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Homosexual Behavior in Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Whitam, Frederick L. and Robin M. Mathy. *Male Homosexuality in Four Societies: Brazil, Guatemala, the Philippines, and the United States*. New York: Praeger, 1986. xxxii + 208 pp. including statistical tables and bibliography. No price.

Murray, Stephen O. *Social Theory, Homosexual Realities*. New York: Gay Academic Union, 1984. iii + 83 pp. including appendix, notes, and bibliography. \$6.75 paper.

While many advances have been made in the study of same-sex eroticism, such scholarship has had to expend much energy in countering ethnocentric psychologically-based views that homosexuality is pathological and deviant. Anthropologists must be faulted for not paying as much attention to sexual variance as they have to other forms of behavior that are stigmatized in Western culture. Cross-cultural perspectives are desperately needed regarding sexual expressions that are too often dismissed as "unnatural," "abnormal," "anti-religion," or "anti-family." Practically the only recent significant ethnographic reporting has been based on important fieldwork of Gilbert Herdt and others in Melanesia, and this reviewer's fieldwork with American Indian berdaches.

Given the lack of anthropologists' attention to sexual variance, the most exciting developments in theoretical approaches on this subject are occurring in the other social sciences. Inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault (1979), social constructionist historians like Jeffrey Weeks (1977, 1981) and sociologists like Kenneth Plummer (1981) are developing new insights on the recent origins of "the modern homosexual." There is a crucial weakness in such studies, however, in their lack of cross-cultural comparisons. It is difficult to believe social constructionist claims that in no other culture besides modern Euroamerican has there emerged a group identity among individuals with a preference for same-sex eroticism. Since so few ethnographies expend more than a few sentences on the subject of homosexual

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behavior, and since intensive field research has not yet been done, it is clearly too early to make such sweeping generalizations.

With existing sources being so limited, sociologist Frederick L. Whitam set out to gather his own data on different cultures. Beginning in 1975 he lived for a year in Guatemala City, followed by months of travel in several Latin American countries, and then another field season studying a homosexual community in São Paulo, Brazil. In 1979 he lived in Cebu, the Philippines, and after that did shorter trips to study homosexuals in Mexico, Hawaii, Sweden, and Thailand. In all of these areas, Whitam asked groups of informants (those who self-identify as *homosexual*, *loca*, *bayot*, *mahu*, or other local terms that denote same-sex preferences) to respond to the same questionnaire. In most cases he also asked heterosexual samples in those countries the same questions. His questions related not only to sexual preferences, but also to occupational preferences, childhood gender role, and leisure interests. For additional comparisons he presented the same questionnaire to a white gay population in Phoenix, Arizona, and a black gay group in San Francisco, California. Robin M. Mathy provided the statistical analysis of the results.

Though Whitam is too quick to generalize from his research to "all societies," he has found interesting evidence that there exist many cross-cultural similarities among effeminate males who are exclusive homosexuals. He proceeds from studies of psychological findings on American males, by Richard Green, Alan Bell, Martin Weinberg, Sue Hammersmith, and others, which show that the majority of gay men recall a history of gender nonconformity in childhood, and that the majority of "sissy boys" grow up to become homosexual or bisexual. Whitam finds similar patterns among effeminate males in all the societies he studied.

Beyond that, he found amazing similarities beyond sexual behaviors, especially in such individuals' childhood interests in aesthetic design, in entertainment, and in the performing and visual arts. In contrast to current Anglo-American psychological opinion that cross-gender behaviors are pathological, Whitam shows how other societies accept such individuals' inclinations as the basis for unique contributions which they can provide to society at large. Furthermore, he demonstrates that such individuals in these divergent cultures usually have little interest in aggressive team sports, or in occupations requiring such skills. His findings seem consistent with this reviewer's research on the gender-mixing character and occupational interests of North American Indian *berdache* (Williams 1986).

Armed with such consistencies across cultures, Whitam comes to the conclusion that a homosexual inclination is biologically based, and that such persons regularly appear in every society at a consistent rate of about 5 percent of the population. He attacks the social learning view that such inclinations grow out of certain types of family relations, and the social constructionist views that there are few comparisons between different societies.

