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Homosexuality

Fernando Luiz Cardoso and Dennis Werner

INTRODUCTION

We might define “homosexuality” simply as sexual relationships between people of the same sex. Yet behind this simple definition lie many different phenomena. People vary tremendously in their same-sex behaviors, in their sexual desires, and in the ways they define themselves. Cultures also differ widely in the ways they define and treat these relationships and the people who engage in them.

Our knowledge has grown tremendously in recent years. But for several reasons, this literature has dealt mostly with male homosexuality. Written reports have come mostly from men, who may not have cared about or been fully aware of what women do. Also, women’s sexuality has usually been restricted to a more limited private sphere of acquaintances that is less visible, or considered less important. Finally, female sexuality may be more difficult to distinguish from “affection,” or may, in fact, be less common than male homosexuality. Although parallels and contrasts with male homosexuality may be drawn, readers should be aware of the disparity in available information.

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Probably since the beginnings of human culture people have been thinking about homosexuality. Records of these reflections have come to us in the form of myths, political histories, legal documents, literature, and religious injunctions. Even attempts at explaining homosexuality date from ancient times.

Pottery from the Peruvian Mochican culture more than 2000 years ago shows homosexual acts (Gregersen, 1983), and rock drawings of homosexual intercourse from the African Khoi-San culture may be thousands of years old (Epprecht, 1998). However, it is the written records of early civilizations that are most informative about how people conceptualized homosexuality.

Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India

Sumerian temple records from the middle of the third millennium BC mention *gala* priests, who for centuries served the goddess Inanna/Ishtar. These priests and their later equivalents in Babylonia and Assyria adopted female dress and manners and engaged in passive anal intercourse with other men. The written word for *gala* combined the symbols for penis and anus. Babylonian and Assyrian omens even instructed men to have sex with these priests to bring good luck. But not all types of homosexuality were considered positive. Middle Assyrian laws from 1250 BC decreed severe punishments for men who falsely accused others of passive homosexuality or who raped companions (Roscoe, 1997). Similar associations of passive homosexuality with humiliation come from Egypt. In one ancient myth the god Horus rapes the god Seth to humiliate him (Roscoe, 1997), and in the *Book of the Dead* (after 2000 BC) a dead man argues that the god “Atum has no power over me, because I copulate between his buttocks” (Gregersen, 1983). Records of homosexuality from India date from a much later period. Law books from the 4th century BC refer to eunuchs occupying important posts in Indian courts. Later records show that some had affairs with their masters, and may have been castrated specifically for sexual purposes. The *Kama Sutra* (5th century CE) gives instructions on how to be fellated by eunuchs (Murray, 2000).

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China and Japan

In China and Japan homosexuality also appears in some of the earliest surviving texts. In one story from the Chinese Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BC) the Duke Ling of Wei falls in love with a boy named Mizi Xia. The boy finds a peach that is especially sweet and shares it with the Duke. From that time up to the present the term “shared peach” has referred to male homosexual ties (Hinsch, 1990). In Japan, ambiguous references to homosexuality appear by the 8th century CE, and unambiguous records appear in personal diaries from the 11th century

(Leupp, 1994). Most of the Chinese and Japanese texts describe love affairs between a ruler and his younger favorite, and were probably recorded because they had political implications. Rulers often attempted to provide land and other gifts to their protégés.

Ancient Greece and Rome

It was with the Greeks that conjectures on the origins of different homosexual activities became common. The Cretan customs of segregating boys and encouraging homosexual relations between boys and men were attributed by Aristotle to a desire to hold down the birth rate. Plutarch suggested that Theban pederasty resulted from a conscious policy of channeling the “natural ferocity of adolescent males to socially useful purposes” (Murray, 2000). Xenophon contrasted the transitory couplings between men and boys of Elis with the more permanent pairings common in Thebes. Whereas in Thebes, Sparta, and Crete physical relations between a mature mentor (*erastes*) and a beardless youth (*eromenos*) were encouraged, Plato argued that in Athens the relationship ideally avoided physical sex at least until one’s partner had proved his worth (Murray, 2000, p. 105).

When Alexander the Great conquered most of the western world a period of wider cross-cultural comparisons began. Observers noted the homosexual use of eunuchs and effeminate boy slaves in different parts of the Hellenic empires, and in fact, even before Rome conquered Greece, the old Greek system had given way to systems more like those in the conquered territories. By late Hellenistic times Charicles thought the idea of women having sex with women was so ridiculous that he used it to clinch a *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

In Rome what a man did with his slave was considered his own business, but freemen were ridiculed if, as adults, they engaged in “receptive” homosexuality. In the 5th century Caelius Aurelianus argued that homosexuality was an inherited disease (Murray, 2000).

