Models of Male Homosexuality

If the question “Where does the word ‘gay’ come from?” is the question I get asked most frequently, the question most commonly not asked is “But what do gay men actually do?” When it is asked, it is almost always whispered and always by a woman: men never seem to need to know. I think this is a kind of “secret men’s business” but when you think about it, there is not much need for secrecy unless you are scared your wife might ask you “Have you ever…. You know?…..”

Of course, if you have followed what I have been saying up to now, you will know that it is only in our culture that men would need to worry about being asked such a question. In many cultures, some homosexual experience would be taken for granted and in some, a matter of concern if you did not keep up your social obligations in this manner. Wives in the Sepik region of New Guinea were reputedly known to remind their husbands that they had not had sex with one or other of the men with whom they had been initiated. In that area, co-initiates had mutual sexual obligations for life.

But back to the nitty-gritty: what do gay men do? The answer is simple: most of the things heterosexual couples do — kissing, cuddling, stroking, the whispering of sweet nothings and so on. Masturbation is another important part of the repertoire. This can be mutual or somewhat one-sided, not only as the mood might take the participants but also according to cultural rules. So for example, I doubt very much if slaves in slave-owning societies which we will study later on were ever masturbated by their masters.

The same kind of conventions definitely also applied to oral sex (fellatio) and anal sex¹. In many societies which have some form of institutionalized or ritual homosexuality, both oral and anal sex are usually uni-directional, by which I mean one man does it to the other but it is not reciprocated as gay men in our society would normally demand. As we will see, in such societies, this is usually because penetration is regarded as “effeminate” or in some way degrading to the man on the receiving end. This usually says something about the position of women in those societies. As a general rule, the more equal the sexes are in a

¹A “Q&A” on anal sex for heterosexuals can be found at http://www.disability.vic.gov.au/bhc2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Anal_sex_Q&A?open
society, the more likely homosexual sex activities will be mutual and reciprocal.

There are of course other activities a couple can enjoy. If you have been a fan of “Little Britain” you will be familiar with Daffid (“the only gay in the village”) and the sex toys and practices he mentions from time to time. While Daffid’s so-called “toys” are used by some modern couples as part of sex play, whether or not they were used by couples in antiquity or in other cultures, is often not known. By far the most common “toy” of course is the dildo. The oldest I have seen was some made of wood and 3,000 years old, which had been preserved in the dry sands of the Saraha Desert. I think it is generally assumed that dildos were used by women as a sex-aid in masturbation, but my guess is that they were also commonly used, then as now, by men also. Archeologists seem to be much more comfortable considering them as “ritual objects” without specifying what ritual purpose they might have been used for. This kind of censorship, unconscious or politely intended, however, is misleading: for example, when I was in Rome in 1983, I saw a marvelous exhibition of murals from Etruscan tombs which was showing at the Vatican. Maybe the

location of the exhibition has something to do with it, but the mural, which clearly showed one man lying on top of another, inserting his penis into the other man’s anus, was labeled “Wrestlers”!

As I said when talking about the need for research into human sexuality, we need to know much more about the activities which people engage in and the cultural context in which they occur, not just whether or not a

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2 Little Britain, the Complete First Series - BBC, Roadshow Entertainment DVD, 9 397810 083790. There are 3 series.
culture respected homosexual sex. For example, we know that “frottage” (that is, where one man rubs his erect penis between the thighs of another) was commonly practiced in both Ancient Greece and Pre-Modern Portugal. But the reasons were different: in Greece, frottage was the rule so that the masculinity of the youth would not be devalued; in Portugal, it was safer that way because penetration (and ejaculation) had to be proved before the Inquisition could burn you at the stake as a sodomite.

