Que(e)rying political practices in Europe: Tensions in the struggle for sexual minority rights

Beger, N.J.

Citation for published version (APA):
Beger, N. J. (2001). Que(e)rying political practices in Europe: Tensions in the struggle for sexual minority rights.
PART THREE ~ ACTIVISTS

CHAPTER NINE
The Political Activist: Agency

The homosexual is a kind of time bomb, encoded with its own explosion. Or perhaps rather its own discreet disappearance.
(Henning Bech 1997:195)

Finally, thinking about norms in relation to practices eliminates the duality between principled and strategic actions. Practices do not simply echo norms—they make them real. Without the disruptive activity of these actors neither normative change nor change in practices is likely to occur.
(Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink 1998:35)

How it is that we can think we have, and act as if we have, (and can be required by law to have) a sense of agency, and recognise at the same time that it is in the constitutive force of discourse that agency lies?
(Bronwyn Davies 1997:272)

In the previous chapters the analysis focused on the structural and organisational level of political practices and on the theoretical concepts behind those practices. The level of individual subjectivity has occasionally been touched upon, but the individual activist as an agent in political practices has not been discussed. This concluding chapter approaches the important other side of political practices—the individual and her or his activism—with regard to the implications of agency as the theoretical and political concept behind individuals’ engagement in bringing about change. Broadly speaking, agency in the political field is defined as connoting the will, desire, and power to act physically, intellectually, or emotionally in order to maintain or change rules and structures within society and between society and state.

Gay and lesbian politics are obviously geared towards change on a normative, structural, or practical level. Be they volunteers or professionals in organisations and institutions, the people involved in gay and lesbian politics usually bring with them a vision and an ideal about change, they perceive themselves as influencing change on different levels. Activists “identify a problem, specify a cause, and propose a solution, all with an eye toward producing procedural, substantive, and normative change in their area of concern”. (Keck and Sikkink 1998:8) In short political activists are commonly understood as agents of change. Agency and the individual activist on the European stage would warrant a whole study on its own. However, this concluding chapter, which also forms the third part of this book, only seeks to
offer an entrance point into this different level of analysis and an entrance point into the many other areas of European political practices still to be investigated.

During the interviews I asked the activists about their motivations for their involvement in gay and lesbian politics, what type of actions they had been involved in over the years, how they measured success and whether they thought their own sexual identity mattered in this respect. Answers to these questions were also included in some responses to other issues, for example, in the area of how important identity and minority politics were to them. The way agency is addressed by the activists is not simple and straightforward. It rather highlights contradictions and complexities which can only be grasped if the theory of agency is re-thought and moved away from its connection to the independent, free will of autonomous and coherent humanist subjects.

How activists describe the relevance of identity for aspects of their activism strongly suggests that drawing on identity as a source of agency does not mean telling a fixed truth either about themselves or about how gayness and lesbianism is defined in essence. What seems to be obvious at first glance, namely that activists in the field of sexual orientation are motivated by their own identities and claim to represent a coherent group, is clearly more complicated. That identity is a complicated and contradictory feature of the possibility of agency highlights the fact that agency is not simply an expression of autonomous, independently acting individuals, but is discursive in its dependency on how individuals position themselves with regard to specific actions to promote change. In the wake of that insight, I argue that, although the framework in which most activists locate their agency seems to be a liberal humanist framework, the way they actually express their agency already includes a re-thinking of that framework. Aspects of interviewees’ talk that relate to agency suggest a tension between activism as contingent—the interviewees were aware of the need for coherent political action—and an identity in flux—they acknowledged the complicated way in which identity is relevant in political action.

To understand the ways activists locate agency, it is important to introduce different conceptions of agency available in the academic debate. After briefly sketching available models, I will proceed to analysing the way the interviewees locate their agency. Successfully bringing about change is a major theme of activism, yet the way success and change become the measure of activism is neither clear cut nor measurable, but depends on the framework activists adopt. Gay and lesbian identities, as personal subjectivities, as minority identity, and as personal enjoyment, feature significantly in this referential framework, but do not in themselves explain how important identity and personal enjoyment is and how the different aspects of identity are differentiated. In a last step the chapter will draw out the importance of a differentiated sense of identity for conceptualising agency. I will also discuss how a

---

211 Some of my summaries in this chapter with regard to poststructuralist understandings of agency have been elaborated at length with respect to historiography in Beger (1997).
contradictory and complicated view of identity enables activists to establish authority to agency.

**Differences in the Approach to Political Agency**

Political scientists Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's book *Activists beyond Borders* (1998) is one of the very few academic analyses of the influence of transnational activist networks in relation to international politics, that takes the agency of individual activists into account. In the beginning of their book, they emphasise that transnational networks multiply the voices that are heard in international and domestic policies. According to them

> these voices argue, persuade, strategize, document, lobby, pressure, and complain. The multiplication of voices is imperfect and selective—for every voice that is amplified, many others are ignored—but in a world where the voices of states have predominated, networks open channels for bringing alternative visions and information into international debate. (1998:x)

To them, advocacy networks embody elements of agency and structure simultaneously (1998:5) and their activists are people who care enough about the issue that they are prepared to incur significant personal costs and act to achieve their goals (1998:14). Activists are defined as agents of change. At the end of their introduction Keck and Sikkink state:

> What distinguishes principled activists of the kind we discuss in this volume is the intensely self-conscious and self-reflective nature of their normative awareness. No mere automatic “enactors”, these are people who seek to amplify the generative power of norms, broaden the scope of practices those norms engender, and sometimes even renegotiate or transform the norms themselves. They do this in an intersubjective context with a wide range of interlocutors, both individual and corporate. Finally, thinking about norms in relation to practices eliminates the duality between principled and strategic actions. Practices do not simply echo norms—they make them real. Without the disruptive activity of these actors neither normative change nor change in practices is likely to occur. States and other targets of network activity resist making explicit definitions of “right” and “wrong”, and overcoming this resistance is central to network strategies. (1998:35)

Keck and Sikkink clearly define political practices as strategic tools that participate in norms, by reiterating or disrupting them, making something real and, in consequence, potentially introducing change. Activists are context dependent, but they are also free to choose in a self-conscious and self-reflective manner and utilise the generative power of norms for their end and purpose. What makes activists successful is the way they frame debates and get issues on the agenda, the way they encourage discursive commitments from states and other policy actors, the way they cause procedural changes, and the way they affect policy and the behaviour of target
actors. (1998:201) In their conclusion, Keck and Sikkink propose a concept of the activist that is explicitly not liberal, in that activists are more than self-interested and risk-averse individuals who calculate benefit and success with regards to context only. (1998:214)