The Age of Discovery

The European discovery of the New World greatly enhanced curiosity about homosexuality. Explorers’ many accounts of “sodomy” in the newly discovered cultures were often used to justify the subduing of native peoples. In the early 1500s Cieza de León complained of homosexual temple prostitutes among native cultures

along the Peruvian coast, and these complaints reinforced the conquistadors’ will to stamp out native religions (Murray, 2000). In the early 1500s Balboa sent wild dogs to kill homosexual shamans in California tribes (Grahn, 1986).

Explorers, traders, and missionaries continued to report on the homosexual activities of newly discovered cultures well into the 20th century. Over time the moral judgments diminished and the descriptions became richer. The 19th-century English explorer, Sir Richard Burton (1967), based many of his detailed descriptions of homosexuality in different countries on “participant observation.” Although he left us with many valuable texts, his widow burned many more (Rice, 1990).

Anthropological Accounts

Up to the 1980s anthropologists’ incidental references to homosexuality were typically no more detailed than those of explorers, missionaries, or traders. Ford and Beach (1951) compiled and quantified some of this information from other cultures, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s the Human Relations Area Files busily indexed accounts from hundreds more. Most accounts were brief, and often ambiguous, but by the late 1960s cross-cultural researchers were able to use statistical analyses to examine psychological and other theories about male homosexuality.

By the 1980s the gay liberation movement had made it possible for Herdt (1981) to initiate a new age in anthropology in which fieldwork was dedicated primarily to homosexuality. At much the same time the social historian, Michel Foucault, published his influential *History of Sexuality* (French edition, 1978; English translation, 1980), making the study of homosexuality one of the central themes of academic research.

Foucault argued that prior to the 19th century people may have talked about homosexual acts, but there was no notion of the “homosexual” as a separate social category. For some of his followers this meant that “homosexuals” themselves did not exist until very recently when they were socially “constructed.” Other scholars pointed out that the lack of a category does not mean that “homosexuals” did not exist, any more than the lack of a concept for “gene” means that genes did not exist prior to Mendel. Still other scholars went further and tried to show that most societies did, indeed, have concepts for “homosexual” that, in essence, were the same everywhere. Thus was born the great “essentialist–constructivist” debate

that permeated gender studies throughout the 1980s and 1990s and resulted in far richer descriptions of homosexuality in different cultures (DeCecco & Elia, 1993).

Attempts to reconcile our knowledge of cross-cultural variation with studies on the biology of homosexuality clarified a need to make greater distinctions with regard to *what* is explained, whether homosexual behaviors, identities, or desires. Several recent studies have once again used cross-cultural statistical studies to test some of these ideas.

THE DIVERSITY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Cultural Systems of Homosexuality

Most scholars of the 1980s and 1990s emphasized the uniqueness of homosexuality in every culture. Of course in some respects every culture *is* different from every other culture. Still, we *can* classify cultures on many different characteristics. One popular typology, originally suggested almost 40 years ago, groups cultures into one of three male homosexual systems (Gorer, 1966). The first, and by far the most common, has been labeled the “pathic” (“passive”) or “gender-stratified” system. The second, also very common, has been called the “pederasty” or “age-stratified” system, and includes societies with “mentorship” or “ritualized” homosexuality. The third system, much less common, has been labeled “homophilic” or “egalitarian,” and may be subdivided into “adolescent homosexuality,” “comrade,” and “gay” systems.

Systems of female homosexuality are similar but not exactly parallel to the male systems. Examples of each system can illustrate the cross-cultural variation.

Male Homosexual Systems

Gender-Stratified Systems. In gender-stratified systems men who take on a pathic (passive or receptive) role in sexual relationships are culturally distinguished from typical men, but the men who take on “active” (insertor) roles are not. Unlike “gays,” pathics do not typically have sex with other pathics. This system is widespread on all the world’s continents. In many societies pathics are known for their special ceremonial roles. Among the Siberian Chuckchee a youth begins his transformation when he receives a “shamanic calling.” He gradually

adopts female characteristics—hairstyles, then dress, then female tasks, and finally female speech. At this point he begins to seek the “good graces of men” and may eventually marry one of his lovers. Pathic shamans, called “soft men,” also communicate with supernatural husbands. The pathic’s human husband is not differentiated from the other men in society, but he may have to follow the orders of his cross-gendered wife’s supernatural husband. Many non-pathic Chuckchee also become shamans, but the “soft-men” are considered special (Murray, 2000).

Gender-stratified homosexuality is also common in Latin America. Although some pathics may adopt special religious roles, like the Brazilian *pai de santo*, most do not, and homosexuality is not necessary for these positions. In his study of a Brazilian fishing village Cardoso (in press) found that most men had had sex with the village’s *paneleiros* (pathics), some of whom were transvestites. Lack of heterosexual opportunities could not explain why men turned to the pathics. The men who had sex with *paneleiros* were actually somewhat more popular with the women than other men. Nor did these men appear to have “bisexual” personality profiles. The local culture did not distinguish them from other men, and they were not intermediate between pathics and other men on childhood precursors to homosexuality (Cardoso, n.d.).