Not every man indulges in or likes any or all of the sex practices possible with another man. You must also remember, that not all men have genital sex. At different times in our own history, there have been periods in which men fell in love with each other and admired each other but did not seek to express this in genital love-making. The best-known example was probably the two young men in Waugh’s “Brideshead Revisited” although the one I like to quote here in Australia were the Bohemians, the café society of Sydney in the 1890s, among whom were Henry Lawson,

Brerton and Lawson, 1895

who wrote about iconic mateship, and the first Challis Professor of English at the University of Sydney, John Le Gay Brereton. I doubt Le Gay Brereton ever had sex with a man, but he wrote some of the greatest man-to-man love poetry ever written in this country. For example, he wrote:

I wonder do you think of me
When I of you am thinking;
With open eyes that hardly see,
I wonder do you think of me;
And now from Love’s deep well are we
A draught together drinking?
I wonder - do you think of me
When I of you are thinking?

Clearly, but to mix my metaphors with quotations, male sexuality is a broad church within which there are many mansions……

**Types or models of customary homosexuality**

In the next section of the course we will look at several societies, both historical and more-or-less contemporary, and examine how they have structured sexuality and in particular, how sex acts between members of the same sex have been treated at different times in their history.

However, the selection of societies I have chosen is a rather biased one because it deals mostly with just one model of socially-approved homosexuality where the relationship is between adult men and post-pubertal youths. But this selection is more an accident of history than for any other reason because it is not only the victors who write history, but also only the literate. In fact, world-wide, *pederasty* — as this model is generally called — is certainly the one historically most often written about by poets and philosophers and others so that therefore we know a lot more about it than about other models which have had much less publicity. And also, as it happens, it is arguably the most common pattern. There may well be homosexual activities in most societies which historians and other scholars simply don’t know about, possibly because the men concerned can’t or — like the Druids — won’t write things down; possibly also, this homosexual activity occurs so commonly everyone takes it for granted so, if you have the opportunity and the desire, then you do it and think no more about it than you would about popping each other’s pimples.

The reason I have chosen to include these cultures is because this is a history, not a sexology course and we don’t need to cover all bases. However, it is opportune at this point to give some thought to the ways in which anthropologists classify the various models of homosexuality in world cultures.

But first, a word of warning: In many — and perhaps in most — examples we will look at, there is no guarantee that the men actually had genital sex. How then can we justify calling their relationships “homosexual”?

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3The English words comes from the Latin name for the practise common among the Ancient Greeks. The *Shorter Oxford* gives Latin *paederastia*, from Greek *paiderastes*, from *pais*=boy and *erastes*=lover; sexual relations between a boy and a man; anal intercourse with the boy as the passive partner.
In their preface to *Same Sex Love in India*, Vanita and Kidway⁴ state that a

........ primary and passionate attachment between two persons
........ may or may not be acted upon sexually..... In most cases
where such attachments are documented or represented in history,
literature, or myth, we have no way of knowing whether they were
technically “sexual” or not. Nor does it seem particularly
important to try to establish such facts.... We are more interested
in how, at different times and places, primary passionate or
romantic attachments between men and between women were
viewed — whether they were accepted as an inevitable part of
human experience , glorified as admirable and imitable, or vilified
as strange and abnormal.

Unlike the Indians, we in the West believe it is most important to
establish the facts of other people’s sexual behaviors. This is no doubt the
product of our own cultural history. All three Abrahamic religions share
the Adam and Eve myth of origin which states clearly that sex is
dangerous. Furthermore, within Christian Europe, for centuries priests
hearing confession have had to define precisely the nature of sexual acts
because they had to determine the appropriate penance while the several
Inquisitions — as did the English criminal and military law — required
proof of penetration and emission before men could be convicted of
sodomy…. The end product of this obsession with detail is that in matters
sexual we cannot see the wood for the trees and so assume a relationship
which is genitally consummated is somehow more important than one
which is not.

That raises another issue we will encounter in most of the cultures we
will look at: in the vast majority, homosexual relationships and
heterosexual marriage co-exist so that adult men, even if they are in a
recognized relationship with another male, are also expected to be
married and have children. This was so in Ancient Greece, medieval
Florence, and even in Australia from colonial times to the late 20th
Century, even though, in this last example, any sexual component had to
be covert. It is only very recently in Western European/North American
society that marriage has come to be seen as necessarily monogamous
and with husband and wife being each other’s most important emotional
attachment. Even in our life-times, a man’s best friend was not “the

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“missus”, but his “best mate”, and if he did not have one, then his dog. Marriage, historically, is a domestic institution, and romance usually belonged elsewhere.

