

Walter L. Williams, "Commentary: the Evolution of Homosexual Behavior"

In the 1980s and 1990s, professors who were members of the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists protested the lack of publications on sexuality in anthropological journals. In response, for its June 2000 issue, *Current Anthropology* v.41 n.3, the leading journal in the field, asked Professor R.C. Kirkpatrick to write a summary article about research on "The Evolution of Homosexual Behavior." As the journal's editor Richard Fox often did with highlighted articles, he invited the leading scholars working on this subject to write their own commentaries on the article. Williams' Commentary follows.

At long last the anthropological profession is beginning to pay attention to same-sex love, a form of human behavior that is quite widespread across cultures, but which has been singularly ignored in anthropological writing. Kenneth Read, in analyzing the avoidance of cultural studies of homosexuality, concluded that this avoidance came from many anthropologists' personal uncomfortableness with the topic. Either consciously or unconsciously, he wrote, they accepted "Western attitudes toward homosexual behavior as a sensitive subject which, though it is probably as prevalent as witchcraft, is morally distasteful" (Read 1984: 215-217). Read posited that, unlike with other "savage" behaviors, anthropologists could find no cultural "justification for homosexual behavior. It was far easier, for example, to excuse infanticide (a custom also abhorrent by Western standards) since it could be shown to have a rational basis in some demographic situations: it 'produced' something. But homosexuality did not 'produce' anything" (Read 1984: 215-217).

This brings us to the efforts of more recent scholars to show that homosexual behavior does, in fact, produce something of value to cultures. R.C. Kirkpatrick makes a substantial contribution to this effort, and I agree that all of the hypotheses Kirkpatrick

suggests for the evolutionary origin of homosexual behavior may apply. One hypothesis or another may best explain particular individuals. These alternatives of kin selection, parental manipulation, or alliance promotion are not opposites, and one or more of them might be present in certain cultures. However, what gets lost in all of this discussion of “evolutionary advantage” is the simple fact that, for primates, the stimulation of genitals is pleasurable.

To note pleasure as a principle for human behavior seems beyond the abilities of some anthropologists, at least as far as this is reflected in anthropological writings. Sexual behavior is most often relegated to “gutter” language, which cannot be discussed in a serious discourse. The fact that sexual pleasure is a major concern of human life, or that it underlies much of social relations within and between groups, is therefore widely ignored in anthropological scholarship.

What is missing in Kirkpatrick’s analysis is simple desire. Everything does not have to be explained in terms of social function. Individual desires in non-sexual matters vary enormously. Some people prefer scrambled eggs with coffee, while others like poached eggs and tea. Given this reality of variation, why would we expect sexual desires to all be the same? Variation is the reality of human life, and sexual desire would be extremely atypical if all humans desired the same thing sexually. If there is an evolutionary advantage at work here, it is the advantage of “variation.”

The question, then, is not why certain individuals enjoy participating in sexual pleasure with another person of the same sex, but why certain individuals would limit this pleasurable activity of genital stimulation solely to the other sex. As Kirkpatrick points out, if the evidence suggests that most people in most cultures (for which we have information) can enjoy sex with both sexes, then a bisexual potential is the true human norm. If genital stimulation feels good, in and of itself, then why do we like particular types of persons to do it to us, but not others. We need much more research on the variability of sexual desire before such questions can be answered.

Going beyond the question of individual variation, what is even more important for anthropologists to understand is why a minority of cultures stigmatize this pleasurable genital stimulation between persons of the same sex. Thus, as I have written elsewhere (Williams 1997) it is not homosexual behavior which most needs to be analyzed by anthropologists, but homophobia. Anthropologists have ignored our responsibility and our role of pricking the bubbles of assumptions about what is “normal” behavior propounded by the other social sciences, which base their analysis solely on modern Western culture. We ignore our professional responsibility if we do not publicize the reality of human individual and cultural variation on attitudes toward same-sex love.

In contemporary society fundamentalist Protestant and Catholic churchmen commonly state that “the only purpose of sex is reproduction.” Anthropologists, above all others, need to publicize the falsity of this statement. There are many purposes of sex, far more complex than simply procreation alone. As Kirkpatrick emphasizes so well, a major factor in sexual involvement is “alliance formation.” While kinship theorists have shown how heterosexual marriage leads to widening circles of mutual dependence and reciprocity obligation, it only stands to reason that sex between males with males and females with females can also produce close intimate bonds that aid group survival. Sexual involvement with friends and relatives produce overlapping circles of intimate involvement that complement reciprocity networks (Williams 1992a, 1992b).

If Kirkpatrick is right about the importance of alliance formation as a motivator for sexual behavior, then the implications are astounding. First, Kirkpatrick points out that the modern Western notion of separate innate homosexual and heterosexual categories of persons does not explain the sexuality of many humans and non-human primates. If sexually relating to both males and females offers an advantage over an exclusive orientation to only one sex, how then are we to explain the establishment of compulsory heterosexuality in pre-modern European and Euro-American cultures, and then the rise of exclusive homosexuality in the modern world?

Let me suggest another hypothesis to account for the rise of compulsory heterosexuality: it helped to maximize population increase for competing European nation-states that wanted to expand their political and economic dominance in Europe and into colonial empires around the world. In this expansionist value system any form of non-procreative sex (for example: masturbation, birth control, abortion, oral sex) becomes stigmatized, in favor of penile-vaginal sex becoming established as the only acceptable form of sex for everyone. This hypothesis could explain why the most rabidly expansionist modern nation-states (for example: the United States, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union), and the most expansionist missionary-oriented Christian churches (for example: Catholics, Mormons, and fundamentalist Protestants) are associated with severe discrimination against homosexuality. That is, homophobia is, to a great extent, a product of expansionist missionary imperialism.