Age-Stratified Systems. Age-stratified homosexual systems have been identified on all the continents except the Americas. One of the most common forms is the “mentorship” system, in which an older male takes on a boy as his protégé to teach the arts of politics, religion, or warfare. In most of these societies relationships are monogamic, and much care is taken to select the proper mentor. Boys may become apprentices as young as 7–10 years, as among the New Guinea Sambia, and may continue with their “passive” role until as old as 25, as among the New Guinea Etoro. At this point a man may take on a boy apprentice of his own until he eventually marries a woman. In some societies, as among the ancient Greeks, the men may continue their mentorship roles even after marrying women. In some societies, like the Etoro, these homosexual activities were more common and considered far superior to heterosexual sex that might be totally prohibited for two thirds of the year. Lengthy and complex rituals assured that insemination would give the boys male strength (Herdt, 1984; Murray, 2000).

From the 13th to the 17th centuries in Japan older Buddhist monks maintained (active) homosexual

relations with (passive) younger acolytes or postulants. Although these *nanshoku* relationships were attributed to the founder of Japanese Buddhism in the 8th century, the custom probably drew more from Shinto and Confucian traditions. At the same time, older Samurai maintained a similar tradition with younger warriors. Sometimes these relationships continued throughout adult life and led to heroic tales of the “comrade loves of the Samurai,” similar to the ancient Greek myths of Achilles and Patroclus or Apollo and Ametus (Ihara, 1972; Leupp, 1994; Murray, 2000).

In both Japan and Greece these “mentorship” systems eventually transformed into “catamite” systems (similar to those of the later Roman emperors and Turkish sultans) in which kept boys were made more effeminate for the sexual pleasures of powerful older males, with no pedagogical aims. Among the West African Mossi, chiefs kept boys for sexual purposes, especially for Fridays when sex with women was taboo (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Among the Ashanti, some male slaves were treated as female lovers. In many societies (China, Korea, Japan, Rome, Egypt, Iraq) boys took on women’s roles in theatrical productions and served as prostitutes, a practice which led some (including possibly Shakespeare’s England) to denounce the theater (Murray, 2000).

Egalitarian Systems. In egalitarian systems power differences between “active” and “passive” partners do not exist, or are downplayed. In many societies adolescent friends engage in homosexual play. Among the African Nyakyusa boys live apart in separate villages from adults. They sleep together and commonly have interfemoral intercourse with each other. Informants said that an adult male may have sex with boys, but never with another adult male (Murray, 2000). Among Yanomami Indians intervillage homosexuality is encouraged and a youth is likely to marry his “best friend’s” sister. Some Australian aborigine adolescents similarly have sex with their future brothers-in-law. Adolescent homosexuality has also been common in many Melanesian and Polynesian societies like Tikopia, Samoa, Tahiti, and Hawaii.

In a few societies an adolescent sexual relationship may develop into a “comrade” relationship that lasts a lifetime and continues to include sex, although both men also have heterosexual relationships and marry women. Although never typical of all the men in a society, such relationships have been reported among ancient Greeks,

Romans, and Japanese (Murray, 2000), and among the more modern Pashtans of Pakistan (Lindholm, 1982).

The rarest of homosexual systems in the ethnographic literature is our modern “gay” system, in which exclusive homosexuals engage in sex with other exclusive homosexuals throughout their lives. This system may, indeed, be unique to modern society as claimed by Foucault. In any case, the “gay” system appears to be increasing recently. Murray and Arboleda (1995) noted changes over time from “pathic” to “gay” systems in Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. In the 1970s, only 50% of their informants had heard of the term “gay,” and only 23% thought it referred to both “passive” and “active” partners. In the 1980s, 76% had heard of the term and 58% applied it to both “passives” and “actives.”

Other Male Systems. Although this classification system may be useful, it cannot account for all of the ways homosexuality occurs in different societies. For example, Duerr (1993) points out that homosexual rape has often been used to humiliate defeated enemies. Greek vases show Persians submitting anally to their conquerors. The losers in Yanomami club fights were also victimized in this way. Homosexual rapes in prisons throughout the world have been well documented (see www.spr.org).

Also, different types of homosexuality may be found in different sectors of the same society. “Gay” systems may characterize most of the homosexual activity found in today’s northern European cultures. Still, gender-stratified systems occur in prisons, and age-stratified systems may occur in private schools or street gangs (Duerr, 1993). In ancient Greece age-stratified systems may have received most of the attention, but gender-stratified homosexuality also occurred. The Greek terms *kinaidos*, *europroktoi*, and *katapygon* referred to men who engaged in passive anal intercourse even as adults. Although their behavior was tolerated, these men were not allowed to hold public office or participate in citizen assemblies (Murray, 2000).