When it comes to looking at the various ways in which homosexuality is institutionalized in different societies, one of the most useful classifications, in my view, is that provided by Dennis Werner. After examining the anthropological literature, he concluded there were several types of “gay” cultures, of which he says:

**The first type** ("gay" culture) is defined by the fact that predominant homosexuals have sexual relations primarily with other predominant homosexuals. This is the system of Northern Europeans and their descendants, and may be spreading with the processes of economic globalization. However, it is actually the most rarely found ethnographically. In an examination of the HRAF records I have been unable to find a single non-Northern European "traditional" (i.e. not influenced by Europeans) culture with this system.

This “Type I” or “gay” model is most common in societies in which hierarchies are not based on personal networks and alliances or on age, but rather on what Werner calls men’s “curriculum vitae”, meaning — one assumes — their educational background, income levels, social class and other impersonal criteria. In such cultures, sexual relations among men are generally discouraged, men who identify as heterosexual virtually quit the field and leave it to predominantly homosexual men to have sex with each other. We will come back to this type later when we consider pre-Modern European cultures and our contemporary gay movement. Suffice to say at the moment that in my view, this “gay” model is a relatively recent development and that earlier European cultures are probably better considered as belonging to the next “type”.

In Werner’s system of classification, the **second model** is one he says is typified by lower class Brazilian culture. Now, this is probably significant in terms of what was said above — Brazilian culture is derived from pre-industrial revolution Portugal with influences from African and native Indian cultures. This second system, which Werner considers is probably more widespread than the pederastic model (the emphases are mine),

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6 Human Relations Area Files, http://www.yale.edu/hraf/collections.htm
......might be labelled the "bicha/bofe" type (using Brazilian terms). In this system, more or less exclusive homosexuals (not always, but very often transvestite or at least effeminate males) have sexual relationships with men who are not culturally distinguished from other men. This system is found among such diverse peoples as southern Europeans and their descendants (e.g. Brazilians), many Native North American Indian societies (Navaho, Sioux, Mohave, Utes, Zuni, Apaches, Shoshones, Yurok, Pomo, Pawnees, Mandan, Crow, Fox, Bellacoola, Aleuts, etc.), many Native South American societies (Guayaki, Kanela, Tupinamba, Tapirape, Warao, Tucano, Toba, Tehuelche, pre-contact Mapuche, Aymara, and Cuna, etc.), Far East and Asian cultures (Bengali, Burusho, Kashmir, Karen, Burma, Philippines, Semai, Malaysians, Indonesians, China, lower class Japan, Chuckchee, Koryak, etc.), a few Oceanic societies (Iban, Toradja, Belan, Makassar, Pukapuka, Marquesans, Tonga), and a few Middle Eastern and African cultures (Oman, Teda, Amhara, Hausa, Twi, Tanala, Zulu, etc.).

The majority of such societies are structured by personal ties and male-male alliances. In biche/bofe, also called “Mediterranean” type societies, adult men who identify as heterosexual often maintain sexual relationships with other, homosexually identified men. In such societies, the “heterosexual” man always assumes the “active” role while the “homosexual” takes the “passive” role. Often, also, in these societies, adolescent males enjoy sexual relationships with each other although they are usually under pressure to maintain an “active” role and are freer to experiment, at least until their secondary sex characteristics — such as deep voice and beard — become too obvious!