This hypothesis could explain why Japan, once one of the world's most accepting cultures of same-sex love (Watanabe 1989), has become so homophobic in the period since it began its expansionist empire. Social pressure to reproduce also explains why such high percentages of Japanese bisexuals and homosexuals marry heterosexually and have children. In the post-1945 world, as colonial empires started falling apart, and population growth is no longer the prime need, sanctions against non-procreative sexuality have declined. Non-imperialistic European nations, like those of Scandinavia and (after 1950) Holland, have unsurprisingly led the way in repealing laws against homosexuality.

Nevertheless, in the context that social norms of compulsory heterosexuality continue to be strongly dictated in the Western-dominated contemporary world, exclusive homosexuality may be a reaction against this compulsion. Many people continue to repress their same-sex desires and to identify as "heterosexuals," but other individuals who feel strong same-sex attractions become psychologically frustrated. They become so disturbed because of social repressions that they either become depressed or suicidal, or

they rebel against those norms. The social rebels flip over to the other extreme, to identify as “homosexuals/gays/lesbians/transgenders/queers”.

There are many reasons why particular individuals construct identities as sexual minorities, but in the anonymity of large cities, becoming a member of a sexual underground can offer subcultural identification that can assist psychological functioning.

What this suggests is that, in order to get beyond a binary division of society, it will be necessary for people to destigmatize bisexuality. Anthropologists can be at the forefront of this effort, breaking down prejudices by teaching about the reality of human sexual variation. Of course, we must be careful not to substitute a compulsory bisexuality for everyone, since even non-homophobic cultures have a minority of individuals who remain totally other-sex oriented or totally same-sex oriented (see Williams 1986). The message must be the reality and advantage of human variation, rather than expecting everyone to have the same sexual desires or identities.

Another astounding perspective is Kirkpatrick’s suggestion that same-sex attractions among males can benefit tribal cultures by strengthening warriorhoods. Contrary to current claims by the United States Armed Forces that “homosexuality is incompatible with military service,” a cross-cultural perspective would suggest that same-sex intimate bonding leads to a culture’s stronger mutual defense. While many nations are abandoning discrimination against gay and lesbian troops, it may take an anthropologist to suggest that U.S. military policies criminalizing sex between soldiers may in fact be counterproductive to defense effectiveness. Recognition of sex as a means of building stronger alliances between troops may be tacitly accepted, which would also avoid the huge expenditure currently borne by the United States military in its efforts to investigate and dismiss homosexuals from its ranks.

Kirkpatrick’s perspective also challenges Western prejudice against intergenerational sexual bonding between men and boys. It is not surprising to find intergenerational male relationships to be so common among cultures that are accepting

of same-sex love, because institutionalizing such age patterns lead to greater access to resources and knowledge acquisition for the younger partner. While unfortunately little is known of woman-girl sexual relationships, extensive cross cultural surveys of intergenerational man-boy patterns include Bullough (1976), Greenberg (1988), Gregersen (1983), Karsch-Haack (1911), Murray (1992), Weinrich and Williams (1991), and Williams (1998). Individual cultures which accepted man-boy sexual relationships include sites as diverse as ancient Greece (Dover 1978), feudal China (Hinsch 1990), Melanesia (Herdt 1981, 1984, 1987), and east Africa (Evans-Pritchard 1970).

In fact, such intimate bonds were often the basis for a culture's educational training system. Rather than educating youths in schools, many cultures have structured education in individual apprenticeships. For example, in pre-modern Japan Buddhist monks and their student novices commonly developed sexual relationships that were socially accepted (Watanabe 1989). Likewise, in medieval southwest Asia, Mamluk officials of the Sultanate governments were forbidden from having sex with females, but they commonly had a young boy as sexual partner. The adult Mamluk would educate this boy as his apprentice, to take on his administrative duties as he reached old age. For over a thousand years, this Mamluk system was largely responsible for governmental administration in areas ranging from Egypt to Turkey, as each successive generation of apprentices matured and took a boy as their trainee and sexual partner (Hardman 1990; Williams 1998).

For those cultures that are concerned about controlling pregnancies among females outside of marriage, encouraging young males to establish same-sex relationships has the added advantage of allowing youths a sexual outlet while also preventing female out-of-wedlock births and prostitution. That many cultures allow a same-sex outlet for pubescent, adolescent, and young adult males at the height of their sexual drive, also seems to be a realistic reaction to preserve social order (Williams 1986, 1992a, 1992b, 1996, 1998). Perhaps this is why intergenerational relationships are so much more

institutionalized for males than for females. In the current climate of large population increases throughout much of the world, it seems sensible for anthropologists to publicize these ancient and indigenous population-control mechanisms. Promoting non-reproductive same-sex relationships for adolescents and young adults in their teens and twenties function to delay the years of procreative heterosexual marriage until individuals are in their thirties and forties as fully-mature adults.

What is most important is that anthropologists take a leading role in countering ignorant claims that the only purpose of sex is reproduction. If we do not say it again and again, that sexual behavior is multi-purposed and highly variable, in both our teaching and publication, then we are allowing a major distortion of reality to continue. As Kirkpatrick points out, a key to understanding hominid evolution involves more than simply passing along genes; it also requires survival strategies through alliances with others. For highlighting the important role of close loving erotic relationships in promoting alliances, between individuals of the same sex, Kirkpatrick deserves our thanks.

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