In addition, especially in small-scale societies, rather ad hoc social adjustments may be confused with long-standing cultural traditions. Crocker (1990) reports the presence of three elderly cross-gendered men among the Brazilian Kanela Indians he studied, but states that the group had no tradition for transvestites to follow. Native research assistants told Crocker that these men were not active sexually, but one had previously allowed Kanela

men to have anal intercourse with him. Similarly, Clastres (1972) describes a transvestite among the hunting and gathering Aché of Paraguay. His account ties traditional structural characteristics of Aché culture to the transvestite's behavior (including his sexual relations with his own brothers), but it seems more likely that these behaviors were ad hoc rather than traditional since a closely related band of Aché reported never having heard of transvestites.

Female Homosexual Systems

In her study of lesbian relationships in Lesotho, Kendall (1998) pointed out how easy it is to ignore female homosexuality. Basotho women simply say that sex is impossible without a penis. Women "have sex" with their husbands, but simultaneously maintain affective ties with women (including "grinding" genital contacts) that they describe as "loving." This has made it difficult for cross-cultural researchers to ascertain just how "sexual" women's relationships are. For example, women taking on the typically male roles of "warrior" or "husband" have been reported for many societies, but it is unclear whether these involved lesbian sex.

Still, there are clear descriptions of gender-stratified female homosexuality. Among the Chuckchee, two women who adopted male dress, speech, and work activities eventually married girls, and one of the wives became pregnant by a cohusband. Records of gender-stratified female homosexuality also appear from ancient China and Japan. A chronicle of the Han emperor Cheng (32–7 BC) reports that his wife had a *dui shi* (husband–wife) relationship with a female student who then became the emperor's concubine so that both could enjoy the girl's sexual favors (Murray, 2000). During the Tokugawa period (1615–1867 CE) lesbianism was common in the shoguns' harems, and there are references to women dressed as males who sought female prostitutes. Japanese theater companies also included women who took on male roles and became enamored of their female counterparts (Leupp, 1994). Gender-stratified lesbian relationships have also been described in Sumatra and Java (Murray, 2000).

Age-stratified female homosexuality occurred as part of initiation ceremonies among the Kaguru of Tanzania, and in the form of "mentorship" systems in ancient Greece. A Spartan text mentions women's intercourse with girls before their marriage, and Sappho,

the poet from Lesbos, addressed women in the language of *erastes/eromenos* used for male homosexual relations. Since Sappho had a daughter, she obviously also had sex with a man. Female homosexuality also occurred in the form of a reverse "catamite" system in Japan, where girl dancers imitated men's behavior and served as prostitutes for female customers (Murray, 2000).

Accounts of non-"gay" egalitarian female homosexuality have been ambiguous. Big Nama women of Malekula (Melanesia) commonly practice homosexuality, but it is unclear whether this is age structured. Similarly, the lesbian relationships described in early 20th century Chinese sisterhoods and in the "mummy–baby" relations of Lesotho women appear to have been egalitarian, but we cannot be sure (Murray, 2000).

As these examples illustrate, homosexual activities occur under many varied forms, and may be given vastly different meanings in different cultures. For some this diversity is great enough to invalidate any attempts at explanation.

Animal Homosexuality

As Bagemihl (1999) points out, zoologists and ethologists have often been reluctant to label animal behaviors as "homosexual." Often these activities are listed as dominance/submissive gestures or "mock" courtships, even though the same behavior with a heterosexual couple would have been called sex. Bagemihl suggests that this reluctance sometimes stems from negative attitudes toward human homosexuality, but in part it may also reflect a recognition that human behavior simply is not the same as animal behavior.

When comparing different species it is important to distinguish "analogous" from "homologous" behaviors. Analogous behaviors may appear similar but are phylogenetically unrelated, while homologous behaviors are similar because they share an evolutionary past. When a bedbug forcibly deposits his own sperm in the sperm ducts of another bedbug, he helps pass along his own genes whenever his victim copulates with a female. Although scientists might label this behavior "homosexual rape," it really has nothing to do with human sexuality (Sommer, 1990). On the other hand, when a male gorilla mounts another male and ejaculates in his anus (Bagemihl, 1999), this behavior is more likely to be homologous to human homosexuality. Whether we decide to call the gorilla's behavior "homosexuality"

Explaining Homosexuality

is less important than recognizing that it is similar enough to human same-sex behavior for us to postulate an evolutionary connection.

Many primate behaviors might be homologous to human same-sex sexuality. Examples might include the male–male mounting, with anal penetration but no apparent ejaculation, of stump-tailed macaques and squirrel monkeys, or perhaps the simple mounts without penetration so common in langurs, pig-tailed macaques, baboons, orangutans, chimpanzees, and bonobos—or the mutual masturbation and fellatio reported among stump-tailed macaques—or the genital–genital contacts of female bonobos and male gibbons (Bagemihl, 1999; Werner, 1998). If we classify these behaviors as homologous with human homosexuality, why not include the sniffing and inspecting of another male’s anogenital region among stump-tailed macaques, or the displaying of erections among vervet macaques or baboons, or the deposition of urine drops on subordinate males among squirrel monkeys? Could the preference of some rhesus monkeys for homosexual partners indicate primate homologs for “pathics” (Werner, 1998)?

