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# A Symbolic Interactionist History of Sexuality?

## Chris Brickell

*Many historians of sexuality explore how sexual subjectivity has taken shape in recent centuries, while historical sociologists tend to focus upon the intimate and erotic aspects of emergent social institutions. Symbolic interactionist sociology can add a new dimension to the existing debates, shifting the primary focus from the history of sexuality to a theoretically informed analysis of sexuality in history. This essay applies symbolic interactionist writings on interaction, scripts and subjectivity to a reading of one particular case: that of a young man committed to New Zealand's Seacliff Lunatic Asylum in 1891 following his 'absurd infatuation' for another man. I attempt to show how symbolic interactionist theory can further enrich historical studies by teasing out the intricacies of the processes through which sexual selves have emerged in the past. What results is not a teleological account of sexual change, but an awareness of the ways particular contexts enable the construction of accounts of sexual subjectivity.*

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### Introduction: Sexuality and Socio-historical Analysis

'The history of sexuality' has well and truly emerged from the shadows. This field charts how what we now know as 'sexuality' has changed over time, especially how sexual categories—heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual—have come to structure current sexual understandings so deeply. Often historians of sexuality challenge the assumption that people in past times adhered to the sexual identities many of us now hold so dear (Chauncey 1994; Halperin 2002). Some have sought to historicise the very foundations of such notions as 'sex' or 'love', arguing that sexual desire,

intimate attachment and romantic love have not always been understood in the same way (Katz 2001; Oram and Turnbull 2001). Meanwhile, historical sociologists focus upon the intimate and erotic aspects of the development of key social institutions such as the family or capitalist relations, or ask what key sociological thinkers—Marx, Weber or Elias—had to say about these (Hawkes 1996; Burke 2003; Miller 2003).

Despite their different disciplinary underpinnings, in some ways historical sociology and the history of sexuality share a very similar project. Both seek to map the historical origins of the present through the past, and ask how we arrived at the social arrangements and individual identities that prevail today. I want to suggest that there is another way of looking at all of this. Rather than seeking out the history *of* sexuality, we might play closer attention to how sexuality has been constructed and understood *in* history. In this way, we can augment the prevailing teleological approach, which maps the development of sexuality through time, with a close analysis of how sexual meanings have been negotiated *within* particular historical moments.

What is required, then, is a framework through which we can think about the negotiation of sexual meanings in given situations. One of the most powerful bodies of theory for exploring meaning is symbolic interactionist sociology. Broadly speaking, symbolic interactionism is concerned with how the members of a society manipulate cultural resources—meanings and symbols—in order to construct a common world and their place in that world. They do this as they interact with others, and it is through these meaning-laden interactions that individual and collective identities develop. Such an approach provides us with a set of conceptual tools we might use to carefully dissect the traces of sexual meaning that survive from the past.

By bringing symbolic interactionist theories to history we can infuse historians' methods of investigation, such as archival research, with sociological insight. As several authors have recently noted, there are benefits for both sociology and history in further developing the interface between the two disciplines (Plummer 2001; Burke 2003; Mandler 2004). Such a move emphasises the historical emergence of sexual meanings, their construction and relative impact, while eschewing the tenacious view-from-nowhere that continues to haunt much historical writing. Our theoretical framework is a crucial part of our investigation, for the lens we bring to a situation shapes what we 'see' about sexuality in its historical settings.

I begin by introducing some useful concepts from those symbolic interactionist writings that address identity and sexuality. In order to develop an argument about their utility I employ them in my reading of

one particular intriguing archival case: that of Percy Ottywell, who in 1891 was committed to Seacliff Lunatic Asylum near Dunedin, New Zealand, following his 'absurd infatuation' for another young man. I suggest that the extent to which this case can tell us about sexual subjectivity in late 19th century New Zealand depends largely upon how we choose to read it. In turn, symbolic interactionist theory can enrich existing historical approaches by teasing out the intricacies of the processes through which sexual subjectivities have been constructed, in this case and more generally.