This distancing from liberalism has an implication for the concept of agency they propose.212 It touches upon an academic controversy they do not explicitly mention. In the predominant liberal humanist discourse that prevails in the social sciences and humanities, the coherent rational character of personhood is assumed to be a constitutive part of what enables agency in a person. Therefore, being a person in the liberal humanist sense is a precondition for agency. According to Bronwyn Davies the individual in a liberal humanist framework is antagonistic to society. (1991:42-43) Individual choices are considered to be based on rational thought, seen as coherent and autonomous from the social, which is external to the selfhood of the individual. Identity and selfhood are continuous and stable. Individuals can speak for themselves as well as accepting full moral responsibility for their action.

Traces of this liberal humanist model of agency can often be found in books and reports about the history of gay and lesbian activism that celebrate individuals who stand out from the collective and shape or change the world around them on their own merits.213 This model is most commonly found in the traditional descriptions of political history where the “men who make history”—from kings to modern presidents and prime ministers—are not understood as being discursively produced by their times, but as the heroes who manage their times. It is this liberal humanist framework of agency that dominates in the everyday work of institutional and parliamentary political work. It presents the framework that most activists refer to in the conceptualisation of their agency, whether they adopt it or distance themselves from it to some extent.

By contrast, within a poststructuralist feminist or queer thinking the concept of a coherent rational liberal humanist personhood is deconstructed. Subsequently agency is not bound to a notion of autonomous, coherent, unified, essential personhood. Agency is still motivated by a desire to change or give meaning. Yet, the will, desire, or power to act and speak is always constituted within discourses, not generated by the core of a human essence. It is constituted within discourses that we actively create, maintain, and change. Those discourses, in turn, give authority to attribute meaning to actions and, thus, give actions the potential for recognition, resistance, change, and re-location of subjectivities. As such, the availability of discursive spaces is a pre-condition for the meaning of actions, while we can also simultaneously engage in creating discursive spaces.

---

212 It would be worthwhile to research the position of Keck and Sikkink's concept of agency in the academic discourse of political science, in which their approach seems to be fairly radical. From a queer or poststructuralist feminist view this approach is well-rehearsed terrain.

213 In general terms, the autonomous, rational, unified individual is the individual of modernity and of economic utility necessary to the development of capitalism.
Keck and Sikkink implicitly touch upon this controversy and locate themselves somewhere in a middle ground. (1998:214) They share the liberal assumption that governments represent a society—even if imperfectly—and that individuals influence governments through political institutions and social practices linking state and society. Yet, they pose an important question that, in their opinion, liberalism cannot answer: how individuals and groups, through their interactions, might constitute new actors and transform understandings of interests and identities. Their answer to this problem is a network theory that links

the constructivist belief that international identities are constructed to the empirical research tracing the paths through which the process occurs, and identifying the material and ideological limits to such construction in particular historical and political settings. (1998:214-215)

While this proposal is new for political science and allows the reader to understand intricate complexities, it is also located at the end of the conclusion of Keck and Sikkink's book and, thus, has not been fully worked through theoretically or analytically. The way they conceptualise activists could be applied in an analysis of gay and lesbian activism on the European stage. However, the network approach they postulate lacks a more detailed definition of what they call the constructivist side. Their model could be advanced by additionally understanding agency as discursive, or, in Scott's words, as "discursive effect". (1990:851) With this formulation, Scott implies that certain dominant discourses assign the power to contextualise oneself as agentic. Only in effect then does one become agentic. Although mostly located in a humanist framework, the notion of agency 'my' interviewed activists express alludes to agency as a discursive effect that does not drain a sense of choice, desire, will, purpose, or resistance that is indeed part of the reality of European activism. Hence, political agency is located at neither end of the academic controversy: it incorporates and exceeds both poles.

The kind of agency that activists can and want to take up depends on the political discourse in which they locate their actions. Most commonly that discourse provides for a sense of achieving change based on political negotiation. The state and its citizens can exchange opinions and successfully alter the conditions of social relations. Here agency moves within the realm of liberal humanism. Yet, just as importantly, the agency of activists depends on a personal motivation for the job and on diverse understandings of sexual identity as a personal and representational factor that grants an authority to speak on behalf of a group. Here agency can become highly contingent: it is put in relation to the many divergent social relations in which an individual locates herself or himself. Thus, agency explicitly depends on the context in which it is voiced. The will, desire, and power to act physically, intellectually, and emotionally is situated in very different approaches to what counts as change, to what sexuality as an identity means, and to how an authority to speak is acquired.

209
Successfully Bringing about Change

Agency is context-specific to the conceptual language available to agents. Joan Scott defines agency as

the attempt (at least partially rational) to construct an identity, a life, a set of relationships, a society within certain limits and with language—conceptual language that at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination.

(1988:42)

Scott's location of agency in language demonstrates that there is a will to agency within the individual. However, this will is neither directly nor necessarily connected to an autonomous, coherent choice; will and autonomy are not necessary for each other. This means that activists' agency is not determined by only one discourse—for example the discourse on citizens' equality in Europe—activists can in fact always choose between several available discourses. Nevertheless, their agency within the European institutional framework is never outside the conceptual language of rights available at the time. Activists act within the framework of discourses that assign them the possibilities to act or resist. Their agency is, therefore, an effect of intersections between politically dominant discourses that make certain actions available to individuals speaking for a recognised NGO. Political agency is not a trait of autonomous, coherent individuals, yet their personal involvement is not pre-determined.

