

# NHH05. Cardinal Sin to Capital Vice

## In this session:

The only way we can think or talk about the real world is in words and by extension, the words we use become our realities. Words, of course, evolve in a society and reflect the culture of which they are perhaps the most important and distinctive part. As a consequence, the moment we use a word we buy into all the cultural associations and perceived "realities" which lie behind it. So it is with *homosexuality* or *homosexual*. Although it was not the intention of the inventor, Károly Mária Kertbeny, back in 1868, these words now imply there are in terms of sexuality, two distinct types of human beings (what Michel Foucault called different "species" of men) and suggest that sexuality is in-built, life-long and immutable aspects of personality. In a strangely contradictory way, these words are believed also to indicate a bad or wrong choice and thus to imply immorality, deviation and even perversion. As such, *homosexuality* and *homosexual* are social constructs and refer to something which does not exist in the real world. However, because we have no other words, we cannot easily describe a more accurate "reality" or even an "alternative" one which we might find, as we will see in later sessions, in Medieval Japan or among the Aranda of the Flinders Ranges.

## The Social Construction of Homosexuality<sup>1</sup>

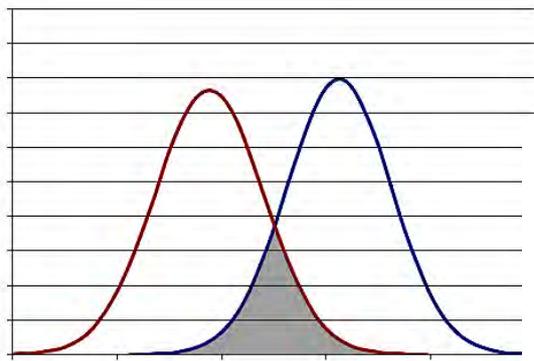
In our daily lives we assume that words refer accurately and precisely to some part of the real world but this is not necessarily so. Reality, whatever that is, is not divided up neatly into chunks which correspond exactly with the words we use. For example, to which wavelengths of light does the word "green" refer? Or, in another example, at what stage does the lump of clay I put on my potter's wheel change from being "clay" to "pot" — or "work of art", if you are really being kind.... And, even if you are very kind and call my pot a "work of art", someone in another culture might see and classify it very differently. In Northern India, once upon a time, friends and I descended upon a roadside stall selling simple domestic pots, bought as many as our car could hold and left the little girl minding the stall wide-eyed with amazement, not only at the amount of money she had to hand on to her potter dad when he returned, but at the madness of tourists who treasured her pots, normally used for storing stuff or making yogurt, as if they were made of gold.

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<sup>1</sup> "The sodomite had been a sinner; the homosexual was now a species." Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, 1976.

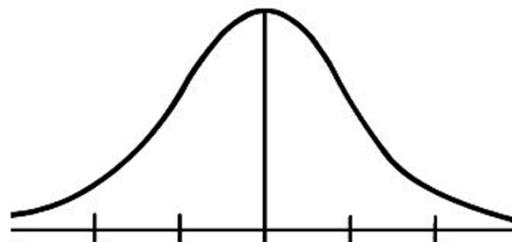
Nick Yee in *Catching The Phoenix: - The Social Construction of Homosexuality*<sup>2</sup> gives a neat resumé of the process which might — once our attention is drawn to it — seem self-evident, but the point made by the “social constructionists” is that in daily life we remain blissfully ignorant of the way in which the words we use and presumably the thoughts behind them are made. Yee says that words are our way of labeling parts of our experience of the world, that over time, they become standardized so that we can communicate our interpretation of the world to each other and that:

*As this interpretation is standardized, it is laden with assumptions about how the world behaves and how different phenomena are related. Communication is therefore the dynamic process through which social reality is constructed and sustained such that a group of individuals come to share the same worldview and can coexist. The worldview and assumptions of a culture evolve through time, become encoded in the language, which in turn reinforce the assumptions of that culture. .... As soon as you use a word, you have bought into the assumptions of that word, and how it relates to other words and concepts. As soon as you speak in a language, you have tacitly accepted its assumptions and worldview.*