Deciding these questions requires theory-driven comparisons of different primates, but our growing knowledge of homosexual-like behaviors among primates has revealed such complexity that some researchers seem to think that we should eschew all attempts at explanation and simply appreciate all the glorious exuberance of nature (Bagemihl, 1999).

EXPLAINING HOMOSEXUALITY

No single argument could possibly account for all aspects of homosexuality in humans and animals. However, attempts have been made to explain some of the variation.

Evolution of Homosexuality

Many scientists have puzzled over how homosexuality (especially exclusive homosexuality) evolved. How could a behavior that appears to reduce reproductive success survive the rigors of natural selection? Many researchers have suggested some hidden adaptive value: (1) exclusive homosexuals may help their relatives raise more offspring (kin selection, parental manipulation); (2) genes that are maladaptive in males might be especially adaptive in females, and vice versa; (3) genes for exclusive

heterosexuality may be less adaptive than *combinations* of genes that permit *some* homosexuality (balanced polymorphism, heterosis, hybrid vigor) (Kirkpatrick, 2000; Sommer, 1990; Werner, 1998). Clear evidence for or against these different ideas is still lacking.

Most theorists have considered only adaptation, but evolutionary arguments must also account for how changes might have arisen throughout our phylogenetic history. Werner (1998) suggested an evolutionary sequence of ever greater male–male cooperation among primates that progressed gradually from systems that marked territories in more solitary animals, to systems that marked dominance and subordination in multimale groups, to systems that marked alliances in more complex social animals.

Only small changes needed to occur to move from one system to another. The scent deposits in urine or other bodily secretions that marked territorial boundaries began to mark some animals as subordinate “guests” in a dominant’s territory. In addition to “paying homage” to dominant individuals by inhaling their markings, subordinates also had to hide or avoid penile erections while observing the erection displays of the dominant males (who had exclusive sexual rights to the group’s females), and perhaps also tolerate the dominant’s mounting behaviors. In many of these groups adolescent males practiced these dominance displays by alternating roles with each other. In more complex animal societies this adolescent behavior continued among adult males who could mark alliances by alternating subordinate and dominant roles. As these alliances became more complex, the same-sex behaviors came to resemble human homosexuality more and more.

In a complex animal society a male with genes that encouraged only submission might fail to reproduce for lack of trying, but a male that could act only as a dominant might also fail to reproduce. A little submissiveness helps avoid dangerous fights and facilitates the formation of alliances. In every generation some males may be too dominant and others too submissive to reproduce, but their genes will be passed on through those who have a little of both personalities.

In line with this theory, one of the most peaceful and cooperative of primates, the bonobo, probably also has the highest incidences of “homosexual” behavior, especially among females. As De Waal (1989) points out, sex is probably the major way that these animals reconcile conflicts and maintain peace.

Cross-Culturally Recurrent Themes

If homosexuality is not a totally arbitrary construct of symbolic culture, then we should find some recurrent themes behind all of the cultural diversity. For example, are “pathics” like “gays”? What about the typical men who have sex with them? Are there perhaps universal cognitive associations with homosexuality?

“Cross-gendered Individuals” versus Typical Men and Women. People with experience in both gender-stratified and modern gay systems often compare “pathics” with “gays,” under the assumption that a man who became a “pathic” in one culture would become a “gay” if he had lived elsewhere. Williams (1985) interviewed Lakota Sioux Indians who automatically associated their traditional *winktes* with modern “gays.” They noted, however, that *winktes* would have sex with men, not with other *winktes* like gays do, and one Indian complained: “It makes me mad when I hear someone insult *winktes*. A lot of the younger gays, though, don’t fulfill their spiritual role as *winktes*, and that’s sad too.”

Just how similar are modern gays to the receptive partners in gender-stratified systems? At least with regard to early cross-gender behaviors, like playing with girls, engaging in girls’ play activities, and avoiding fights, American “gays” are very similar to “pathics” from the Philippines, Peru, Guatemala, and Brazil (Cardoso, 1994; Whitam, 1983; Whitam & Mathy, 1986; Whitam & Zent, 1984). Psychoanalytic theories often attributed homosexuality to hostility with fathers, but the U.S. correlations between hostile fathers and homosexuality did not appear in the more accepting cultures of Guatemala and the Philippines. This finding suggests that fathers’ hostility may be a consequence, and not a cause, of homosexuality in more intolerant cultures.

In their comparison of Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, and the United States, Whitam and Mathy (1991) also found that cross-gendered females were more likely than other females to have engaged with boys’ in boys’ play activities, and to have adopted men’s clothes during childhood.