While the activists I interviewed did not formulate their agency in these words, their own descriptions feature traces of agency as discursive. The meaning of success is one area in which this tracing is possible. Even though all interviewees found it relatively easy to identify their goals—for example equality or protection from discrimination—they all found it difficult to measure how successful their personal involvement or ILGA-Europe's involvement is or was in relation to the ideal goal. Success was identified as change on one of the many levels of political concern such as legal changes or changes in attitude towards homosexuality in society, access to goods and services, change in publicity or changes in the norms perpetuated around what human sexuality is. Marion Oprel—co-president of EGALITE—gives one example for a version of success:

Well, I measure it in the sense that things are published, the debate keeps on expanding. After the intergroup meeting in December for example...214 Cyprus was discussed in the press conference and the next day it was all over the papers in Bulgaria, in Hungary, in Holland and in the UK, the fact that countries such as Cyprus need to respect gay and lesbian rights if they want to become members of the European Union.... It is an old thing and then you

---

In identifying success, Marion Oprel sees her role as an activist not as a leader of an organisation, but as a member of a network that disseminates information. It is fulfilling to her “to be able to put people into contact with each other and to be able to bridge somewhere between organisations that need each other”—in her case the European Parliament and NGOs such as ILGA-Europe—“and it is good to get to know so many people that approach this issue from many different angles.” Thus, she positions herself clearly as someone who has an effect on awareness, presence, and debate. Successful change to her is reached by disseminating information about discrimination and about good practices to combat discrimination. Her activism could be called information work from an explicit ideological perspective—namely that discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation is a violation of human rights. This information work influences change on the level of debate and knowledge, with very practical consequences through the specific political discourses of human rights and membership to the EU. In order to understand the type of agency Oprel claims here, one has to understand that success and change do not operate on a clearly identifiable level where input equals output. Success and change operate within an intricate web of what information can be placed where, when, and how, which incorporates the awareness that different structural or organisational situations need different sets of arguments and allow different levels of influence.

Every point of change is, therefore, context specific. Hanneli Lehtikuusi—Finnish activist and former member of the executive board of ILGA-Europe—expressed this need for context specificity when asked after the definitions of identities in a political context and the problem of representation:

Maybe not definable but how can you define Afro-American? I believe that most of the minorities have diversity and multiplicity inside of them. I find this defining politics a bit academic and after doing lobbying work I have dropped the whole idea. It does not work so simply. The world is not changed by the fashions/modes of thinking—it is changed by making a point so clear that it makes a difference. (Hanneli Lehtikuusi, e-mail interview July 1998, emphasis mine)

Apart from a certain opposition to academic inquiries—obviously including mine—Lehtikuusi acknowledges to some extent the undefinability of homosexual identity, i.e. of the total sameness of all people in that group, while she simultaneously uses identity politically. Lehtikuusi sees the fashion of critiquing as counterproductive to deploying what is deemed successful in politics, even if homosexual identity is not definable. In order to make a political point clear and achieve success through actively working for change, in her opinion one has to be persuasive and legible within the discourse on rights that dominates the field the action takes place in. This
legibility—making the point clear—achieves rights and progress and nothing else can do the same. Lehtikuusi, thus, propagates a strategic essentialism.

While I find this view problematic from a queer theoretical standpoint, with regard to agency it offers an interesting insight. Making a point so clear that it makes a difference defines change as situative: specific to the context in which it is argued. To make a point clear means to assure that all actors participating in the debate understand the referential framework in which a claim is voiced. If clarity according to Lehtikuusi cannot be reached by a critical academic analysis of identity but only on a practical political level, then what makes political sense—and in consequence brings about political change—defines the possibility of agency. Change is not tangible in any easy form that is valid in all situations, times, and places, but is acknowledged by all interviewees to be dependent on its own location in activist discourses and strategies. Yet, even within those discourses and strategies, it is not easy to define what has been influenced or changed through which action.

Kurt Krickler—long-term Austrian activist and co-chair of ILGA-Europe—acknowledges the difficulty of identifying change and success in relation to his own active involvement in different sorts of gay and lesbian political actions over twenty years. During his narrative on the kinds of activism in which he has been involved, he touched upon many themes relevant to understanding the possibility of agency. Here, he is reporting on his outing actions against the homophobia of the Catholic church in Austria whose anti-gay lobby he wished to counter.215

I have collected a huge amount of newspaper clippings... 100 people came to the press conference, six camera teams from major European broadcasters, even the Vatican reported....

Nico: “Where you alone?”

Yes, only me.... It was great fun. Mind you I thought back then already that, you know, you are already too old for these actions, the younger ones should do this. But it is as usual in Austria, you have to do everything yourself. I have

215 A few years ago he announced a press conference to occur in two months in which he would identify gay bishops in Austria. To his amusement, all the outing work was done before the set date by journalists who researched the matter and published articles in which certain bishops were not named but were identifiable. On 1. August 1995 he then held the announced press conference, which became a major media event. In consequence the Austrian Catholic Church took Kurt Krickler to court with charges of libel. He lost in all instances. He was sentenced to disclaim his action in the leading newspapers and to pay the legal costs since, according to the court, stating that a person is gay causes severe stigma and career disadvantages for this person. Since he lives on social benefits, he wrote a letter to the church announcing not to own the financial means that enable him to pay for the space in the newspapers and for the legal costs. He offered to collect the money in front of the Cathedral in Vienna. Faced with the prospect of another public action on this matter the church backtracked, accepting the loss of a large amount of money in the legal procedures. Krickler, then, brought this case to the European Court of Human Rights under Freedom of Speech, where it is was judged in October 2000. Krickler lost his case, although earlier judgements on similar freedom of speech in Austria have been successful in Strasbourg. During the interview Kurt Krickler reported about many other equally inventive and funny actions he has been involved in over the years besides his strong role in lobby politics in Austria and on the European level.
constantly participated in these actions since 1980. Really lustful actions. At the same time we did lobby work and talked insistently to generations of politicians whose names are not known to anybody anymore. I started in 1979 and at some point I came to the conclusion that this is actually crazy, that you work for something for that long and actually have no success and result with regard to, for example, the legal situation. Looking back on it I am pretty disappointed, because actually this is an imposition. The only comforting thing is that the societal situation has totally changed, homosexuality, to be lesbian or gay, has not got such a stigma attached to it anymore and it is present in the media. I remember that 20 years ago we were totally excited about every mentioning of homosexuality and that was collected and archived and it became a big sensation. Nowadays you could not manage to do that anymore. Things have changed and that has an impact on society, the questions that were relevant 20 years ago do not exist anymore and that is comforting because you see that it was not all for nothing. But the question certainly remains what is societal development and what have you really influenced through your work? That is difficult to assign. I just thought that it could function in Austria the same way it functioned in Scandinavia that a NGO, a citizens' movement could fight for their rights and actually participate in politics. And that is the disappointment of my life. In Scandinavia this worked much better. But the level on which politics function in Austria is different, it is not the factual questions of evidence and rationality that count, but ideology and in this case Christian conservative fanatic ideology in which lesbians and gay men are second class in the consciousness of politicians. (Kurt Krickler, February 1998, translation mine)