## Symbolic Interactionism, Identity and Sexuality

Symbolic interactionist perspectives emerged in the United States in the early decades of the 20th century. The founding of this school of thought is most often attributed to Charles Cooley and George Mead, with Harold Blumer its most systematic enunciator. This said, the precise influences on symbolic interactionism's intellectual development remain somewhat contested, and in places the theories of this school overlap with two other, related, approaches: phenomenology and ethnomethodology (Plummer 1996).

There is a general agreement, however, on symbolic interactionism's key conceptual underpinnings. Broadly, this body of theory is used to explore how meanings are created, assembled, negotiated and modified by members of a society (Craib 1984; Plummer 1996). It presumes meaning to be an emergent property of human interactions, not something intrinsic to an individual or a situation. Accordingly, we construct the meaning of our social world and our own lives through our interactions with other people, gathering together and negotiating meaning as we participate in social life (Blumer 1969). Our interpretations about what constitutes 'reality' are worked and reworked within multiple 'interaction orders': the domains of face-to-face interaction between people in given contexts, domains whose communications are governed by particular rules and conditions (Goffman 1983).

None of this is to say that meaning operates deterministically. Even though meaning is a product of social processes, individuals can and do actively manage symbols and actions in their own lives. For example, most of us strive to present ourselves as credible and competent members of society, in order to avoid adverse social judgement and sanction. To this end, we generally attempt to project our own 'definition of the situation' upon social proceedings (Goffman 1959, p. 3).[1] In so doing, we participate in the collective establishment of a 'common world' of understandings, albeit one that is liable to shift over time (Berger and Luckmann 1969;

Goffman 1983, p. 9).[2] Thus, social relations are reproduced and contested through day-to-day, face-to-face interactions.

It follows that individuals' identities, too, are constructed through interactions with the available social meanings and other social actors. Each of us develops our beliefs about who we 'are' as we draw upon the interpretative frameworks provided by our culture and as we relate to significant and not so significant others. While each of us might adhere fairly consistently to a particular way of seeing ourselves at any given moment, new modes of self-understanding can develop over time (Turner 1976). We may wish to seek out our 'true self', or even feel we have already attained it. However, the symbolic interactionist understands personal 'truth' not as an expression of our inner 'nature', but as a socially contingent notion, one means by which we account for ourselves at a given time (Turner 1976, pp. 900, 1012). In short, the notion of a 'true self' is a symbolic construction, itself developed within a matrix of social meanings and interactions.

During the late 1960s these general symbolic interactionist insights about meaning, subjectivity and interaction were applied to sexuality by John Gagnon and William Simon (Gagnon and Simon 1973). These authors argued that our experience of sexuality is guided by patterned constellations of language and action, convention and expectation. Society makes available 'cultural scenarios' which prescribe the *what* and *how* of sexual conduct and its forms: with whom might one engage sexually, why and when, and what might one expect to feel? From these scenarios individuals piece together sexual 'scripts', internalising and routinising wider sexual meanings and developing sexual 'careers' (Whittier and Simon 2001). In this way, the individual's sexual world emerges at the intersection of meaning, subjective interpretation and social interaction.

More radically, perhaps, for the symbolic interactionist there is no 'sexuality' (and hence no sexual self) without social definition. Gagnon and Simon famously contended that '[w]ithout the proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior, nothing sexual is likely to happen' (1973, p. 19). The very understanding of what is 'sexual', then, is played out dramaturgically. This is not dissimilar to performances on the stage, with their scripts that provide actors with rules and guidelines.[3] Unless an activity or relationship is defined *as* sexual within a particular context, it cannot be said to actually *be* sexual. This insight is particularly useful for the study of the 19th century, when the 'romantic friendship' was a widespread cultural form. It has been suggested that highly intimate, even passionate same-sex friendships were accepted during this time precisely because they were not defined as sexual: during the early 19th century romantic love and sexual desire were regarded as quite separate,

and romance was sited on a spiritual plane distinct from sensual pleasure (Katz 2001, pp. 36 – 39). It was not until intimate same-sex friendships were conflated with 'perverse' same-sex desire later in the century that they too were stigmatised (D'Emilio and Freedman 1998, p. 130). Clearly the definition of what has come to count as 'sexual' (and, accordingly, as 'comradeship', or 'devotion') in particular places and times is pivotal to the way we might now interpret specific social relationships from the past.