Where Whitam gets into trouble is in his categorization of those masculine males who may participate in sexual activities with the gender-nonconformist homosexuals. Whitam labels them "heterosexuals," but clearly such a term does not fit. It is at this point where the social constructionist approach has value, and Whitam is begrudgingly forced to recognize cultural variation as an important variable. As he shows so well for Brazil and for the Philippines, in fascinating ethnographic description in Chapter 6, most masculine men will have sexual relations with "homosexuals," usually as their earliest sexual encounters in adolescence and early

adulthood, but that does not prevent those masculine boys from later becoming heterosexual in their marriage to a woman. This is similar to Herdt's (1981, 1984) findings for Melanesia.

In Chapter 6 Whitam offers a blueprint for social tolerance of sexual variance. He suggests that a society will consider homosexuals as non-threatening if several factors exist: (1) other sexual issues (for example, prostitution, or age of consent) are not subject to political or police repression; (2) same-sex behavior in the young is not seen as leading them to become a lifelong "homosexual" themselves; (3) society does not see feminine males or masculine females as abnormal, but as part of the natural diversity of the population; (4) there is an awareness that gender nonconformists are likely to be homosexually inclined, but the difference of such persons is recognized in other aspects than just sexuality; and (5) such differences are seen as bringing unique skills of benefit to society as a whole, which the average person does not possess.

Perhaps it is true that a certain minority of boys are innately non-masculine (this may be inborn, but if not it seems to be well-formed in early childhood) and that an exclusive or near-exclusive sexual attraction to males is associated with such character traits. But what about those societies that expect conformity to a norm of compulsory heterosexual behavior (as in Western culture) or compulsory homosexual behavior (as in some New Guinea cultures)? Whitam almost completely ignores the implications of Herdt's (1981, 1984) work, that virtually all individuals have the capacity for both homosexual and heterosexual expression, if the society forces them to conform.

We need a theoretical position, and much more fieldwork and documentary research to back it up, that explains two things. First, it should account for a minority of individuals who may be innately gender variant, and it should describe the relationship of their variance to their feelings of same-sex eroticism. Second, it should encompass the variety of differing cultural responses to homosexuality. A good beginning in this direction is made by Stephen O. Murray, who has attempted to bring together the myriad psychological, historical, sociological, political, and anthropological perspectives. Overcoming disciplinary isolation is necessary in weaving the various social science theories together into an interdisciplinary analysis. Murray is well qualified to do this, with a background in both anthropological linguistics and sociology.

Murray has succeeded in producing a concise summary of the major social science theories on homosexuality, along with extremely valuable critiques of those theories. Every page contains valuable insights, no matter what the reader's discipline. It is to be hoped that Murray's book will be read widely, and especially by scholars of lesbian studies, who need to become more involved in theory development on homosexuality (which has heretofore been mainly from a male perspective). Likewise, sex researchers need to pay more attention to feminist theory, which has been the major focus of lesbian studies and the newly emerging men's studies. Both groups would benefit from more interchange of ideas. It is a pity that, along with this separation, the study of homosexuality has been so fragmented along academic disciplinary boundaries. Murray's book is an important step in helping to overcome this fragmentation.

Murray begins by pointing out the failure of many social theories to explain the emergence of large gay and lesbian communities in the twentieth century. He shows

that assimilationist "modernization" theory, as well as Marxist theory, functionalism, and deviance theory have been discredited by not being able to predict a rise in new identities as part of modern society.

Murray next tackles symbolic interactionism. He agrees with Whitam that most people who reach a homosexual identity do so before being labeled by others, and that a lesbian or gay identity will often precede homosexual behavior. But unlike Whitam, he presents a more sophisticated awareness that identity is not always synonymous with behavior, and that we cannot always explain sexual identities as a simple inborn "essential" character trait.

Nevertheless, Murray does not accept wholeheartedly the recent social constructionist theory. He concludes that scholars need to "steer a course between the Scylla of labeling anyone who engages in homosexual behavior anywhere anytime 'a homosexual' or 'a gay person' (as John Boswell [1980] does) and the Charybdis of arguing there is no category at all, so that 'the homosexual' is an historical aberration" (p. iii). Murray seems more sympathetic to stigma theory, but even with this approach we are only beginning to perceive the complexities of sexual desire and sexual identity.