Werner, in characterizing such societies, draws on the work of Peter Fry who, in his 1982 paper, noted that the Brazilian upper and middle classes were already labelling men who had sex with men as “homosexuals”, although the word they used was “entendido” (literally, “understood” but also used to mean a knowledgeable person or connoisseur). However, the lower classes were still using the more traditional designations: the “active” man was called a “bofe” and his passive “partner”, a “viado”

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(literally a “deer”). Effeminate viados are called bichas. Of these, the bofes are regarded as heterosexuals, while the viados and bichas are “homosexual”. In an informative aside, when reporting Fry’s observations about homosexuality in Brazil, Werner said that the

….. differences between the North American/North European criteria and Brazilian lower-class criteria were most dramatically clarified for me in observing Brazilian reactions to American pornographic films, and American reactions to Brazilian films in movie theaters. At one point in an American film a woman inserted her finger into her male partner's anus. The Brazilian audience went wild, crying out "viado" to refer to the male actor. On the other hand, in Brazilian pornographic films it is not uncommon for a man to have (active-role) sexual relationships with several women, and also with a bicha. No one refers to the insertor male as viado in these film sequences. Yet Americans would classify this male as "bisexual." The term bisexual has found its way into the vocabulary of many lower-class Brazilian males. But its meaning is not the same as in the United States. Often bisexual refers to a man who has both "active" and "passive" sexual relations. A man who has active sexual relations with viados and with women is not considered bisexual.

Werner also reports Cardoso who studied homosexual relations in a fishing community in Santa Catarina State, in Brazil. Here, he said, whether men were “active” or “passive” was clearly the way people distinguished viados in their community. While there was a high level of agreement on who and who was not viados, there was no agreement at all over the men who had sex with these viados and the people did not even have a word for them. Unlike in Europe and North America (and Australia) where it is understood that many men will have sex with other men when women are unavailable (as in jail or traditionally, the Navy), in Santa Catarina it was the men who had the most sex with other men who also had the most sex with women. This suggests, contrary to our belief, that it was not the deprivation of female company which motivated these Brazilians.

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8 Bicha has several meanings in Portuguese, including a queue, a leech or serpent, and even an ear-ring. In colloquial speech it means “gay” or “faggot”.
9 See Werner, op cit.
Werner’s **third system** (the "age-grade" system or *paiderastia*), which he says is somewhat less widespread\(^{11}\) than the Type II (but many would disagree):

> .....consists in homosexual relations between older men and younger boys or men, often with a "master/apprentice" type of relationship. This system is found in traditional Europe (ancient Greeks), *Africa* (Azande), *the Middle-East* (Siwans), *Asia* (Badaga, Tibetan monasteries, Samurai/aristocratic caste Japanese), and *Oceania* (Etoro, Sambia, Malekula, Aranda, etc.).

This third type tends to flourish in societies where age brings greater prestige, wealth and other resources. It serves as a means whereby the youth learns the finer points of being a man as well as acquiring important social connections, not only for himself, but also for his extended family. In return, the adult man gains a lover with all the attributes of youth. In many cases, he gains prestige and respect, not only because he can command the physical beauty of the youth, but also because he has been recognized socially as a suitable mentor. And, in many cases where society is so structured, he gains the opportunity to mould and educate a youth which is a personal satisfaction traditional marriage arrangements and related customs sometimes deny a man with his own offspring. Furthermore, in many cases (as among the Aranda where the men are often considerably older), the adult man also gains much-appreciated young labour.

And what does the society gain from such relationships? Although I have not seen much written about this, I suspect that society gains not only civic education of the young, but most importantly, social control. At this stage of their lives, the youths’ testosterone levels are at their peak which makes them prone to heightened sexual appetites and excessive risk-taking. There are clearly advantages then, in having them beholden to older men who, unlike their fathers or other people in authority, control their access to sex.

The **fourth type**, which Werner labels “the adolescent-sex system”,

\(^{11}\) On the other hand, Herdt, (1995) says pederasty is the most common form of same-sex relationship in which adult males cross-culturally and historically have been involved.
....consists in homosexual relationships between adolescents but which disappear after marriage. This system is found in many oceanic societies (Lau, Manus, Wogeo, Ifugao, Marquesans, Tikopia), in some African societies (Ngonde, Hottentot, Shona, Mongo), and in some South American societies (Nambikwara, Yanomamo, Araucanians).