In light of this, it is somewhat ironic to note that sociology's interpretive tradition, of which symbolic interactionism is one strand, has been accused of a functionalism that fails to attend to historical change (e.g. Thorne 1995; Weber 1995). I would argue, though, that quite the opposite is the case. We can very profitably consider how sexuality and subjectivity have been negotiated, individually and collectively, within particular historical contexts. The concept of scripts, for instance, offers a useful bridge between individual subjectivity and larger-scale social shifts. As society changes over time, so too do the prevailing modes of understanding sexuality that people negotiate in order to account for their own lives. Given the argument that historians of sexuality cannot avoid recognising the 'messy' question of past subjects' self-consciousness (Maynard 1999, p. 73), symbolic interactionism offers one set of tools we might use in order to investigate this question of subjectivity, and in ways attuned to historical specificity. Goffman has already noted the approach's affinity with historical analysis (1983, p. 9), although this is not without its own irony. Goffman's own work treats the asylum, for instance, as a rather static institution uninfluenced by historical changes (Garton 2003, p. 20).

As a form of sociological analysis that focuses on the micro-level of the social world, symbolic interactionism dovetails nicely with some of the concerns of microhistory. While some microhistories are concerned with what individual cases from the archives might tell us about wider social processes at particular times (Stanley 1992; Gibbons 2003), symbolic interactionism asks how the wider constraints and possibilities of social life are (and have been) reflected in individual conduct and self-understanding. The symbolic interactionist historian might search for the surviving fragments of life stories that allow careful readings of the processes of meaning making operative in their own time. The most ordinary of stories will not tell us everything about sexuality in the past, but we can start to explore how individuals within highly specific 'interaction orders' constructed sexuality and sexual subjectivity, and how these orders guided such constructions. In the process, we start to understand the complexities of the relationships between individual lives and the wider sphere of socio-sexual meanings.

Let me further consider symbolic interactionism's contribution to the historical study of sexuality by introducing my case study, that of Percy Ottywell. Ottywell, aged 22, arrived under police escort at Seacliff Lunatic Asylum near Dunedin, New Zealand, one winter's afternoon in 1891. His committal was instigated a day earlier by the parents of 15 year old Leslie Douglas. Ottywell had developed a 'strange attachment' for Douglas which saw him waiting outside the youth's house at all hours, 'dogging his steps' whenever he went out, and writing him numerous letters expressing his devotion. The final straw came when Ottywell delivered a pencilled note insisting that 'the end would come tonight' if Douglas would not see him. (It remains unclear whether or not Ottywell's attraction for Douglas was reciprocated in any way.)

Percy Ottywell had been sent from Scotland by his family two years earlier with nothing but a few pounds and some letters of introduction, in the hope he would capitalise on his agricultural training and make a life for himself as a colonial farmer. His spell in the asylum—which lasted six months—followed a lonely time roaming the rural South Island country-side in search of work. He was in and out of farm labouring jobs, and almost always broke. In some desperation he wrote to Sir John Hall, a member of the New Zealand House of Representatives, who agreed to loan him a few pounds. In the ensuing months, Ottywell kept up a regular correspondence with Hall, and reported on his pecuniary and emotional experiences of colonial life, the latter marked by loneliness and dissatisfaction. In one such letter he wrote:

> I write to inform you (as you have shown me so much kindness since my arrival in the country) that I have attained a situation upon the Taieri Plain. I am engaged to look after a small place of 375 acres (250 sheep and 150 cattle, mostly fattening), chiefly grazing land ... I have occupied the place now 3 weeks to the apparent satisfaction of my employer, who pays me a visit every week. I live in a small hut and cook my own meals. I am quite alone, and when I first came I thought the loneliness at night was terrible, but I have got used to it now. I do not see a soul for days together sometimes.
>
> (Ottywell 1890)

By the time Ottywell was apprehended he had abandoned itinerant farm work, moved into the urban centre of Dunedin, and taken up a job as a clerk.