As what types of activism he found more successful Krickler explained that direct actions, such as the outing of the bishops, do not directly work towards his goal of change. Yet, they create publicity, are funny and do not harm the cause, although some politicians pretend that the public scandals he regularly causes are detrimental to getting rid of the discriminatory laws still existing in Austria. To actually achieve political success through pressure at the EU is an excellent place of political work for him despite his personal dislike of European centralism. Krickler's story explains his take on his own active involvement through his belief in the influence his actions should have. As much as the other interviewees, he defines himself as an active agent free to identify a problem, pick his strategies, and decide when and where to enact them. He believes in the possibility of a direct effect of his actions.

However, Krickler clearly touches upon several complications in his possibilities to define himself as agentic in the sense of achieving change. For him change is not directly measurable as an outcome of activism, but depends on historic and social developments as well. He situates the possibility of change in a political context, in this case a specific national context. He believes that both forms of politics in which

---

216 Kurt Krickler used the German term “lustvolle Aktionen”, which incorporates the English lusty and pleasurable, as well as the sexual tinge of lustful, yet not as strongly.
he is involved—direct action and lobbying—can achieve explicit aims to different
degrees. It is the great disappointment of his life that they did not, while in other
places the goals were achieved. Rational arguments and evidence are the bench
markers for his argumentation. The reason for this rests in what he calls a Christian
conservative fanatic ideology that reduces gay men and lesbians to second class
citizens. He implies that, in consequence, the dominant heteronormativity in Austria
denies a certain group agency in that it prevents their fight for rights from reaching
successful completion.

Beyond this implication his account reflects on his sexuality as the motivating
factor in the work for rights. There is a group that is jointly interested in change,
there are generations to follow him in activism even if he bemoans a lack of brave
and forthcoming involvement among the younger ones. Sexual orientation fuels
political agency and the belief in an ideal goal of equality is a feature in his account as
well as his very personal enjoyment in activism. Since both these last aspects
intersect in almost all interviews, they appear to be crucial for an understanding of
political agency as discursive agency.

All interviewees connected their activism to their personal enjoyment, their
personal anger, or their personal needs, as well as to shared identifications with the
group of homosexuals in Europe. However, personal motivation was never simply a
logical consequence of shared identification. For the interviewees, identity seems not
necessarily to pre-condition what a person gets out of her or his activism nor does it
necessitate shared goals. Yet, the concept of identity was alluded to in the
understanding of agency in political practices voiced by them. Most interviewees
acknowledge a significant personal gain through learning the technicalities of
political activism, but to what extent the ideal changes mattered personally varied to
a great degree. Different frames of reference become evident in the way the
interviewees conceptualise their motivation for activism as well as the importance of
identity as a shared feature that entitles them to speak on behalf of a group.

Steffen Jensen—Danish activist and board member of ILGA-Europe—stated that

the discrimination of g/l's is important for my way, it makes me angry and I
want to change it, but it does not mean anything for my own identity, I have
never been discriminated myself, and the discrimination in itself does not mean
that I feel more in common with other g/l's. (Steffen Jensen, e-mail interview
February 1998)

Roy Dickinson—co-president of EGALITE—similarly disclaims personal relevance
in envisaging that “were we to achieve our aims at this moment it would make no
difference for me personally, only it would be deeply satisfactory in principle, the
symbol, the political significance of achieving your goal.” (May 1998) Steffen Jensen
and Roy Dickinson, thus, do not occupy a position of personal suffering as
motivation for their immensely time-consuming involvement. They claim not to be
active out of personal necessity to fight unbearable discrimination in their own life
or out of the need to find a group to identify with or indeed because they thought they were sharing something significant, but out of anger with regard to others and out of political principle. Their activism surely connects to their personal identities, but the intent, will, and power to achieve change is for them not pre-conditioned by their sexual orientation, but rather by reference to a more general framework of agency: one that grants freedom of speech and action to equal citizens endowed with the human capacities to execute will and carry the responsibility for actions. With reference to this framework, the discourse of equality becomes the means by which an agentic position is taken up and by which the power to change is claimed.

Gay and lesbian identities, as personal subjectivities and as group identity, feature significantly in this referential framework, but do not in themselves explain why activists become active and what their agency means to them. Michiel Odijk—Dutch Parliamentarian and long-term ILGA activist—and Jan Willem de Jong—Dutch and long-term ILGA activist—add to their political tactics, their own personal hesitation about the existence of a clear gay identity:

For practical purposes it is sometimes quite useful to say I am gay, I do that myself as well. Sometimes you need so much explanation for people, so to be short let’s define it in this way.... Ok I am gay and this is what I want. But if you have some more access to the EU if you have talked to people more extensively then you can make it clear that it is not so clear.... (Michiel Odijk Feb 1998)

One of the beautiful things of being involved in ILGA is, then you can see how other concepts are, you get an awareness of other cultural definitions of identity. Homosexuality in the Netherlands is different from the US or South Africa.... (Jan Willem de Jong Feb 1998)

Michiel Odijk strategically utilises identity, but only to a certain degree, there comes a clear point at which he feels his firm critique of essentialist gayness can and does enter the way he works for change. Jan Willem de Jong directly added that this belief for both of them stems from an intercultural experience they gained in the decades of their ILGA involvement. While there is a clear political task that Odijk identifies, essentially shared identifications are not the motivating factor for formulating and enacting those politics. De Jong and Odijk’s sense of agency does not depend on personal identification and sameness with a minority group, while they also do not deny that they use a sense of shared group identity for certain political purposes.