Typical Men Who Engage in Homosexual Activities. Research on the characteristics of typical males who engage in homosexual behaviors is much rarer and the results are more ambiguous. In his study of prisoners in Brazil, Silva (1998) found that it was those

most concerned about their positions in status hierarchies who spoke most favorably about raping other prisoners. Looking at homosexual activities in a Brazilian fishing village, Cardoso (1994, n.d.), found that the men who had sex with the village’s pathics were more fond of aggression during sex. Perhaps these findings are related to U.S. studies that show high-stimulus-seeking males are more likely to engage in bisexuality (Ekleberry, 2000; Udry, 2002), or to the finding that U.S. males expressing more hostility towards homosexuals are more likely than other males to show sexual excitement (measured by penile volume) when viewing films of male homosexual activities (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1996).

Cognitive Associations of Homosexuality. For centuries scholars have puzzled over how our concepts are constructed. Plato thought that we are all born with very specific ideas (like “horse”) which we later attribute to empirical phenomena. Kant reduced these inborn ideas to a few basic building blocks (categories like “time,” “space,” or “causality”) that he thought necessary to construct any intelligent system. Piaget followed Kant, but more recently, developmental psychologists have discovered that babies are born with some very specific concepts (McKenzie, 1990; Pinker, 1994) and that (as etymologies and pidgin languages show) more abstract concepts are built up from earlier more concrete concepts (Givon, 1989). This ontogenetic process may reflect phylogenetic changes in cognition as thought becomes more complex.

Do humans have any elementary concrete ideas regarding homosexuality? The psychoanalyst Arango (1989) suggests that our “dirty words” reflect some of our most basic concepts. These words seem to be stored in a different part of our brain, and may continue to be remembered and used even after brain damage destroys the rest of our conceptual thinking.

Many of the dirty words mentioned by Arango seem to derive rather directly from primate markers for dominance and submission. For example, in most, if not all, human languages, typical primate “homage-paying” behaviors are used to insult people thought too anxious to please their superiors. Brazilians call such people *puxa-sacos* (literally sack-pullers), recalling the behavior of subordinate vervet monkeys. More common is the subordinate’s gesture of sniffing the dominant’s behind.

The association of “active” (insertor) homosexual roles with domination and “passive” (insertee) roles with

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subordination also appears to be almost universal, although the nature of the domination may vary from cruel demonstrations of power (as in prison rape) to more fatherly “mentorship” roles.

Explaining Cross-Cultural Variation

Every culture has some characteristics that are unique and others that are shared by all, but it is those characteristics that only *some* cultures share with *some* others that most interest anthropologists concerned with explaining cultural variation. So far anthropologists have tried to explain why societies vary in their frequency, acceptance, and type of homosexuality.

Frequency and Acceptance of Homosexuality.

Early cross-cultural studies of homosexuality dealt almost exclusively with the closely related variables “frequency” and “acceptance” of male homosexuality (Broude, 1976; Minturn, Grosse, & Haider, 1969; Werner, 1979). Although intercoder reliability coefficients were high, some later scholars (e.g., Bolton, 1994; Gray & Ellington, 1984) complained that these ratings were invalid because they failed to distinguish “homosexual behavior” from “homosexuals.” They pointed out that most of the cultural variance comes from the homosexual behaviors of heterosexually identified men. Thus, cross-cultural comparisons of “modal” psychological characteristics would be irrelevant to theories about differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals, although they might tell us something about heterosexual males who engage in homosexual practices.

Most of the cultural variation in homosexuality recorded in these early studies probably had to do with gender-stratified cultures. Gray and Ellington (1984) showed that societies coded as having more homosexual behavior were also generally coded as having transvestism, and Werner (1975) found that societies with positive attitudes toward exclusive homosexuals also had positive attitudes toward the homosexual behaviors of typical males.

Here are the principal correlations found in these studies.¹ First, homosexuality is more frequent where there are mixed-sex play groups (Werner, 1979), and transvestites are more common where there are fewer sex distinctions within a society (Munroe, Whiting, & Hally, 1969). As the authors explain, these findings suggest that social tolerance of “pathics” is at least partly a function of a more general tendency toward sexual equality.

Homosexual behaviors are also more acceptable where heterosexual outlets are less available or less attractive. They are more common in polygynous societies, where some males have difficulty attaining wives, and in societies where males marry at a later age (Barber, 1998; Werner, 1975). Homosexuality is also more common where there are arranged marriages (Minturn et al., 1969), perhaps reflecting less sexual satisfaction with wives.

