find evidence of homosexuality by examining the body, whether it is one’s hormones, genetics or anatomy.

One, of my favorite articles to distribute to students to discuss this very point is research cited by the widely read *New York Magazine* in a 2007 article titled “The Science of Gaydar” (France). In this article, authors discuss the direction of hair whorls, voice pitch, and fingernail length in an attempt to predict whether one was gay. While this might seem farcical at first glance, this article includes the results of nationally funded research by British-neuroscientist Simon LeVay and Richard Lippa a psychologist at California State University at Fullerton—both catalogue the differences between straights and gays. And while students get a kick out of measuring their finger length and looking at each others hair whorls, it is not beyond reproach to emphasize the importance of these sorts of studies to the medical and neuroscience community. If for nothing else, this article reveals to students how dominant the neurosciences and biomedical model is to sexuality researchers. When particular behaviors (voice pitch) or conditions (finger length and hair whorls) are

given medical meaning, then it is not surprising that medial practices continue to look for the elimination or control of said problem.

To reiterate, based on what we know as a society so far about sexual orientation does not appear to be “directly or causally connected to the physical body: (Blank 2012, p. 60). Following more of a sociological lens, Blank contends that so-called scientific evidence (MRI, neuroimaging, etc.) at best explains that sexual preferences or desires are most likely intrinsic as much as they might be learned. Echoing Blank, Cordelia Fine’s (2011) meta-analysis of almost a century of research that attempts to casually link biological sex to gendered differences between boys and girls is turned on its head. According to Fine (2011), because neuroscience currently occupies the hierarchy of “scientificness,” finding differences in the brain would provide an explanation for how sexuality manifests itself as innate (p. 169). And whether or not neuroscientists can pinpoint where in the brain sexual preference might exist may not matter to the public, for Fine (2011) has found that most people prefer neuroscientific explanations. As she so aptly puts it—“So long as the magic word *brain* is there, no further information required” (p. 172, emphasis in original). It is against the latter types biological and medical reductionism of sexual identity that I attempt to work against in the sex and gender classroom.

## 2.5 Overcoming the “Paranoia of Choice” Discourse in the Classroom

Why the paranoia? For most students, unraveling the sexual identity thread that they may have strongly believed was tied to their biology is unsettling. However, I contend that a feeling of unease is an understatement. Living in a society that privileges biological and medical explanations over social ones creates what I call “paranoia of choice.” The term “choice” used in front of a sexual identity statements such as: “I choose to be bisexual/homosexual/gay/lesbian” is anathema to many. Biological and medical arguments not only benefit essentialist lines of thought, but also social reformers. Activists for LGBT rights have successfully used “born this way” arguments to further the case of civil rights, most recently seen in same-sex marriage campaigns.

As the first part of this chapter discussed, the current sexuo-political landscape in U.S. society tends to root sexual identity (and orientation) in the idea of nature or the natural. Once nature is invoked, the belief in fate or the predetermined is secured and choice becomes irrelevant. In other words, why choose something that cannot be changed? In order to alter this predictive line of thought, I ask students to examine the concept of heteronormativity—more specifically the widely held social belief that heterosexuality is unchangeable, fated, or a predetermined sexual identity. Halberstam’s conceptualization of “gaga feminism” gives students another looking glass to view the sexuo-political landscape. Like Halberstam, let’s give our students (and ourselves) permission to “go gaga.” For Halberstam, “going gaga”

means “letting go of many of your basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires” (2012, p. 27). By dropping these preconceived notions students can lean towards genders and sexualities that are not simply fixed, but more fluid and temporary. Granting students permission to “go gaga,” is especially beneficial when confronted with the larger social structure of heteronormativity that I discuss next.

Heteronormativity, which plagues the larger social structure and social institutions, largely remains unexamined. As feminist theorist Stevi Jackson notes with regard to choice rhetoric and sexuality: “... I consider it risky to assume that any aspect of sexuality or gender is innate, since this can entail placing aspects of our gendered and sexual practices beyond critique” (2005, p. 18). And because heterosexuality is considered a default or “not a choice” position, non-strights who attempt to describe their identity by using “choice” language are considered abject in a society that emphasizes heterosexuality as naturally occurring. By investigating how a heteronormative social structure impacts how les/bi/gays and *straight* identities, I explain how the “paranoia of choice” continues to prop up heterosexuality as the only socially “legitimate” sexual identity.