Identity nevertheless matters significantly for political agency. It is not disclaimed by the interviewees but is, instead, re-instated. Roy Dickinson, for example, reintroduces the significance of his sexual orientation with regard to changes he can achieve within settings that are based on the notion of out and closeted gays in the workplace. His political agency has various, and according to him distinct, features in which the notion of identity carries a different political relevancy.
Well there are distinct levels. I mean there is the sort of traditional political lobbying formal bureaucratic stuff of being an activist, in terms of writing letters, having meetings, doing concrete things to try and achieve results.... Then there is a second political level. I mean the fact that I was an out gay man at work, everybody knew I was gay..... is itself a bit political, it really does influence how people think about lesbians and gays and in the sense of changing individuals’ perceptions probably that is more successful than having meetings and writing letters... just being open does make you feel more politically significant.... Being out at work is a political statement in a broad sense. (Roy Dickinson, May 1998)

Dickinson changed his mind in the course of the interview. In the end, he does insist that there is a shared identity based on the shared experience of coming out and that this aspect did produce a group that had to endure a certain pressure and, thus, gained authority to act on its own behalf.

Marion Oprel also re-instates identity in her argument of how she gains access to making a difference while insisting that sexual orientation is not very decisive for her personal identity. While identity does not matter too much in her daily life, she comes back to group identity as the factor that grants the position and authority to speak about human rights and discrimination:

If you want to stop discrimination you ought not to pay too much attention to differences yourself, you ought not to judge, you ought not to put people in different boxes or subsections of society. The fact that we are discriminated against on grounds of our sexual orientation, which shows itself in our identity and in our longing to be recognised as such, makes us work in EGALITE and for changes. It is not my primary political, personal occupation and worry in life.... We have bisexual and straight members too and all these people want to see discrimination end, they want the institutions to grant us legally recognised space... but we are the only ones who have the logical reason to organise ourselves, because heterosexuals who opt not to marry but to live together don’t have this steady ground we are standing on.... It is a question of principle, we have a stronger ground than they have, and we are fighting their fight too... (Marion Oprel, March 1998)

Oprel insists on a shared group identification and solidarity as a motivating factor for activism, claiming the prerogative to speak up politically and to successfully influence the debate, while at the same time disclaiming sexual orientation—or her lesbian identity—as a decisive marker of the self, envisaging a future in which categorising people will not be necessary any longer.

She and Roy Dickinson obviously make a distinction between different ways to interpret identity in response to my question about the significance of sexual identity to their political work. This was also made explicit by Maren Wuch—a German activist and member of the board of ILGA-Europe at the time of the interview. The idea of a fixed identity in content sits uneasily with her. She elaborates at length about the fact that she does not believe she shares much with all lesbians and gays,
that, in fact, she does not assume homosexuality alone would make another person
her ally or somebody she would want to align herself with. Yet, she definitely denies
that successful political practice—defined by her as a practice that brings about
change—can do without speaking for a group, and, thus, arguing for a minority.

I think one can only argue with the minority concept.... It is a critical concept
one should think about, but it is politically useful.... I mean one cannot say this
for ILGA, there are a thousand member groups who have an opinion, and
every member of a member organisation has an opinion.... But I think it
[ILGA] is a politics for a minority.... ILGA-Europe can display an opinion, do
its job well and can raise its voice in Europe, which is, I think, important for
lesbians and gays in Europe... but I need something on which I can in this
moment fix my personality, characterise it, connect to the circumstance out of
which I speak, so it is important.... This is difficult, when you speak about gays
and lesbians. There are opinions of lesbians I cannot do anything with and it
gets even harder with gay men. There are a good amount of them who are
highly misogynist, so it is difficult to speak in an entirely positive fashion, but at
the moment of politics you do not think whether you just yesterday had a
stupid argument with a stupid gay man in the pub, you speak of a general
minority which claims its rights...

Nico: “Would you say then that your politics and ILGA politics are based on
an idea of identity?”

Yes... but that can change in content... I have to admit I have never occupied
myself with these things... [laughter] Hanno say something [that is the dog]...if
there wasn’t any identity there wouldn’t be any ILGA work... most others have
not thought about this question either, but we wouldn’t connect if we did not
think we shared something. (Maren Wuch, March 1998, translation mine)

Wuch describes a minority or a group one speaks for as the only way to gain rights,
create change, make the political goal representable, and render homosexual life-style
choices intelligible, and, thus, give her agency. She also uses identity as the marker
for solidarity that grants a sense of self as an activist. Yet, quite importantly, my
question about identity was also something she did not consider before and it made
her uncomfortable to be asked to voice a clear opinion on it—my dog, who was
present at the interview, was rendered part of the discussion by her at this point. Yet,
in fact, her opinion is not entirely clear cut in the end. Her reference to difference in
opinion and attitude about what it means to be gay or lesbian ruptures her later
assertion that identity is the only successful way to argue politics.

All quoted accounts utilise the term identity in various interpretations of its
meaning. The interviewees all implied manifold concepts of identity such as an
emphasis on individualisation or on a sense of being and simultaneously on a sense
of doing. Identity functions as subjectivity, as a referent to commonalities between
people, or as a marker of their group status. The all-encompassing and hazy
understanding of identity explains the necessity for an implicit distinction between
personal identification, personal motivation for activism, and the authority to speak
on a certain issue. Since identity can mean so many things, activists use the single term to conceptualise different aspects of their lives and work, but still clearly differentiate those uses. This differentiation is more than a confusion of various aspects under the one concept of identity. Understood as a discursive subject position, the implicit differentiation among definitions of identity actually enables activists to adopt a critical concept of political agency.

**Identity and the Authority to Agency**

Judith Butler wonders “whether the subject is the condition or the impasse of agency”. (1997a:14) She goes on to suggest that it is both. The subject is itself a site of ambivalence, emerging as the effect of a power that forms the basis for a radically conditioned form of agency. (1997a:14-15) A subject is, therefore, subject in both senses of the word—a subject who determines and is determined or subjected. The subject as an individual whole that consciously attributes meaning to objects is replaced “by a conception of the subject as a position, a place where different systems intersect”. (Bal 1991:156) This implies that a politically deployed sexual identity depends on the conditions in which the homosexual subject is determined, subjected, as well as determines itself.