The fourth model, the “adolescent-sex” one is rather rare, at least uncommon enough to cause some scandal when anthropologists first published accounts of those cultures. I don’t know anything about the African or South American cultures Werner cites, but from what I remember of works such as Firth’s “We the Tikopea”, or others by my own lecturer in Anthropology at Sydney University, Dr. H. Ian Hogbin on his field work on Wogeo, — and not to forget Dr Margaret Mead’s work on Manus Island — these were all cultures which took a generally laissez-faire attitude to human sexuality.

Berdache

Many anthropologists and other social scientists would add a fifth type to Werner’s list, the kind typified by the North American Indian “berdache”. This differs in that under this system — and up until fairly recently it has been generally believed — a male adopts the female role totally, including changing his name to a feminine one, dressing in female clothes and performing all female duties. This was seen as a way of dealing socially with sex between males by changing the gender of one man so that any relationship becomes effectively heterosexual.

However, more recently, many younger anthropologists, including some writing about their own cultures, have pointed out that these “two spirit” people (also called “winkte”) do not necessarily do as the older anthropologists originally described. Will Roscoe in a talk delivered in New York in 1995 started by saying:

I became interested in the possibilities of multiple genders as a result of my research on Native American two-spirits or berdaches. The first problem I encountered when I began this research was that much of the evidence I found didn’t fit the standard anthropological definition of berdaches, which explained these

12 Roscoe, Will: How I Became a Queen in the Empire of Gender. A talk was presented at the conference “Lesbian and Gay History: Defining a Field” held at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, City University of New York, October 7, 1995.
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/stonewall/3044/thirdgender.html
diverse tribal roles as instances of “a person of one anatomic sex assuming part or most of the attire, occupation, and social—including marital—status, of the opposite sex”.... I was learning about two-spirits who did not cross-dress, or who dressed in styles distinct from both women and men, or who cross-dressed but made no attempt to “pass” or disguise their original sex. In many cases they engaged in behaviors and activities of both their anatomical sex and those of the so-called opposite sex, and many of their behaviors and activities were unique to their role, especially their ritual and spiritual lives. Finally, there were myths that accounted for the origins of two-spirit roles much as male and female genders were explained. In short, many elements of these roles were inconsistent with the idea that these were persons of one sex trying to be the opposite sex.

Roscoe argues that the “two-spirit people” are not men or women socially re-assigned to the opposite gender, that this is our misunderstanding because we conceive of only two genders and link these so closely to anatomical sex that there is really no difference in meaning between the two words.

Conversely, (he says) in a society like Zuni, where infants are considered “raw” and ungendered until cultural intervention makes them “cooked,” gendered adults, biology is reduced to a minimum. “Sex” counts for nothing compared to the requisite ritual and social experiences that render raw infants into cooked people. In contemporary North American and northern European society, on the other hand, both sex and gender are important categories. Gender, a learned social role, helps explain why individuals can vary from what is otherwise considered the biological destiny of their sex. Gender polices sex and creates a ground for morality. That is, gender can vary from physical sex— but [as he says sarcastically] it shouldn’t and it’s our job as moral citizens to make sure it doesn’t.

So, as he explains it, unlike ours, some cultures conceive of gender as a social construct of which there can be more than two and into which the individual grows as he or she matures. Furthermore, such cultures were not restricted to the New World:

In the past six years, I have expanded my research to the rich field of ancient history. I began by studying the priests of the Greco-Roman gods Cybele and Attis known as galli, who were sometimes
referred to as members of a tertium sexus. Along the way, I realized that parallel roles existed in the Near East and Mesopotamia, as well, going all the way back to what historians like to call the "dawn of civilization." Seeking to identify the full extent of the distribution of such roles, I turned next to south Asia, where I again found gender-defined religious roles, like the contemporary hijra of northern India, with remarkable similarities to the galli. Hijra and their counterparts throughout south Asia can be traced back to Sanskrit sources from the early first millennium BCE. As I argue in an article13, multiple genders linked to specialization in religious-administrative functions are a feature of the entire area from the Mediterranean to south and southeast Asia, a region of agrarian city-state societies interconnected from prehistoric through Islamic times.