What I call “paranoia of choice” is at the crux of not only this paper but also the current state of LGBT politics in the United States. “Choosing” one’s sexual identity is not consistent with the current doxa of Western understandings of sexual identity. Hanne Blank (2012) writes that the very limited number of sexual orientations from which one identifies with is simply an artifact of the social world. Halperin echoed this in his breakthrough article “Is There a History of Sexuality?” where he posited that, “sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect” (1989, p. 257). Somatic fact or not, these kinds of statements have not given geneticists and scientists pause for finding differences between the heterosexual and non-heterosexual body. It is cultural knowledge that geneticists have been trying to locate a “gay gene” and “gay hormones” since the Human Genome Project commenced in 1990. Even with its official ending in 2003, the pursuit for the “gay gene” continues (“Human Genome Project” 2013).

As I reviewed in the previous section neither the marked “gay” nor the unmarked “straight” gene, hormone(s) or brain has been found. However, this Sisyphean quest continues. Most sex researchers accept and reify the sexual orientation categories of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” regardless of the sexual variance research subjects’ show. Moreover, the privileged position that biology, neuroscience and the like hold in Western society makes the body the primary (and sometimes only) tableau for finding evidence for “heterosexual” and “homosexual” selves. As long as biological paradigms continue to dominate the knowledge hierarchy, alternate forms of understanding sexual orientation will continue to lack validity.

In order to better frame this “paranoia of choice” I have found it helpful to ask students when and how we use “choice” language in other discourses. Most students are able to point out that “choice” language is celebrated when Westerners argue for free-speech rights, reproductive rights, voting rights, etc. but when it comes to sexual identity “choice” language is somehow not appropriate. Democratic language is apparently not meant for talking about one’s sexual orientation.



Perhaps what is most troubling to the student in the sex and gender classroom is that many who eschew “choice” discourse are gay activists themselves, including many who run nationally recognized LGBT organizations like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Taskforce. I have students investigate the sort of language these organizations use when talking about sexual orientation to their membership base by investigating the organizations’ website and written literature. It is not surprising that students find arguments rooted in biological essentialism or the natural because biological arguments are key to the campaigns of some les-bi-gay organizations; they uphold the idea that les-bi-gay folks “pose no threat to the heterosexual majority” (Jackson 2005, p. 16). For example, The Human Rights Campaign’s *Resource Guide to Coming Out* notes in bold type (and all caps) that “Your sexual or gender identity is not a choice. It chooses you” A few paragraphs down, the pamphlet tells it readers, “Being Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender is Natural” (“A Resource Guide to Coming Out,” 2014). This is just one of many organizations that rely on a “paranoia of choice” paradigm that discourages anything that is not believed to be innate or natural.

Outside of national organizations like the HRC, gay advocates and bloggers like John Aravoisis, writing for “AMERICAblog” reacted harshly to *Sex and the City* star Cynthia Nixon when she posited that her bisexuality was a “choice.” After her announcement he wrote: “If you like both flavors, men and women, you’re bisexual, you’re not gay, so please don’t tell people that you are gay, and that gay people can ‘choose’ their sexual orientation, i.e., will it out of nowhere. Because they can’t.” Aravoisis goes on to say, “Every religious right hatemonger is now going to quote this woman [Nixon] every single time they want to deny us our civil rights” (Aravoisis 2012). While I don’t dismiss Aravoisis’ fears that hate mongers will use Nixon’s comments to support reasons gay and lesbian (and bisexual) folks shouldn’t have civil rights, the larger question is: “Should we promote dogmatic either/or tropes to discuss sexual orientation because hate mongers will vilify us or do we attempt to instead present cultural facts about queer folks regardless of how hate-mongers react?”

Sexuality researchers like Lisa Diamond (2008) rightly notes that there is no other topic in sexuality research that infuriates more than that of choice or change in one’s sexual orientation (2008). And while Diamond sees sexual orientation as something that cannot be changed she is willing to advocate that folks should be able to determine their sexual lives regardless of who might be the current hatemonger: “... plenty of inborn traits are viewed as highly undesirable, so why should the notion of social orientations as a biological trait make it more socially acceptable?... After all, the common view of race and ethnicity as inborn traits has not eroded racism” (2008, p. 138).

