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Chapter 1 Categorizing Sex
Interview with Walter Williams

Walter Williams, Ph.D., is Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies in the Anthropology Department at University of Southern California in Los Angeles. His research interests include homosexual subcultures, prejudice reduction, and the investigation of cross-cultural strategies to reduce sexually transmitted infections. Dr. Williams is the author of 9 books. The latest, Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History (co-authored with Yolanda Retter) is published by Greenwood Press in 2003.

What led you to begin studying sexuality?

When I was teaching American Indian Studies classes in the 1970's, I was fascinated to learn that many indigenous Native American cultures accepted and respected androgynous persons who were involved in same-sex marriages and relationships. This was important to me on a personal level, as well as academically, since I was in the process of recognizing my own strong homosexual feelings. I wondered why I had never been taught that homosexual behavior was recognized in most of the world's cultures and (at least, before the impact of Westernization) was socially accepted. I wondered why homosexuality had never been mentioned in any of the anthropology classes that I had taken, or in any of the anthropology textbooks that I had read. I only learned of these traditions when I was doing research for my teaching. When I found ever more documentation, I began further research.

Which of your projects have you found most stimulating?

My work on Native American same-sex practices. In 1982, I began travelling to numerous reservations, and soon learned that many Native Americans still retain accepting attitudes towards sexual variance, with a respectful attitude towards androgynous or transgendered persons. Their androgyny and homosexuality are seen as reflections of spiritual power. A male who is feminine, or a female who is masculine, are seen as having been given both the masculine and feminine spirits by the spirit world, and thus they have twice as much spirituality as the average person. These "Two Spirit" persons were, and on some reservations still are, considered as sacred people who are spiritually gifted. This spiritual explanation was so different from anything that I had heard about sex that I was motivated to pursue further research on this topic.

What have you found most challenging about studying sexuality? The most frustrating challenge is to get funding for this kind of research. Among many academics, sex is seen as a frivolous and less than serious topic. When considering how important sex is to most people, it is astounding that more attention is not paid to this subject as compared to other topics of human concern. For example, the number of historians who do research on warfare is many times larger than the number of historians of sexuality. Universities have whole departments of specialists who study political structures, but only a small number of academics who are hired to teach and do research on sex.

Why is it important to do sex research?

Since sex is such a major concern of most people as they go through their lives, it is important to educate people about the many varieties of sexual attraction in different cultures. By doing research on the wide variety of sexual practices, researchers can contribute to greater acceptance of human diversity in all aspects of life. Sex research is also important to deal with two of the major problems currently facing humanity: overpopulation and AIDS. In less than two centuries, human numbers have multiplied so drastically that the world's population has reached six billion. Non-reproductive sexuality needs to be emphasized as a means of population control. In a time when AIDS is devastating many communities around the world, it is important to challenge the idea that intercourse is the only proper form of sex. In order to do this, it is necessary to destigmatize other forms of erotic interaction.

What ethical dilemmas have you faced in studying homosexuality among Native Americans? How did you resolve them?

When I was doing research for my book, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, a number of Indian people confided in me about their culture's acceptance of homosexual persons. They worried that if I publicized their accepting attitude, outsiders would condemn Indians as 'immoral' and 'sinful.' I resolved this dilemma by reasoning that it is important for young people to have this knowledge, especially if they are growing up in a community that no longer expresses the traditional respect for Two Spirit traditions. To preserve privacy, I used aliases for my Native American collaborators, unless a person specifically asked me to use their real name.

How do people react when they find out that you study sexuality?

People are often surprised, but I have found that most people seem accepting and even grateful that such research is being done. Quite a number of people conclude that my university must be a progressive place to hire me to do this kind of teaching and research.

If you could teach people one thing about sexuality, what would it be?

To appreciate the wide range of human diversity. We as individuals vary on all kinds of preferences and inclinations. Just as we differ in other aspects of life, the basic reality of human sexual response is variety. My Native American consultants led me to understand that variety is what makes life complete; the universe cannot be complete without it. Difference is not a threat, they taught me, but a blessing.

Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Sex research has a political impact. The struggle for sexual freedom should be studied as a core aspect of human rights, along with movements to abolish slavery, and to gain equality for women and for stigmatized minorities. Research on sexual freedom should be treated as seriously as research on freedom of speech, freedom of thought, or other intimate behaviors. The point of liberty is to allow individuals to make decisions about their own lives. Laws that interfere with sexual freedom are as great an infringement on liberty as laws that restrict freedom of the press or freedom of religion.