

NHH00: A Natural History of Homosexuality

An Overview of this Course

Sex between men has been controversial in Western Society for the past couple of hundred years, but what we call *homosexuality* has not always been so in times past or in other parts of the world. In fact, in the majority of world cultures, sexual relations between men are considered anything from a private pleasure to a revered and honourable institution.



Early Gay Bars

This course aims to explore that range of alternative views to our own “homophobic” one, although I must say, in these last few decades, a more tolerant and accepting attitude has been emerging in the West. Nonetheless, even now we still divide the world into “homosexuals” and “heterosexuals”, as though these labels are sub-species of *Homo sapiens*. And, most importantly, because these *social constructs* have become so entrenched in our language, even scientists

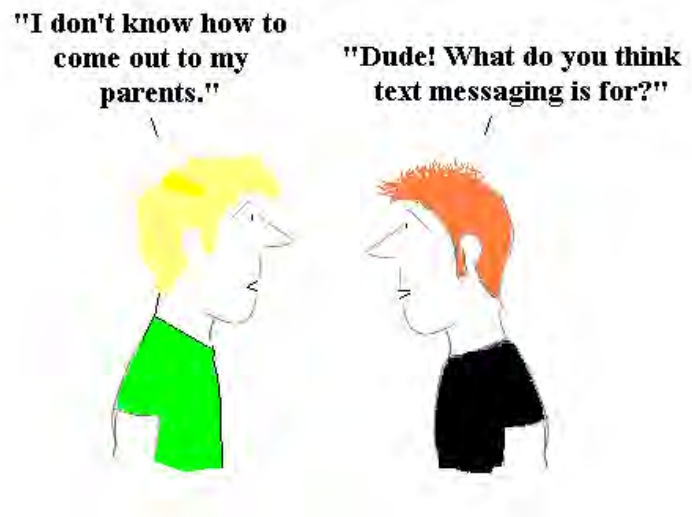
researching aspects of human sexuality have often fallen into the trap of believing these labels represent reality rather than convenient hypothetical constructs. By and large, such research has not been very successful at finding anything beyond the fact that some men, by their own admission, tend to have sex more often with other men than with women.

However, it does seem that some men are characteristically more “turned on” by members of our own sex — a small number exclusively so, and an equally small number, never. In between these extremes there is the majority of men who, given the right conditions, will engage in what we call “homosexual” behaviour of one kind or another. As a general rule, the proportion of men who will engage in genital sex with another man varies from culture to

culture, depending on how homosexual sex has been integrated into that society.

After reviewing the scientific literature as best I could for this course, I personally concluded the proclivity to homosexual activity (as distinct from actually doing anything about it) is probably genetically determined. However, despite media hype about a “Gay Gene”, it seems most probable that more than one gene must be involved and that these necessarily act in a complex variety of ways.

Furthermore, it seems increasingly likely that whatever these genes might be, they are also closely associated with matters such as dominance-submission, the experience of pleasure, male bonding and the like.



This genetic complex I equate with “sexual orientation” but recognise that the proclivity is not necessarily acted upon and that when it is, there are many other factors involved. Among these others there are cultural factors which include attitudes and values and of course, religious beliefs, which the society uses to control the behaviour of its citizens. These *social controls* are inculcated into each and every one of us while we are growing up and are reinforced throughout our lives.

This course sets out to examine how different societies “institutionalise” sexual behaviour among men. As an aside, I might add that *explicit* social controls, such as laws, seem to have less control over homosexual behaviour than the *implicit*, more emotional conventions. For example, we will see that men were prepared to risk their lives for sex together even in Pre-Modern Portugal and the English Navy during the Enlightenment where the Inquisition and draconian laws respectively prohibited such intercourse. Even so, it is important to recognise that sex everywhere is always governed by regulations of one kind or another — uncontrolled lust is always condemned. Even the Bonobos follow rules in their hippy-happy sex lives.

On the other hand, there are also factors which are more a matter of individual experiences, both good and bad, which we have during our lifetime. These are not necessarily limited to our “formative” years as — for example — various psychoanalytic theories might contend but also from

other significant events we encounter along the way. While psychoanalysis and other “cures” all fail to remove homosexual desire (“reparative therapy”), it does seem fairly clear that men who have pleasurable homosexual experiences in their youth tend, if not necessarily to continue such activity into later life, then to be more tolerant and accepting of it in others. Perhaps more controversially, although we legally define as abusive all sex between men and boys, boys who have consensual sex with men usually grow up to consider this as a positive experience even though most do not go on to become homosexuals in adulthood. Of course, non-consensual sex (rape) is always destructive.

Apart from in-built genetic and other biological reasons and the influence of culture there are also other, more immediate factors involved, including the situation of the moment. These situational factors would necessarily involve things like the availability of partners, opportunity, safety and privacy. This aspect is clearly shown in the part of the course where we look at the rather spontaneous homosexual activities in



India, the “making mischief” as those men described their behaviour. This, it seems to me, is probably pretty much as the situation might have been back in pre-Reformation England and parts of the American Wild West and — although we still don’t like to talk about it — among men in the Outback during Colonial Days.

These last two raise another situational question, the availability of women. While there might have been an imbalance in the sexes in the Wild West and Aussie Outback, this was not so in Medieval England nor in many other societies, such as Cardoso’s fishing village in Brazil, where men socially recognised as heterosexual have sex with other men.

Although in modern Western society we still think homosexual and heterosexual desires are mutually exclusive, both history and anthropology show this is definitely not so. It is really only in our society that “gay” men are believed to restrict themselves only to men, and “straight” men only to women as sexual partners. In all the other cultures, no matter what the place of sex between men, all men (irrespective of sexual orientation) are expected to marry and produce children.



Indeed, it looks as though bi-sexual (or more correctly, *ambisexual*) men have more sexual encounters with people of either sex and are more prolific as fathers, thus conferring on them an evolutionary advantage. What role homosexual sex could play evolutionarily is difficult to see if we consider only reproduction as the aim or purpose of sex. Alternatively, many scientists consider sex between men as a survival strategy, allowing us to build alliances and live together cooperatively and not, like many other testosterone-driven males, spend our lives competing for territory and females.

This is not to say that all male-male sex is altruistic or that all men must necessarily engage in genital sex together in order to live harmoniously — rather, it says that sex between men is but the tip of the iceberg, the greater part being that mixture of love and desire, mutual respect and admiration, not to forget comradeship and affection, which we sometimes call male bonding but for which we have no better word in our English vocabulary.

.....but seriously folks:

Advice to Viewers

The illustrations shown in this course were chosen to demonstrate how homosexuality was constructed in historic cultures.

Even though some were the “porn” of their day, they allow us better to understand the attitudes and values of their time.

If you think you will find these images offensive you might be best advised to avert your gaze or even leave the class.