Homosexual behaviors are rare in societies with monogamous nuclear families where husbands and wives sleep in the same room, and where there is close father-child contact. Homosexuality and transvestism are also rare in societies with the *couvade* (Carroll, 1978; Munroe, 1980). Although early researchers explained these findings with neo-Freudian theories about sex identities, a more parsimonious explanation might be that they simply reflect a society’s attitude toward paternal investments. By spending more time with the children of just one wife, a father automatically devotes more of his resources to his children. And by submitting to *couvade* taboos around the time of birth he demonstrates to all of society his willingness to assume his paternal responsibilities. In societies with the *couvade*, fathers are more likely to sleep apart from their wives during the first months or even years after birth. Rather than indicate *less* paternal investment, this may in fact indicate greater concern with the new-born’s welfare since the mother’s attention would not be divided between her husband and her child during this critical period. Werner (1979) found homosexual behaviors to be less acceptable in societies where married women are punished for committing infanticide or abortion with legitimate offspring. Werner originally attributed this correlation to a “pro-natalist” social policy in which women are encouraged to bear more children. However, in light of these other studies, it may be more accurate to see intolerance of homosexuality as reflecting a desire to invest more in children rather than simply bear more. One correlation from these early studies seems to require at least some psychological theorizing about sexual identity formation: more accepting societies, and those with more homosexual behaviors, are more likely to perform male genital mutilations (Minturn et al., 1969). Bolton (1994) suggested that this might be part of the ritualization of age-stratified homosexual systems. But, as the next section shows, genital mutilations are actually associated with gender-stratified homosexuality, not with age-stratified homosexuality. Perhaps males living in gender-stratified systems are more

intrigued or anxious about male genitalia because of the ever-present contradiction between the gender roles and the biological sex of their “pathics.”

Different Cultural Forms of Homosexuality.

Crapo (1995) and Murray (2000) coded societies for the presence of the three principal homosexual systems. For male homosexuality, Murray was able to code 120 societies as gender-stratified, 53 as age-stratified, and 30 as egalitarian. For female homosexuality he was able to code only 19 as gender-stratified, seven as age-stratified, and six as egalitarian. Crapo and Murray compared the different types of homosexual organization with regard to other aspects of culture.

Crapo found that gender-stratified societies generally had fewer overall sex distinctions, sleeping arrangements in which husbands and wives stayed together, and more female power. Murray found that gender-stratified societies were more likely to be matrilineal, somewhat more likely to have equal participation by males and females in the principal subsistence activity, less likely to have segregation of adolescent males, and more likely to practice male genital mutilations. These associations confirm the earlier studies on male transvestism (Munroe et al., 1969) and suggest that acceptance and frequency of “pathic” homosexuality is related to greater equality between the sexes.

Crapo found age-stratified systems more common in societies with patrilocality and patrilineality, where polygyny is preferred but limited to older and wealthier men, and where boys are segregated from others. Murray noted that in age-stratified systems male age-mates are more likely to live apart from others, and people are more likely to consider virginity necessary for brides. These societies are also more likely to have social classes, and somewhat more likely to have cities. Neither Murray nor Crapo distinguished between “mentorship” societies and “catamite” societies. It seems likely that the “mentorship” systems may be part of a more general sexual segregation in society, while the “catamite” system may result from class differences that allow the wealthy and powerful to subordinate younger males for sexual purposes.

In both age- and gender-stratified systems, Crapo noted that fathers are less involved with infant care than in societies with neither of these systems, perhaps reflecting once again a less pro-natalist social policy.

In egalitarian systems most typical males (after adolescence) do not usually engage in homosexual

relations. Murray found that, for males, egalitarian systems are most likely where premarital sex is most permissible, where post-partum sex taboos are longest, and where there are fewer wealth distinctions. Perhaps more generally open attitudes toward sex coupled with more egalitarian ideologies make equal male–male sexual ties more acceptable. The taboos on post-partum sex may have more to do with respect for the new mother and encouragement of fatherhood than with any sexual repression.

Murray’s correlations for female homosexuality are more precarious, since he could code far fewer cases. But it is worth noting that female gender-stratified systems are most common where men and women participate equally in the major subsistence task, where there is less segregation of adolescent males, where there are fewer wealth distinctions, and where female premarital intercourse is more acceptable. These correlations are based on very few cases but do seem to indicate, once again, that fewer overall sex distinctions within a society make cross-gender roles more acceptable.

Murray found that female age-graded systems are most likely where women participate more than men in the major subsistence activity. Perhaps the importance of women’s work makes it more crucial for girls to receive closer guidance from older women. His data on female egalitarian systems were based on very few cases (six or seven) and percentage differences so small that any conclusions regarding cross-cultural correlations would be premature.

These findings may lead to some tentative speculations that, of course, will require further confirmation. First, we might observe that typical males are more likely to engage in homosexual activities in age-stratified and gender-stratified systems. In egalitarian systems the homosexual behaviors of most males is usually limited to adolescence, and the number of “comrade” relationships is few. Greater general repression of homosexual activities among typical males may be partly a function of a society’s natalist policy, including paternal investment in offspring. Perhaps the major question facing males is whether to invest directly in offspring or in male–male competition/cooperation. If male–male relations are more important, the next question is how they might be organized. Sexually segregated societies appear to favor age-stratified homosexuality as a way for men to compete/cooperate, while sex with cross-gendered homosexuals may be a part of male camaraderie where sex distinctions are few.