## Reading Percy Ottywell's Story

Percy Ottywell's story is a fascinating one. It tells us of a young man's journey to the colonies, of his attachment to young Leslie Douglas, and

of his confinement in an asylum under the firm but apparently kindly care of superintendent Truby King. While I have dealt with the broad context and details of this case elsewhere (Brickell 2005), here I am particularly interested in how we might read the intricacies of Ottywell's interactions with those around him through a symbolic inter-actionist framework. Reading this case in such a way provides a number of insights into the social construction of individual sexual subjectivity in 19th century colonial society. There are at least two key aspects to this.

First, there is the question of how Ottywell's desires for another male were understood by himself and others at the time. It is often argued that the second half of the 19th century witnessed the emergence of a new figure: 'the homosexual', an identifiable individual who was said to possess an inner 'core' of same-sex desire. This began to replace the earlier assumption that any man might engage in renegade sexual practices if he gave in to his natural curiosity or temptation (Foucault 1990; McLaren 1999; Halperin 2002). Such a shift was propelled by two interrelated forces: psychiatry, with its interest in classifying and medicalising human sexuality (Beyer 1987; Greenberg 1988), and a European activism that sought to defend same-sex love as 'natural' and to overturn state sodomy laws (e.g. Symonds 1975; Ulrichs 1994). In contrast, it turns out that superintendent Truby King did not assume Ottywell to embody a new sexual identity. Instead, King concluded that his patient had given in to wayward emotions and desires that might threaten any man lacking in willpower and respectable male company (Brickell 2005).

Second, and more important for this discussion, we might consider the ways in which Ottywell's identity, in its broadest sense, was constructed through his interactions within the asylum, especially his interviews with King. We witness one individual's confinement in an institution whose primary mission was the re-establishment of individual rationality (in those cases deemed 'curable', at least). In order that Ottywell might leave Seacliff, he had to establish himself as a sufficiently credible, rational individual rather than a lunatic (legally defined at the time as a person who could not manage his or her own affairs). In his interactions with King, then, Ottywell was required to present a particular sort of subjectivity. By using some symbolic interactionist tools, we can carefully pick through the intricacies of this process.

By the time Ottywell alighted from the train at Seacliff station with his police escort, his medical record had already been inscribed with two definitions of his situation. These were crafted during earlier

interactions between Ottywell and the doctors Isaiah de Zouche and Thomas Hocken:

> He says that he is greatly attracted to a boy named Douglas and cannot live without him, that his affection for this boy has become an all absorbing idea, and that his greatest happiness is to see him and be with him constantly [...] that in short he worships Douglas and that last night he had thoughts of taking his own life because he could not see him. The Rev[erend] York tells me that Ottywell is unable to bring his mind to any other subject than his love for Douglas.
>
> (De Zouche 1891)

> [Patient] is downcast and somewhat melancholic and is monomaniacal. Has conceived a violent passion for a youth [...] whom he pursues and by whose house he spends whole hours. He threatens that if he is thwarted he will commit suicide and will do other mischief.
>
> (Hocken 1891)

Before Ottywell had even begun his brief career as a mental patient, his experiences had been defined in different ways. In one account, his feelings were described in terms of 'love', 'attraction' and 'affection', while the other reveals a very different and much more pathological view. Divergent meanings were attached to the young man's actions, emotions and intentions: in one, he appears as a love-lorn young man, in the other a depressive maniac. In his admission interview Truby King set out to construct an account of Ottywell's feelings and activities that would draw him into the lunatic asylum's 'symbolic universe': that matrix of historically and institutionally specific meanings to which individuals and groups are subject (Berger and Luckmann 1969). As Dorothy Smith has argued, complex conceptual and interpersonal work is required in order that a person's membership of a category such as 'mentally ill' can take hold (Smith 1990, pp. 12–16). As we read King's case notes, we can see him attempt to relate Ottywell's case to what he already 'knew' about mental instability and sexual 'irregularity':

> Questioned re suicide he says that he threatened to kill himself only in order to frighten people because he thought that then they would not interfere with his having [access] to the boy Douglas lest in despair he should commit suicide.[4]

> Lately his conduct has been very strange. For instance he would scatter his wages among a crowd of boys that he gathered round him and he openly professed his strong attachment for the boy Douglas.

> He appears to have gone in for no recreation which would throw him in with his fellows in a healthy way.