For those of us, especially our students who have been faced with bias—whether due to a combination of race, ethnicity, gender, age or sexuality—many would point out that hatemongering will continue regardless of the language one chooses to talk about outsider identities. Moreover, the task of the social scientist is to look at social and cultural facts (and artifacts) and present their effect on society, *not* avoid these



facts in order to spare what Aravoisis and others see as a way to dissuade civil rights. Civil rights will be denied to those of us who do not follow hegemonic ideals regardless of whether or not we think something is a choice. The idea is that civil rights will not be afforded to groups who “choose” their disadvantage in society. But as sex researcher John D’Emilio suggests: “Do we really expect to bid for real power from a position of ‘I can’t help it?’” (1992, p. 187). Must we use the essentialist, “not a choice” trope that will at best provide a minority-status in a socio-political climate that continues to buttress heterosexual privilege on the backs of les-bi-gay politics? Or instead, as Whisman posits: “What about ... the recognition that living as sexual outlaws is what unites us, not a shared and essential identity” (1996, p. 124).

An example of uniting under the banner of “sexual outlaws” is the “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage” (2006) statement signed by some of the most prominent U.S. and International queer theorists and activists and the Against Equality (AE) (Conrad 2014) group that has collectively published essays on why gay marriage does little for equality since marriage, itself, perpetuates power imbalances. The signatories of the “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage” call for a new strategic plan to LGBT organizing that does not limit it to the securing of same-sex marriage rights, but broadens the goal to varying family relationships that exist outside of a two-person marriage.

In order to juxtapose ideas from so-called “sexual outlaws” students should also be aware of the stance that major lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender organizations in the United States have on the “born this way” trope. This sort of informal research can easily be undertaken in beginner or intermediate undergraduate classroom. I have successfully employed informal research with first and second-year students in September 2012 and again in September 2014. Students conducted informal analysis of major LGBT organizations (The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Lambda Legal, GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), and PFLAG (formerly Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and found that all warn against the statement that sexual orientation is a “choice.” As an exemplar of this practice Lambda Legal cautioned against using the word “choice” because it might prop up reparative therapy campaigns even though the American Psychological Association denounced reparative therapy in August 2009 (APA Task Force). No doubt are these major organizations influenced by the essentialist or biological position on one’s sexual orientation as they more easily fit the civil rights model of social movements that rely on a “born this way” trope.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Certainly, the cultural creation of knowledge by the early sexologists has not been abandoned. It is part of our common nomenclature that heterosexuality exists and by default so too does homosexuality. Today, research ranging from neuroimaging to the length of one’s fingers is at the crux of “discovering” our true sexuality.

While this sort of research persists, we also know that studies of nervous systems between heterosexual and non-heterosexual folks have shown no significant differences (Blank 2012). Geneticists on the hunt for the “straight” and “gay” gene have also had no conclusive results. Obviously the dizzyingly amount of research that exists in an attempt to find evidence of homosexuality is critical to Western societies. Like most minority-politics, we need to discover who is “out” so we can prop up who is “in.” The fact remains (at least thus far) that sexual orientation does not appear to have a significant correlation to the physical body (Blank 2012; Fine 2011). What these lack of findings suggests is *not* that there is no biological component to sexual orientation, but that sociologists have more to offer about sexual identity or orientation as an organizing agent in society. So while the geneticists, endocrinologists, and neurologists continue to seek their answers to finding sexual orientation within the body, social scientists need to not only problematize this approach but do their own looking—into the social interactions, social institutions and ultimately, the power relations in Western society.

Not only do the categories exist, but also we believe as a society that we know how to fill them—and what better way to fill the categories than with those ideas that seem to be rooted in nature. Invoking nature or the natural is so pleasing, copacetic even, because it does not involve further question or inquiry—it “just is” and heterosexuality or homosexuality can exist without humans really having to do much. The secret is that no one really knows conclusively whether heterosexuality is the result of nature or nurture—most likely it is some combination of both and then some.

I have proposed here that the future of discourse in the sex and gender classroom must move away from the essentialist origin stories that attempt to explain women and men’s sexual orientation as primarily a product of nature or biology. Lady Gaga’s anthem, “Born this Way,” may be empowering on some level, but at what cost? If students are willing to unravel the “gender knot” (Johnson 2014) then why not equip them with similar tools to unravel what sexual orientation might look like outside of “born this way,” essentialist tropes? Perhaps this is where “gaga feminism” comes in: “[to be] the fly in the ointment, the wrench in the machinery ... Halberstam 2012, p. 141). I want to give students more than a tribute to being “on the right track” because they were “born this way.” Will we be shoved “off the track” if our DNA cannot prove our sexuality? What if the neuroimaging scans and the DNA analysis give us a result we do not wish for? Will heterosexuals be willing to submit DNA samples for testing? Perhaps my fear is not merely that we will be pushed of “off the track,” but that we will be run over by a train that is speeding up to find biological answers to social questions. Let’s go gaga instead!

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