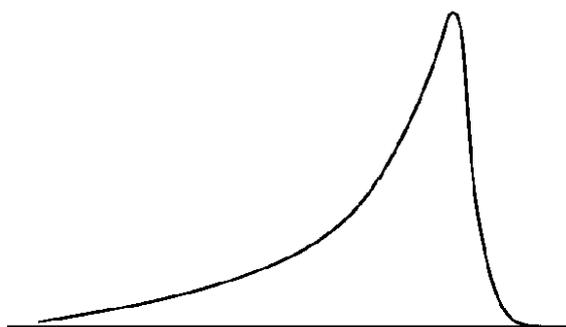


*A “normal” or “Poisson” distribution*

*A bi-modal distribution*



*A “skewed” distribution*



Yee then goes on to examine how “homosexuality” is socially constructed. Following the French philosopher, Michel Foucault<sup>3</sup> he stresses that “homosexuality” is very much a recent concept —

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nickyee.com/ponder/social\\_construction.html](http://www.nickyee.com/ponder/social_construction.html)

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault: *The History of Sexuality Volume 1 – An Introduction*, 1978 (French publication: 1976), translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon, New York.

remember, the word was coined only in 1868 although the ideas must have been percolating a bit before then. The concept is also surprisingly unique to Western culture in that unlike other cultures, our notion presupposes that same-sex attraction is a life-long predisposition and pretty much exclusive of opposite-sex attraction. For us, people are either “homosexual” or “heterosexual” — what scientists often refer to as a “**bi-modal distribution**” when they describe human sexuality. Of course we have the term “bi-sexual” to mean people attracted to both sexes, but generally we regard this as referring to a very small minority in our community. We also seem to mistrust the notion: among gay men particularly, “bi-sexuality” is frequently interpreted to mean that the person in question is in the process of “coming out”, and is therefore ultimately “homosexual”.

Rather than assume that homosexuality is a whole-of-life predisposition, other cultures typically see it more as just a part of a much wider repertoire of sexual experiences and often as belonging to a passing or temporary phase in one’s life. So, for example, in many tribes in traditional New Guinea, a youth participating in the initiation rites may spend several years in sexual relationships with one or more other males who are either same-age co-initiates or with older men who act as mentors and models for them and help them attain their own manhood. Often, in those circumstances, homosexual activity declines or even stops altogether when the man has passed through all the stages of initiation and eventually marries.

Yee draws attention to an even greater divergence from the Western concept of homosexuality when he looks at Imperial China. Right up until the end of the Qing Dynasty, he points out, several Emperors had male harems and favourite male concubines. They even maintained stables of male prostitutes for the use of important visitors to the Court.

*Male-male sexual and romantic bonds were construed as relationships between two people as opposed to a psychological essence that defined either person. Moreover, these same-sex bonds were seen as a perfectly acceptable and natural way of life in Imperial China.*

There are two serious problems with our concept of “homosexuality”. First, is the assumption of a life-long pre-disposition already mentioned. As Yee says, “*The general sense is that if someone figures out that they are gay today, then they must have been gay when they were born, and they will be gay for the rest of their life.*”

Simply stated, the problem with this assumption is that there is just not the evidence to support it. Although everyone recognizes that surveys of human sexuality are always only as good as the answers people give to questionnaires, there have been many studies of sexuality and most, including most famously the

Kinsey studies, report very few people remain exclusively homosexual throughout their lives... as a ball-park figure, about 4% of men appear to have exclusively male partners throughout their lives. The remainder are either celibate — which is rare — or have both male and female partners to varying degrees. Australian gay historians, for example, have recorded many oral histories from Australian soldiers who served in World War II which clearly demonstrate that “normal” men can have sex — and do so repeatedly — with other men for a time yet otherwise lead essentially heterosexual lives.