An analysis of the agency taken up by activists in transnational networks needs to take this ambiguity into account. Such an analysis has to take into account that the politically predominant liberal humanist sense of a person as continuous is created through discourses on essential selves. A consistent positioning within a frequently used dominant discourse comes to be regarded as a feature of the person rather than the discourse. (Davies 1991:49) This involves a process of taking on, as our own, discursive practices that in fact do not originate in us but constitute us. We claim authorship to characteristics that seem to locate us, subsequently, within categories of collectives. (1990b:506) According to Bal the traditional split between the individual and the social is an ideological construction to subject us to a system, while at the same time making us believe in our own personal autonomy.217 (1991:46)

This view is relevant with regard to homosexuality in the political field. Homosexual identity is exposed to the process of subjugating powers of discourse to create a sense of continuity. In Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré’s words the individual activist could be said to emerge

through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. (1990:46) 218


218 Davies and Harré work within the field of education and agency in classrooms. They do not actually write about political activists.
Therefore, persons as speakers or agents acquire beliefs about themselves that are shifting with the discourses in which they are positioned and with the story lines they take up (1990:58), and which, in turn, position them as members of certain identificatory collectives. To remain within possibilities of communication, a subject needs public language to understand itself and be understood as a social agent. (Bal 1991:36) The 'I' of the activist—her or his personal identification—is spoken into existence through taking up story lines that characterise the activist's identity as a part of collective discourses that provide the rules of political practices.

The constitutive forces of each political practice, then, lie in its potential to open up possible subject positions. The subject positions available to an activist with regard to utilising identity as personal or group incentive for action are never disconnected from existing collective political practices. Yet, they are not connected in a simple one way road from collective practices to individual subject positions; their interrelation is, rather, a process of mutual influence that makes the creation of new or different subject positions possible. Power here becomes a decisive element of the conditions in which sexual identity can become politically meaningful in the first place. Butler points out that the power to act or the agency of the subject is located in time and I would add also in space, place, and political system. (1997a:14) For power to act, there must be a subject, but that necessity does not turn the subject into the origin of power. Power makes the subject possible. The subject's power to act refers to both the subject's power to incorporate as well as to resist the norms of how rights and equality are distributed. As Bal summarises:

Since social interaction goes on at the level of signs, the more substantial struggle is the struggle for power over signs, because possession of signs makes possible the representation of authority, and assures the possessor a place in the ideology under formation. (1991:38)

If the substantial struggle is the struggle for power over signs, then the substantial political struggle is a struggle for the power to designate various subject positions as true subjectivities. Taking up those positions is occupying a place as well as actively doing something. (1991:45) Yet, according to Bal, the positions made available in political practices are pre-positions—established in advance—and sub-positions—insinuated from the actors and from social reality itself. (1991:45) Both aspects of positioning serve as the basis from which one acts individually and as a stage on which one plays a specific attributed role. What Bal terms subjectivity and subject position is usually incorporated in the term identity in the political realm. On the one hand activists use the term identity to describe their subject positions with respect to their activism. On the other hand, the discussion of agency is most commonly bound to the question of identity and so-called identity politics. While subjectivity is the theoretically more precise term, identity keeps visible the complexity and contradictions that are implied whenever sexual identity or sexual orientation is used to describe a group that has authority to politically represent its experience. How the contradictions of identity enable agency becomes apparent on three levels.
Firstly, the differentiation Odijk, de Jong, Opred, and Dickinson make with regard to identity is, in fact, the complex relation among sexual subjectivity, group identities, and the possibilities of agency for individual activists and NGOs to participate in debates on rights and equality. As a political activist, Opred asserts a subjectivity that enables her to speak. She, thus, implicitly acknowledges that "each person can only speak from the positions made available within those collective through the recognised discursive practices used by each collective." (Davies 1990a:343) Hence, the will, desire, and power of gay and lesbian activists to speak and act was never independent from the processes in which gender identities and sexuality were made desirable and wanted within any particular collective. Nor were acts ever independent of the processes in which personhood and the interrelation between group and individual are constituted. Yet, being dependent on political rules that foreground identities and give them authority does not determine action fully since every political strategy excludes possible interpretations and remains incomplete or fragmented, and as such, contradictory. Partially, those contradictions are expressed in the contradictory ways the interviewees related to their own motivations of involvement with regard to identity.

Secondly, the contradictory accounts of identity mirror activists' proficiency in the rules of the political debate in which they intervene and in the rules of the political collectives to which they belong as individuals. Political discourses provide contradictory and changing positions with regard to how much influence the individual activist has on change. Thus, activists' agency becomes a process of weaving together social, cultural, political meanings of available positions. This process attaches meaning to certain actions that can result from personal experiences, from relating to others in the same positions, from the discourses that legitimate democratic change and equality, and from the cultural moral system that links and legitimates choices. (Davies & Harré 1990:59) Yet, most importantly, the language of identity makes available a very crucial subject position: it grants access to the authority to speak and be respected as an agent in a political setting.

Thus, thirdly, the authority to speak and be an agent has a significant connection to identity in the political field. Adrian Coman addressed that connection explicitly:

Sometimes I am sorry for having a career that has to do with my sexual orientation. I wonder, if I had been straight, would I still have been a good human rights activist? Isn't everything too personal? I know there some are advantages. I am probably more credible this way in gay circles. Or less credible, in straight circles. Or, it depends on the approached issue rather than on the environment. (Adrian Coman, e-mail interview June 1999)

His identity as a gay man makes him credible—or incredible, depending on the situation in which he speaks. The issue and the environment define the connection between his identity and the possibilities of creating change. This once again, highlights the discursivity of agency. Who has what authority to speak when and where is extremely important to the assessment of possible change, while that
authority is recognised by Coman as fluid and contestable. Authority depends on the referential framework in which action is located by the activists or by the political institutions or indeed by hegemonic discourses on human gender and sexuality.

Thus, authority depends on the access to subject positions that include the right to speak and be heard, that constitute a person as the author of meanings and desires, and gives a sense of the possibilities to combine discourses that compete and that provide an imagination of what could be. (Davies 1991:51) Authority to agency might, therefore, not always be available to marginalised groups in institutionalised contexts, although discursive opportunities exist, through which such groups may claim an authority to agency. More often than not this claim is built upon the connection of personal experience to group identifications and generalised ideals of equality. Such connection is the background to a common story line of activists' argumentation in politics. The story line runs approximately like this: because I am a man and sleep with men I am gay, which means I have a specific experience of discrimination that I share with the group of all gay men and we all want to be treated as equal to heterosexuals. Yet, this chain of logic could be interrupted at any point in institutional contexts to deny that such an act is legitimate, that such an identity exists, that there is any discrimination which is not in the healthy defence of morals. The language of rights claims often utilises this logic in defence against the historical denial of agency. This double bind of the language of minority politics is clearly identified by Tatjana Greif—Slovenian activist and member of the board of ILGA-Europe:

If a certain human praxis is not transparent, it doesn't mean it does not exist or that it exists as a minority. I'm not trying to say, that g/l are a majority, I simply think that the self-definition of a minority is not always productive or positive (it might be understand as victimisation etc.), but in some case it may be. Depends on the situation. (Tatjana Greif, e-mail interview January 2000)

For Greif, the authority to speak is not only relevant on a political level. It is also relevant for the connection between activism and personal motivation. She takes up discrimination and the invisibility of her lesbian identity in general—as well as within the gay and lesbian movement—as the personal motor for her involvement which caused significant trouble in her life.