> He is a well-bred, well-educated young man and appears actually to
> have very high principles and a good aim but he has held aloof too
> much from association with his fellows and has been keeping his
> mind saturated with filthy ideas. It is hard to say how far masturbation
> has been carried out and to what extent it may have been a factor in
> bringing about his present state. His physical condition is good but his
> gaze is not as straight and frank as it might be and he is decidedly
> diffident.

What we see here is King working his way through a range of historically
specific meanings, testing them out and putting them into some sort of
order. Suicidal tendencies were frequently taken as evidence of mental
instability, although in this case the patient insisted his threats were
strategic (and hence rational, if ill advised) rather than heartfelt (and hence
evidence of insanity). Given the prevailing 19th century values of financial
and moral restraint, carelessly 'scattering' one's wages and declaring a
passion for another young man might be interpreted as a lack of self-
control, and was certainly taken as evidence of 'strangeness'. Refusing to
get involved 'with his fellows in a healthy way' represented a violation of
Victorian codes of masculine comradeship, while masturbation was
widely considered a precursor to madness. Through his notes, King built
up layer upon layer of 'evidence' of moral and mental instability, by
interpreting Ottywell's actions in those terms. In doing so he drew upon the
meanings, narratives and stories provided by his own social and
professional milieu.[5]

Ottywell's own meaning making processes are visible too. We are lucky
enough to observe them reasonably clearly within the records available to
us, even though the archived case notes were written by the asylum
superintendent who held the power to define his patients' lives for the
official record. King directed the admission interview and subsequent
consultations through his line of questioning, chose what to record and
what to ignore, and set the diagnostic frame within which others might
interpret a patient's claims subsequently. King was keenly interested in
Ottywell's own account of how he came to be interested in socially
disreputable forms of sex. 'Sodomy' became a preoccupation after the
young man read about it in the news media. He reported that '[it] was not
natural to me[,] it was induced by what I read':

> I was perfectly right until about two years ago when I happened to read a
> notice of a case of sodomy in a newspaper [...] I looked up the subject
> in a book and gradually I came to read things like that until after a while
> they seized quite a fascination over me. I don't know why I read them
> either because they were quite repugnant to my feelings but somehow I

> could not help it; one thing led to another. I actually took a pleasure in reading the beastly things about sodomy and masturbation.

What we have here is an account of the development of a sexual consciousness. At least two things are taking place. First, we observe one individual assembling his sexual interests with reference to external prompts and cultural resources—a story in a newspaper and other material in books—which over time were woven together into nascent sexual scripts. King was greatly interested in the cultural influences on young people's moral education, and he kept questioning along this line. It becomes clear that Ottywell found numerous other resources that might further contribute to the process of self-construction. These included an 'Aristotle' (an early sex advice book), and other 'health books and pamphlets'. Some of these apparently lay open in the local book arcade for all to see, while others were borrowed from 'other young fellows' whom Ottywell suggested were also greatly interested in sexual matters.

The second point to note is that Ottywell had to manage the interaction with King as best he could if he wanted to present himself as a competent social actor, one who did not 'belong' in a lunatic asylum. Thus, there was a strategic aspect to the patient's arguments. His account contained an insistence that he was not inherently predisposed to the kinds of sexual interests a medical superintendent may find unacceptable, but that such desires had 'seized control' over him. Such a claim was a double-edged sword: to disavow inherent disreputability was to deny any innate disorder, certainly, but it also involved admitting the failure of self-control, a key trope in 19th century beliefs about sexual propriety. Perhaps the only way out of this bind lay in an overt insistence of sanity:

> When patient came in he was greatly excited at the idea of being in an asylum among the insane, and when he saw me said he was sure that I should at once recognise that a mistake had been made: 'nothing can justify thrusting a young man with all his life before him in among a crowd of lunatics … I'm certainly not mad'.

From the moment Ottywell passed behind Seacliff's high stone walls, he contested the symbolic universe of the institution in which he found himself. While he conceded being overcome by the twin temptations of 'sodomy and masturbation', he strenuously denied that he belonged among the 'mad'. He then attempted to take the moral high ground by insisting only he knew the true definition of his own situation:

> It is a true and genuine affection, in fact I have a passionate regard for the boy, in a perfectly pure way you understand. There is nothing that I

> would not do for him, I would lay down my life for him ... You can't
> understand a pure and ardent love for a boy such as I have, and I
> feel that what I am telling you will simply confirm you in the idea that
> I am mad. Yet you will admit that a man may love a woman—then
> why not one of the other sex? The bible says 'love one another' does
> it not?