Murray sees several conditions which led to the emergence of a homosexual minority in twentieth century America: (1) experiences of Americans in more tolerant environments abroad, (2) the massive draft and defense-industry work of World War II, in which large numbers of young adults were taken away from their communities and housed in largely same-sex environments, (3) reduction of the economic role of the family, and the ability of single people to provide for their sickness and old age support through insurance, savings and pensions, and government welfare programs, rather than by dependence on children, (4) publicity of widespread homosexual behavior in the Kinsey reports, (5) formation of a critical mass of people in big cities who defined themselves by their homosexual behavior, (6) beginning of small homophile activist groups who made successful legal challenges to discrimination, (7) inspirations of change in the Black civil rights movement, (8) American traditions of respect for pluralism, dissent, and civil liberties, especially as a result of the 1960s counterculture protests. Gays and lesbians not only used these prior movements as inspiration, but also as a training ground in protest tactics by many who first became active in support of those movements.

An additional factor was medical improvement in treatment of venereal diseases, and the invention of the birth control pill, both of which helped lead to a hetero-"sexual revolution" in the 1960s that relaxed attitudes toward all forms of sexuality. The reemergence of a feminist movement also had a big impact, in that it gave lesbians a base for activism, questioned conformist gender roles and propounded the view that "the personal is political."

Murray suggests several needed areas of social research on maturing gay/lesbian communities, for example migration patterns. It is too early to tell what the impact of AIDS will be on such communities, beyond the rapid decline of promiscuity which has taken place in the 1980s, but one emerging contemporary trend is a prominent development of gay/lesbian self-help groups for people with AIDS and those who care for them. Also evident are model social assistance programs being developed for gay teenagers and elderly.

Murray next turns to an analysis of the cross-cultural data. While there is

diversity within and across cultures, same-sex eroticism is not unlimited variation. He finds three major patterns, defined by (1) age, (2) gender, and (3) profession. In areas like East Africa, Melanesia, and ancient Greece, the pattern is intergenerational, with a mature person having a homosexual relationship with a youth. Since virtually every male in these societies (adequate data on lesbianism has not yet been gathered by female anthropologists) is sexually involved with males, and also gets married to women, he suggests that there are no "homosexual" or "heterosexual" identities. Further research is needed in this type of society, to see if there truly is no sense of difference by a minority of those with strong same-sex feelings.

A very different pattern of homosexuality exists in Pre-Columbian America and Latin America, Polynesia, and Asia, in which certain individuals take on a different gender role. Many of these societies recognize one or more gender categories that are distinct from either women or men. Knowledge of these forms lead us to see the limitedness of our own society's view, that there are only two recognized genders. Again, more field research is needed, to see the similarities and differences between such identities and modern gay/lesbian identities. Whitam's descriptions of Cebu imply that an alternative gender role might intersect with an intergenerational model, as the *bayot* take adolescent males as their partners, aiding them financially and allowing them a sexual outlet when teenagers' access to females is restricted.

What Murray has done brilliantly is to show how an alternative gender pattern replaced an earlier intergenerational pattern. In medieval Europe an intergenerational man-boy love tradition had persisted from the ancient Greek tradition, but it declined under the persecution of the Inquisition. By the 18th century same-sex relationships in Europe had changed to a cross-gender pattern, and this continued into the 19th century "third sex" ideas, to 20th century "drag queens." Then during the 1950s and 1960s there was another rapid shift, to mostly same-age and same-gender pairings, based on an individual's professing a gay identity. Why these shifts occurred when they did, and why certain societies evidence one pattern over another, Murray does not attempt to answer.

He does, however, set some directions which scholars need to pursue in future research. The appendix suggests many additional questions needing research: alcoholism, anti-homosexual loathing, class mobility, demography, ethnic cleavages, language use, migration, minority status of gay/lesbian communities, pornography, prisons, and distinctions between homosexual versus heterosexual incest. An excellent bibliography provides resource materials.

One area Murray does not focus upon is the glaring need to correlate this theory with cross-cultural and historical evidence on lesbianism, to see if patterns among women are parallel or different. Do these theories provide any understanding for women-loving women? Are female gender-crossers following the same patterns in reverse from males? Are there female intergenerational relationships comparable to institutionalized man-boy relationships? Murray's book demonstrates why, particularly in this topic, it is so important that scholars need to be in close touch with both women's studies and men's studies specialists, and familiar with research in several disciplines. Taken together, these books open up new ideas for fieldwork on sexual variance in non-Western cultures, as an important means for enlarging our understandings of sexual meanings and the incorporation of erotic desires into human lifeways.

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