In a way it sure gives me a form of my personal satisfaction. The fact that g/l are discriminated against is one of the basic grounds, which motivate me to keep working. Sometimes I also feel that I simply have to deal with the invisibility of lesbian women in g/l movement and the society as such. That's why I decided to live and work as an open lesbian in a small country such as Slovenia. This caused a lot of problems with my family, relatives etc., but I feel there is no way back. Pretending not to be gay is a way of self-destruction, I guess. (Tatjana Greif, e-mail interview January 2000)
Nigel Warner also emphasised personal satisfaction and said that 20 years ago activism meant acquiring an identity for him, which was more necessary then than it is now.

I have always said the first 10 or 15 years that activism is like a therapy, [laughter] to shake off all the horrors of oppression and all those sorts of things. So I must say it has been a wonderful therapy, a really good one. I have always done activism because I enjoyed it because it was good for me, not only for anyone else... I suppressed myself from my mid teens to my mid twenties... I had not got an identity, I was a vacuum.... So for a few years going around talking to people helped a lot, I felt more professional about what I was doing.... And today, I feel that very strongly now too, but not quite so as I did before, with last year retiring and people saying “what are you going to do, you are 50 and have all this time and energy” and “are you going to work”. Well, [laughter] I said I am going to be a gay activist and get back to doing what I really like doing best... It is not about a power trip... I am more happy in the background... I want the organisation that I work for to be successful and respected... I am very much an organisational person. (Nigel Warner, February 1998)

For both Warner and Greif the personal gain of identification is decisive for what they define as successful political engagement as well as access to the possibilities to speak up about issues that concern them and others. As most of the others, they both re-iterate the need for personal and group identification as a strategic tool in different political settings and for different political aims. They create a referential framework—from personal experience to anger about the lack of equality for others—which is quoted as motivation and justification for an involvement in an organisation, in this case a large and officially recognised NGO that represents the authority to stipulate changes on institutional levels.

How interviewed activists formulate the relevance of identity with regard to various aspects of their activism suggests that, in drawing on identity as agency, they do not claim to tell a fixed truth about themselves or about how gayness and lesbianism is defined in essence. What seems to be obvious at first glance, namely that activists in the field of sexual orientation are motivated by their own identities and claim to represent a coherent group, is clearly more complicated. I have shown identity to be a relevant, but complex and contradictory feature of the possibility of agency. Activists do not only conceptualise their personal motivation and their power to achieve change as a simple expression of their own coherence and independence from the constricting forces of a marginalised sexuality. Implicitly, they position themselves in relation to their actions for change and those relations are discursively determined through the rules of political participation and the historical ideal of equality and justice. This assertion seems to contradict the common understanding in most queer theoretical writing of what agency in mainstream lobby activism entails. The activist as an agent of change is relevant and
real in the transnational political sphere. From a queer point of view, her or his existing role should not be abandoned, but critically re-considered.

**Conclusion**

Activists are aware of the tensions between activism as contingent and the sense of a sexual identity that is not fixed in essence. This tension carries implications for the agency activists can take up. Political agency involves an immense discursive, political, and individual complexity that does not entirely escape those who believe they are successfully bringing about change. Yet, there is still no politically intelligible and applicable explanation of how it is “that we can think we have, and act as if we have, (and can be required by law to have) a sense of agency, and recognize at the same time that it is in the constitutive force of discourse that agency lies”. (Davies 1997:272) While precise answers to this question are still lacking, the tension within the concept of political agency is a significant aspect of the fundamental tensions that characterise all struggles for sexual minority rights. The individual level of activists’ agency analysed in this chapter connects to the structural and organisational level discussed via political and theoretical concepts in the previous chapters.

When Hannele Lehtikuusi asserts “that most of the minorities have diversity and multiplicity inside of them” and that “the world is not changed by the fashions/modes of thinking—it is changed by making a point so clear that it makes a difference” (e-mail interview July 1998), she explicitly brings an old conflict between theory and practice to the fore. Yet, the way she positions herself in this conflict includes the assertion that she is able to make a point so clear that it makes a difference. Obviously, for her the line between normative and non-normative has ceased to simply run along the heterosexual-homosexual divide and that the breakdown of that divide is possibly the greatest success of the gay and lesbian movements in obtaining visibility, acceptance, and tolerance. Although theory is often too academic for Lehtikuusi to make practical sense, queer theory need not pose a threat to those interested in political change. It does not deny political agency. Nor does the theory–practice gap need to be sharpened. Queer theory simply foretells the breaking apart of what was formerly a group characterised by solidarity, into new affiliations around different rally-points than homosexual identity. Most importantly, the queer critiques put desire back on the agenda, centralising it by understanding the formative power it wields over the claim to rights and over the subject formation of activists as agents of change. The interrelation between desire and agency is fundamental for an assessment of all sexual and gender politics.

The interrelation between desire and agency also partly accounts for the trouble which sexual rights as human rights produce. The concept of humanity has a history that is not positively inclined towards non-normative expressions of sexual and gender desires. When those who live non-normative sexualities claim agency to change, it is their desires that ground both their capacity to change and the denial of
the right to enact and deserve change. While the discourse of human rights is a powerful tool, human identity and its heteronormative sexuality ought to remain a temporary political strategy that is intelligible in institutional political discourse, and that is a means to an end. Adrian Coman suggests human identity is a means to dissolve problematic group identifications: “I think that the concept of a ‘human identity’ should first be brought into both politics and in our lives with less hypocrisy. If that works, we may NOT need to refer to particular groups.” (Adrian Coman, e-mail interview June 1999) Coman makes explicit rather than implicit the reliance on the problematic history of humanity, which is a history of hypocrisy. He positions himself in relation to a history of humanity that does not liberate, but burdens those who are designated as a minority group. The way activists position themselves in relation to this territory of humanity is already differentiated, but ought to be made more explicit. For as long as the stakes of humanity are not openly designated as the territory of negotiation, human rights will continue to burden those they actually seek to liberate.