Here Ottywell attempted to signify his attraction to Douglas not as one of
carnal desire, but as one of 'pure' romantic friendship. This 19th century
separation of physical desire from intimate same-sex bonds allowed
Ottywell to claim for himself a more respectable form of masculine self-
presentation than may have been otherwise possible, and to distance
himself from a diagnosis of madness.[6] The Bible was one powerful symbol
in his argument, as biblical love presumably epitomised moral rectitude.

   Ottywell's definition of the situation, however, was unable to take hold,
because the more powerful participant in the interaction would not allow
it. The patient, King wrote, 'seems subconscious of the fact that such ideas
as the above are not normal', and in the interview the superintendent asked
more questions about 'this affection for Douglas':

> Patient volunteered that his love for him was now entirely a pure
> affection but that it has not been so all along. Impure ideas with regard
> to Douglas would come into his head in spite of himself but he never
> said or did anything rude to him.

Having conceded his inability to prevent 'impure ideas' entering his head
'in spite of himself', Ottywell was left trying to bridge the gap between a
socially acceptable spiritual love between men on the one hand, and his
outlawed, somewhat more carnal desires on the other.[7] Anxious to avoid a
diagnosis of madness, perhaps the best he could do was to assert the
ultimate triumph of his capacity for self-control by insisting that he never
acted upon his desires.

   Ten weeks later, still at Seacliff, Ottywell wrote once again to
parliamentarian Sir John Hall:

> You will naturally wonder how I came to be here. I do not intend to
> trouble you with details of the circumstances connected with my
> removal here, nor of the ridiculous conduct on my part which rendered
> such a thing apparently necessary, suffice it to say that I conceived a very
> violent and unnatural affection for a member of Mr Douglas's family
> and amongst other ridiculous actions announced my intention of
> committing suicide, because my absurd infatuation was not approved
> of. It is not my intention to trouble you with any further comments on a
> most humiliating and unpleasant subject. The end was that I was sent
> here by the Douglass'es [sic], they saying that they did so for my own

> good. At first I was in a state of great indignation but now that I have been
> here 10 weeks I do not look upon it quite in the same light as I did then. Of
> course I need not say that I had no intention whatever of taking my own
> life. It was merely said to frighten my friends. But having once said such a
> ridiculous thing it is not so easy to *prove* that it was only talk.
>
> (Ottywell 1891)

Here Ottywell voiced less opposition to the asylum's symbolic universe
than he had originally, as he himself conceded. Ironically, Truby King had
never described same-sex desire as 'unnatural' (even though he did refer to
it as 'not normal'), but this term—apparently widespread in reference to
attraction between men or between women (Halperin 1990, p. 48)—rather
intriguingly turns up in Ottywell's letter. Here the patient appears to back
down from his original contention that there was nothing unusual about
his feelings for the youth he had so ardently desired. What might we make
of this apparent retraction?

A number of related possibilities present themselves. First, Ottywell may
have written these words quite calculatingly and for purely instrumental
reasons. Perhaps he reasoned that by claiming he had overcome an ardent
and illicit passion, and alluding to a self-evidently superior psychiatric
knowledge ('I do not look upon it quite in the same light ...'), King would
approve and allow the letter out of the asylum gates. Second, Ottywell was
corresponding with a reader of high status, and may have felt this required
an assertion of reason and respectability in order to create a favourable
impression with one who had already financially supported him and might
conceivably be called upon to do so again. The letter-writing process
involves a relationship between individuals and hence not dissimilar rules
to other forms of interaction (Plummer 2001, p. 54), while the way one
seeks to present oneself to others not infrequently conditions the self-story
one tells (Goffman 1959, pp. 3–4).