There is really no way of telling, at this stage of our history, precisely what proportion of people would have sex with both men and women because the social conventions against same-sex sex are so strong. Again, Nick Yee makes a good point:

*Think about it this way. When someone realizes they are strongly attracted to Asians as sexual partners, they do not have to deal with the anxiety of wondering whether they will only like Asians for the rest of their life because there is no strong social norm for racial preference. But when someone thinks that they are attracted to someone of the same gender, they are suddenly forced to deal with a life-long decision.*



For almost 20 years I counseled young men who were “coming out” as gay. Consistently, one of the most difficult things they had to deal with was the realization that all the things they had earlier taken for granted would be theirs in the future, including marriage and fatherhood, were now ruled out... or so it seemed back then. These days, the

expectation is changing, at least towards fatherhood. The young men in the final series of “*Queer as Folk*”, the Canadian TV series telecast here on SBS, were pretty much exclusively homosexual with very strong identifications as “gay” yet they were contemplating marriage (to other men) and fatherhood — this latter admittedly by virtue of the old-fashioned turkey-baster and the good offices of a lesbian pal.

The other problem with our notion of “homosexuality” is that it has come to be defined as an integral part of the person’s identity in such a way and to such a degree that other personal characteristics do not. For example, we generally acknowledge that a person might be introverted or extroverted, but we don’t yet talk of “the introvert community” or “Extrovert Pride”. The difference between personality characteristics such as introversion or extroversion and “homosexuality” is that these features have not yet been socially constructed in such a way as to be purposefully alienating.

I say “purposefully” but I don’t mean to be quite so consciously deterministic: our civilization, for whatever its reasons to reject same-sex sex, has constructed “homosexuality” as a category of people no one in his or her right mind would want to be like.....

As an interesting aside, Nick Yee offers some alternative ways in which sexuality might be conceptualized. For starters, he suggests,

*without the assumption of a universal life-long sexual preference, we could have defined people as being “rigid and set” in their sexual preference versus people who are “flexible and adaptable”. We could have defined people as being attracted to people of their same ethnicity or someone of a different ethnicity.*

In fact, gay men do already categorize other men if they have an ethnic preference: men who are noticeably attracted to Asian men are described as “rice queens” while, in America, black men characteristically attracted to white men are called “snow queens”. And of course, there is the famous category, “size queens”.....

We run into difficulties also with the Western construct of “homosexuality” when we stop to consider the difference, if any, between physical attraction and romantic attraction. One of the early complaints by gay activists in the early ‘70s was that “homosexual” focused too narrowly on genital sexuality and ignored all the other affectional and emotional aspects of human sexuality.

We also run into enormous — and probably insurmountable — difficulties when we use the word “homosexual”, or “gay” for that matter, to describe people or events in the past or in other cultures. For example, were Nick Yee’s Chinese emperors “gay” or “homosexual” or did they keep harems of men because sometimes they felt more like having sex with a man than with a woman and there was no one telling them this was “wrong”, “sick” or “sinful”?

For that matter, was Julius Caesar “gay”? How do we describe his relationship with King Nicomedes of Bithynia for which he was taunted, particularly by Cicero, for much of his life?

As it happened, the problem for Caesar was not that he might have had sex with Nicomedes but that he had allegedly been the “submissive” partner. The Romans, as we will see when we consider them in detail, didn’t give a fig for sodomy *per se* but really got their knickers in a twist about a man submitting sexually to another. This they believed reflected badly not only on his personal manhood but also on the pride of the Roman State.