As we have seen, a crucial part of human rights is the right to freedom from discrimination. Like human rights, anti-discrimination rights are set up as indivisible and as means to assure diversity rather than normalising sameness. The category discrimination is a strong factor in forming an identity that becomes politically deployable and presents the motivation to take up agency. As Marion Oprel formulated so succinctly: “the fact that we are discriminated against on grounds of our sexual orientation, which shows itself in our identity and in our longing to be recognised as such, makes us work in EGALITE and for changes.” (Marion Oprel, February 1998) While Oprel clearly acknowledges the connection among discrimination, identity, and an authority to speak politically, the implications of this connection are not made explicit. Activists insert themselves and their agency into the theme of discrimination to an extent that raises problems with regard to the normalising effect of remaining a discriminated, clearly identifiable group subjected to the hegemony of the juridical that only assigns certain kinds of agentic roles. Yet, the response to this problem cannot be to discard legal measures in the future. The problems of anti-discrimination draw different responses on a theoretical and a practical level, which Tatjana Greif acknowledges:

Politics around g/l issues should do both, I guess, defining and redefining these identities. In the situation where there is the problem of social invisibility of g/l, for example, you should define l/g/b/t identities in order to make them visible. In more developed situation, or on the level of theory, art etc. you should try to deconstruct and redefine them in order to get rid of the stereotypes, negative meanings etc. (Tatjana Greif, e-mail interview January 2000)

All political practices—in one way or the other—already engage in a negotiation about the pre-conditions of what can be conceptualised and granted as rights, although there is much scope for development in this respect. The law as a whole, therefore, is not to be disregarded in relation to how activists take up agency for
change. Steffen Jensen explains his actions for legal change as one way to actively position himself against the injustice that concerns him most. His motivation for his activism has a strong connection to a specific belief in the law:

The most difficult discrimination to fight is not the legal one but the day-to-day discrimination in the society. But legal equality and the introduction of formal rights are important in the fight against the day-to-day discrimination. Formal rights will eventually lead to changes in the opinion of ordinary people. When legislators go ahead others will follow! (Steffen Jensen, e-mail interview February 1998)

In a way his discourse on legal rights as a fulfilment of equality is surely ripe for ontological and epistemological doubt. The rhetoric of the liberated future whose approach we are apparently witnessing is marked by a certain romanticised fascination with equality before the law while gayness and transgenderism continue to cross boundaries of cultural norms. In spite of this, Jensen’s hope of leadership of the law is not only a site of normative regulation. He does not believe that the law can undo the cultural markers that create, cement, institutionalise, and change the meaning of difference and identity. Yet, legal cases are potentially a battle field on which cultural markers—Jensen’s day-to-day discrimination—could be rendered visible and where human diversity can at least be spoken. Both contradictory aspects are present in the ways activists take up agency with regard to the law.

The rights claims staged by NGOs such as ILGA-Europe, will most likely in due course be successful in Europe. The freedom European economic citizenship offers will eventually be applied to gay men and lesbians as long as they fit the bill in other aspects of the order. At the point of full citizenship in the European order, gay and lesbian identity movements will likely dissolve politically, while the hierarchical conditions of why they became meaningful remain in place. Partly, activists already position themselves in relation to this dissolution through their claim to end a second class citizenship status. They want to become and be recognised as part of the family and to some extent they are explicitly aware of the potential reformation of solidarities and identities this move implies. It is part of their agentic choice to pursue certain forms of citizenship and not others and to hopefully deal more explicitly with the exclusionary aspects of those models that are currently on offer in Europe. The motivations for involving oneself in activism have already changed significantly with the move towards more citizenship rights. Yet, the agency citizenship rights accrue is bought at the price of segregating public citizenship from private kinship, while rights of kinship are simultaneously the most decisive stumbling blocks for rights and the motivation to seek a home in activism. Political groups used to and function still today as a family substitute for those abandoned by their families of origin and for those not admitted to the legal and social recognition of their chosen kin.

Nigel Warner as the oldest activist of ILGA succinctly puts his motivation for activism in the quote above into a context of finding a new family, a group of people
who affirm him in his position as an agent of change. To some extent Warner, thus, explicitly connected his activism and his activist group with his former lack of self-worth and of recognition for the intimate attachment he actually wished to form since his teenage years. His gay kinship relations became the place that made politics possible without ever entering the political stage as such. The challenge to kinship rights that l/g/b/t activism poses, then, lies in a hopefully more explicit future effort to drag kinship out of the pre-political into the political frame. Activists as agents of change are entangled in the heteronormativity of European kinship rules, but the way they position themselvesagentically with regard to kinship complicates the tensions already apparent in kinship rights.

In summary, political agency is not independently available to everybody irrespective of their positioning in relation to an authority to speak and create change in a certain setting. Political action is not purely creative, even the most obviously innovative practice presupposes an incorporation of the rules of the political routine and pre-reflexive forms of behaviour in activism. Yet, creativity remains a concept of importance with regard to realising norms and values in concrete practices, “the existence of values also presupposes a creative process by which values are fashioned and transmitted”. (McNay 1999:189)

Creativity and agency need to be explored further to enhance an understanding of how it is that psychic anger or subjection is channelled into activism. While I have shown that activists’ individual involvement and their concept of agency is not a straightforward humanist conceptualisation, it remains to be clarified how the interface between the social and the psyche work here. It also remains to be clarified how the interface between psyche and the social relate to institutional and non-institutional politics and how creative action detaches itself from its original conditions of enactment, thus, giving rise to a set of new values which become resources for further action. (McNay 1999:189)

Struggles for sexual minority rights primarily produce tensions, since they are to some extent necessarily hybrid. They are hybrid not only with respect to agency, but also with respect to all other conceptual frames of political practices—from human rights to anti-discrimination and the law, from citizenship to kinship and the possibilities of agency. All political practices engage, in one way or another, in a hybrid negotiation of these tensions.