Third, as a site for the creation of self-stories, the mental hospital is
particularly unforgiving of those accounts of oneself not constructed along
psychiatric lines, as Goffman has pointed out (1962, pp. 153–154). In such
a setting

> [it] is not very practicable to try and sustain solid claims about oneself
> ... [The patient] learns about the viability of taking up a standpoint—
> and hence a self—that is outside the one which the hospital can give and
> take away from him.
>
> (Goffman 1962, p. 165)

Thus, there would have been an incentive for Ottywell to project a self-story
of a type likely to be accorded respect within (and subsequently outside of)

the asylum, rather than persisting in publicly adhering to a more closely-held account of his actions and emotions. This second option may well have seemed more personally risky, and indeed 10 weeks earlier during his admission interview Ottywell had articulated the danger inherent in disclosing his most closely-held feelings: 'Now I'm telling you all this because I know you must be told everything, and in spite of the fact that it is against my own interests to do so'.

There is a fourth way of viewing Ottywell's apparent acceptance of institutional frames of reference: perhaps he had started to reorganise his 'career', that is, his sense of his own life-course, in a manner congruent with the beliefs of King and the other asylum staff. Goffman notes that career alteration may consist of changing one's 'framework of imagery for judging [one]self and others' (1962, p. 128), and this usually involves constructing a new view of one's life and its future possibilities by looking backwards over one's progress to date (p. 145).[8] This explanation would account for Ottywell's retrospective references to his 'ridiculous' former actions and his 'humiliation' on recounting such an 'unpleasant subject'. Having been at Seacliff for some time, had Ottywell had come to submit to the asylum's symbolic universe to such an extent he had started to reorganise his understanding of his sexual attachments and ultimately his sense of himself?

Certainly, by the end of Percy Ottywell's stay both patient and doctor were using the same terminology to describe the former's feelings for Leslie Douglas: an 'absurd infatuation'.[9] It is possible that this became a shared definition of the situation, negotiated by the two men as a way both could account for Ottywell's erstwhile desire. 'Absurd infatuation' suggests a flight from reason and hence sanity, one that is ultimately temporary and might be repaired by the application of more rational understandings of emotions and their place in a man's life. Irrationality was thought to expedite melancholia, a mainstay of psychiatry at the time (Berrios 1996, p. 293), while, conversely, a patient's gaining control of his or her wayward emotions set him or her on the road to release. By representing his attraction for Lesley Douglas as a passing folly, Ottywell could regard himself, and be regarded by others, as an essentially rational, competent social actor no longer in need of institutional care. (Ironically, though, King stated that his patient was reluctant to leave the asylum some months later; perhaps in the end Ottywell reasoned that King's care was preferable to the hardships of itinerant farm labour).

Ultimately, I have no wish to adjudicate between these different ways of interpreting the accounts of Truby King and Percy Ottywell. Each of them appears plausible, and they are not without their overlaps. However, this

multitude of possibilities is interesting for the way it reveals the complexities with which we are presented. What becomes clear is that Ottywell's claims about his own feelings and actions were to some degree contingent upon the interaction orders within the asylum, particularly insofar as King was involved. The flow-on effects from the exigencies of these interactions came into relief, too, in Ottywell's correspondence with one prominent individual outside of the asylum's walls.

## Conclusion: Temporality, Subjectivity and Meaning

The archival traces of Percy Ottywell's life offer up something more complex than self-evident statements of facts and feelings, or authentic representations. We observe a set of accounts which express reaction, strategy or resistance as much as closely-held feelings. Disentangling these impulses is difficult because every word in these archives was simultaneously enabled and constrained by the interaction order in which it was produced. What is available to us is not an essence of sexual subjectivity that we might distil, but sets of claims formulated within social interactions in a very specific context, claims that functioned in particular ways. We cannot locate the essence of Ottywell's individual self. This is not because the records are insufficient to allow us to do so, but because no such essence can be disaggregated from the situation in which this individual's sense of himself was worked and reworked. Any biographical search for the 'truth about subject X or Y' is limited not only by the investments brought to the life story by its writer (Stanley 1992; Sarkar 2003), but also because the object of analysis never actually existed in any pure and unmediated form that we might subsequently reveal.