A tertium sexus or “third sex” was never a popular choice of words when such notions were introduced into Europe in the Nineteenth Century by Magnus Hirschfeld and others. Kertbeny’s word “homosexual” claimed the high ground and “gay” later confirmed that the world was divided, for Europeans in particular, into two genders which were almost identical to the two biological sexes, from which “homosexuals” deviated in the performance of some gender roles. But a “third gender” (or even “fourth” or “fifth”), when gender is divorced from biological sex, in many ways makes much greater sense of the variety of ways men and women lead their lives.

So, if we are to characterise cultures in which this kind of homosexuality can flourish, we would have to conclude that they are typically ones in which gender and biological sex are not equated, or if they are associated, the connection is much more elastic than in our own case. As Roscoe in his talk stressed, the value of a notion like third gender is that:

On the one hand, it helps us see the cultural and historical coherency of roles that until recently have been treated in isolation. At the same time, third gender helps us to break the vicious cycle of projection, in which Western heterosexist binarism is constantly replicated onto the world’s cultures (and most animal species for that matter) by the language we use.

13 in History of Religions: “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion”— this is Roscoe’s reference removed into a footnote to make reading easier.
So, in societies which employ the berdache model, what we are actually witnessing is not a socially-approved gender re-assignment from “masculine” to its opposite, to “feminine”. Instead, what is happening is that the individual grows — through a process of experience and ritual — into one of several socially approved genders, “genders” in this case implying constellations of personal characteristics and behaviours which may or may not originate in the individual’s anatomical sex or, for that matter, of the other sex.

In considering different societies and the ways in which they integrate same-sex sex into their cultures, it is worth remembering, as Werner cautions, that

*A few societies might be classified into more than one of these types -- especially the adolescent sex type may also occur with the bicha/bofe type. In addition, a single society (like the Brazilians or the Japanese) may have different systems within different classes. Still, most societies are characterized primarily by one or the other systems. This does not mean that there are not other important differences between societies. For example, it is very important to the people involved if they are treated with respect, ridiculed or disdained, have high status or are slaves, are harshly punished, or given rewards, and privileges., etc.*

An example might be the male-male sex which occurs in some biker gangs in Western societies. Usually regarded as ultra-macho, bikers are famous for their *molls*15, and at the gang level, the *onions*, women who service more than one member of the group. However, when those gangs go on excursions or hold functions from which women are excluded, some of the members then sexually service their comrades. These men are full members and are not thought of as any less masculine (the cardinal virtue in biker gangs), even though, during sex, they are called names such as (*inter alia*) “pansy”, “fag”, “cocksucker”, and “poofta”…. These terms however, carry no venom and are more designed to assert the dominance of the “tops” in the “scene”. If these “bottoms” were to be called by such names by outsiders, the whole gang would rally, usually violently, to their defence. Essentially, what we see here is a kind of

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14 This of course excludes gay biker gangs.
15 The same word or variations of it occur in many sexual contexts — referring to women, it usually implies promiscuity, as in “Moll Flanders”, but when referring to homosexuals, a sense of sexually submissive, non-macho — see “Molly House” in London; *mollies* in Colonial Australia; *molle*, meaning “soft”, the Latin derogatory term applied to Roman men who submitted to anal penetration….
berdache in operation: there are two genders among the men which are differentiated only by a willingness or otherwise to be penetrated.

It is all very well for us to suggest models for the manner in which societies structured in different ways integrate male-male sex into their cultures, but there has been very little research done into what specific activities and how much of them is permitted in individual societies. For example, even in our own Western society, we know little about how a man’s preference for different sexual activities might change over his lifetime, even though — as we will see — in some societies which accept youthful homosexuality it is assumed his attentions will turn to women after he marries and reaches the age of discretion.