Just why the gay system appeared is under debate. Besides questions of paternal investment, Werner (1999) suggested this change may partly be due to changes from a “patron–client” political system to a “meritocratic” system in which personal qualifications are valued more than personal ties in getting ahead. In line with this theory, Cardoso’s preliminary data from 79 male Brazilian slum dwellers showed that 85% of those who adopted the “pathic” homosexual ideology thought personal ties were most important to getting ahead, while only 60% of those adopting the “gay” ideology agreed with this statement.

As to the different systems for female homosexuality, data are much more precarious. Women everywhere invest more in their offspring than do men, and cooperation/competition between women is usually limited to a smaller and more intimate group. That female gender-stratified systems are more common where sex and wealth differences are fewer, and where premarital sex is more common, may simply imply a more relaxed attitude toward their behavior.

As for the more limited homosexual activities typical of “egalitarian” systems, there is still a great deal of variation with regard to tolerance. These activities appear to be most acceptable where social equalities and sexual freedoms are greatest, probably reflecting a greater sense of equal “justice” for all.

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF HOMOSEXUALITY AND SOCIAL POLICY

One of the most common philosophical mistakes is to confuse what *is* with what *ought to be*. One variation of this confusion is known as the *naturalistic fallacy*—the idea that if something *is* natural, then it is good (i.e., *ought to be*). As Sommer (1990) points out, the presence or absence of homosexual behavior among animals has been used since ancient times either to defend or to condemn the practice. The contradictory conclusions of different authors illustrate well the problems in trying to conclude from what is “natural” (found among animals) to what “ought to be”: In *Laws*, Plato argues *against* homosexuality because it does not occur among animals. But the 2nd century Pseudo-Lucien *defends* homosexuality by arguing that “lions have no homosexuality because they have no philosophers,” and “bears have none because they know not beauty.” On the other hand, the 2nd century

author of *Physiologus* argues that impure hyenas *do* exhibit homosexual characteristics and thus humans should *not* engage in homosexuality, while the 20th century author, André Gide, argues that homosexuality *does* occur in animals and thus is “natural” and so “good.” As these arguments make clear, simply knowing whether animals do or do not engage in homosexuality tells us nothing about whether human homosexuality is good or not. The same holds for arguments about evolutionary adaptiveness.

Likewise, knowing whether homosexual behavior is common or highly regarded in different cultures tells us nothing about whether it *ought to be* common or highly regarded there or anywhere else. This confusion is known as the *relativistic fallacy*. In 1986 Chief Justice Burger of the U.S. Supreme Court argued that historical evidence of proscriptions against homosexuality in different cultures justified upholding the Georgia sodomy laws (Bowkers vs. Hardwick, 1986). More recently, the Zimbabwean dictator, Robert Mugabe, initiated a violent antihomosexual campaign in his country with the justification that homosexuality did not exist there prior to European colonization (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Actually, both are wrong about history, but even if they had been right on the facts, they would still be committing the relativistic fallacy.

The confusion of “is” with “ought” is so common that some scholars have fallen into the reverse error of concluding about what “is” based on what they think “ought to be,” thus committing the *moralistic fallacy*. For example, the Soviet scientist Lysenko decided that the theory of natural selection must be wrong because it implied that reality was based on unjust non-Marxist principles. Some more contemporary scholars have attempted to conclude that men and women, or gays and straights, “are” equal because they “ought to be” equal.

Science deals with what “is,” not with what “ought to be.” How, then, can science help us to draw conclusions about what social policy “ought to be.” The answer depends on the principles we accept (for nonscientific reasons) as the basis for our moral, ethical, or political decisions. For example, one of the most respected principles sees “increasing well-being” as the basis of moral decisions. Many religions have adopted similar principles, such as “love thy neighbor as thy self.”

If we accept “increasing well-being” as our moral aim, then science can help us establish what policies enhance both physical and mental well-being. In the

study of homosexuality we need to understand what can be done to increase the well-being of all involved. Many topics are amenable to this type of research. For example, can we predict beforehand who will benefit from transsexual surgery? What kinds of programs diminish problems like bullying behaviors in school? What social policies can help reduce AIDS contamination? What kinds of domestic arrangements lead to most happiness for different kinds of people? What kinds of laws most encourage these arrangements? As we learn more about homosexuality and its many possible manifestations, we will surely be able to answer these and other questions with greater confidence.

NOTE

1. We did not include the correlations in Broude's (1976) matrix because some appeared to be contradicted by statements in the text. We suspect that there may be misprints.

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