   At first blush such a conclusion might seem rather nihilistic, but I would like to argue that in fact a symbolic interactionist approach proves highly productive for historical inquiry in the area of sexuality. I have suggested that we might move beyond a teleological mapping of the history of sexuality and start to examine the intricacies of sexuality's construction within history. What does symbolic interactionism contribute in this regard? First, it suggests that individual lives are perhaps even more contingent upon their contexts than we thought. Not only is sexual subjectivity dependent upon the time and place in which it takes shape, but it is also differentially constructed in particular interactional situations within that temporal and geographical location. In addition, intense moments of disruption to the context in which one crafts one's self-stories may cause a set of calculated re-presentations of self, or even a marked reworking of one's sense of who one 'is' and might be. After all, what could

be a more intense prompt for this than one's removal to an asylum, a place dedicated to the reformulation of subjectivity?

Second, symbolic interactionist perspectives suggest that 'the sexual' does not have a tidy history. Sexual subjectivity is much more complicated than we might assume: individuals do not merely take on prepackaged forms of sexuality that emerge over time on a wider social level. Instead, the sexual beliefs circulating in a society are negotiated and modified at the individual level. One becomes a sexual subject not by expressing an always already sexualised inner impulse or by adopting cultural codes wholesale, but by assembling sexual meanings during one's interactions with other members of society. Precisely how one carries this out will be influenced by the meanings given to feelings and situations, the resources through which these might form into scripts, and the exigencies of one's relationships with others. We can see this in Percy Ottywell's case: 19th century ideas about purity, romantic friendship, respectability and self-control, and insights from the available literature on sex, combined with Ottywell's experience of his own material and symbolic world to create a sexual subjectivity. This further developed through his relationships with other young men and in his interviews with Truby King. Importantly, this young male colonial both reflected upon and renegotiated his sexual subjectivity at the same time that he accounted for himself to the asylum hierarchy.

By drawing on symbolic interactionist theories, we turn the dice to reveal yet another side to sexuality and its history. Symbolic interactionism provides some useful tools with which we can unpick 'what is going on' historically, at the moments when sexuality plays out at the level of any individual conducting their lives within their particular social context. We cannot unearth the 'truth' about individuals' sexual desires. What we can do, however, is observe *how* those such as Percy Ottywell and Truby King constructed sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge within the prevailing meanings of their time and culture, and how the order of their interactions influenced which understandings could take hold. Between them these two men, just like so many others of their time, constructed a set of understandings about what sexuality *meant* and, therefore, what it might be said to *be*.

## Acknowledgements

## Notes

[1]   While Goffman developed the concept of 'definition of the situation', it was originally coined by W.I. Thomas in 1923. See Thomas (1967, p. 42).

[2]   It is worth noting parenthetically that Goffman is often described as a symbolic interactionist (Craib 1984; Wallace and Wolf 1999), but that his writings on the everyday presentation of the self sit closely with the focus of a closely related approach known as ethnomethodology. Strictly speaking, Berger and Luckmann are phenomenologists, but their writings on the symbolic are in many places indistinguishable from the approach taken by symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists.

[3]   For an in-depth discussion of dramaturgy see Goffman (1959), although the origins of the concept lie in the work of Kenneth Burke: see Gusfield (1989).

[4]   Unless otherwise noted, all quoted excerpts about Ottywell's case are taken from Truby King's 'Medical remarks by superintendent' (King 1891a).

[5]   The earlier symbolic interactionist focus on meaning has been reworked into a discussion of 'sexual stories' by Plummer (1995, 2001), while the concept of 'narrative' in this sense has been developed by Somers (1994).

[6]   Ottywell's fear that King might interpret his ardent feelings for Douglas as an indication of madness suggests that he was aware of the pathologising of love (if not sex) between men that psychiatry had started to promulgate.

[7]   Jonathan Katz notes that the 'unmapped space' between sensual and spiritual forms of love created difficulties for men during the 19th century, and their attempts to bridge such a space were liable to co-option by psychiatrists (Katz 2001, pp. 335–336).

[8]   For a not dissimilar Foucauldian discussion of the ways institutionalised disciplinary techniques and privileged knowledges can lead to the reconstitution of patients' subjectivity in psychiatric settings, see Lawn (1993).

[9]   The superintendent noted that Ottywell 'seems to be now quite free from the absurd infatuation for the young Douglas' in a letter to the young man's father (King 1891b, p. 408).

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