Summing up, Nick Yee concluded:

*Tacit in every language is the construction of a social reality that frames individuals and concepts as inside or outside the boundaries of social norms.*

And he added as a final word,



*The irony of gay culture is that there is an emerging sense of the correct way of being gay - exemplified by TV shows like "Queer Eye For The Straight Guy". There is a certain way a gay man should dress, certain name brands that are favored, certain ways hair should be cut and styled, and certain skills and mannerisms that they should have.*

### **The construction of “normal”**

These days we are perhaps less certain that heterosexuality is “normal” and ‘homosexual’ is abnormal: the boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders” are blurring to a degree we could not have imagined back in the 1950’s when many other members of U3A, like me, were becoming aware of the sexual norms of our society. It is salutary however, to go back a bit further in history and remember that when our grandparents were young, the world was not divided sharply into “heterosexuals” and “homosexuals”.

The writer and historian Jonathan Katz<sup>4</sup> in his 1995 book, “*The Invention of Heterosexuality*” wrote that, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, both *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* were still obscure medical terms and heterosexuality was not considered "normal". For example, Dorland's Medical

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz: *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995).

Dictionary, published in Philadelphia in 1901, defined *Heterosexuality* as *Abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex.*

Katz argues that this dictionary definition was proof that *heterosexuality* was not directed to procreation but to pleasure for pleasure's sake. He goes on to say that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a decrease in what he calls the *procreative imperative*, that is, that the primary purpose of sex is reproduction. In its place, certainly by the mid 1960s, was an increase in public acceptance that sex between men and women was undertaken for pleasure and not primarily to make babies. Katz argues that this was something of a reaction against the *cult of domesticity* which followed World War II — that is, the re-association of women with the home, motherhood, and child care, men with fatherhood and wage-work outside the home — and which, in the baby-boom era, for a time re-affirmed the link between heterosexuality and procreation.

Katz advances an interesting perspective when he suggests that it was the actions of many of the more liberal-minded scientists and others who actually helped set the division between heterosexual and homosexual in concrete. He singles out the famous sexologist Kinsey<sup>5</sup> as being particularly influential in this way. As most of us know, Kinsey popularized the idea that hetero- and homo-sexual feelings and activities among human beings are actually on a continuum.

*“But that famous continuum”, argues Katz, also emphatically reaffirmed the idea of a sexuality divided between the hetero and homo.”*

*Kinsey's "heterosexual-homosexual rating scale," from zero to six, sounded precise, quantitative, and scientific, fixing the het/homo binary in the public mind with new certainty. His science-dressed, influential sex-liberalism thus upheld the hetero/homo division, giving it new life and legitimacy.*

Strangely, this is pretty much the opposite of what Kinsey meant when he said that exclusively heterosexual and exclusively homosexual people do not "represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual." And as Katz reports, goes on to make his point by stressing that

*.....the world's population "is not to be divided into sheep and goats." (That revealing Biblical metaphor positions heterosexuals as sheep,*

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<sup>5</sup> The famous 7-point scale appeared originally in Kinsey, AC; Pomeroy, WB; and Martin, CE.: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. WB Saunders Company, 1948. For information about Kinsey, the Scale and the Kinsey Institute, see <http://gaylife.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=gaylife&zu=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.indiana.edu%2F%7Ekinsey%2Fabout%2Fphoto-tour.html>

*coupled with conformity, and homosexuals as goats, linked with licentiousness).*

### **“Not properly masculine”**

A constant source of discomfort for homosexual men, at least for the past century or so, has been the nagging thought that we are “not properly masculine”. Perhaps this has come from building into the social construct notions that all homosexuals are effeminate and, despite the fact that many VCs and other heroes were homosexual, that we lack the courage of the proper man.

Gay communities, particularly on the east and west coasts of the United States and other big gay centers, such as Sydney and Amsterdam, responded in the ‘70s and early ‘80s by evolving a life-style and fashions which emphasized (some might say, over-emphasized) our maleness. Remember, until then we had been wearing chunky gold jewelry, long hair and flared jeans.... The new style, commonly known as “Clones” featured blue jeans (worn so as to emphasize the bulge in the crotch), a lumber-jack kind of checked flannel shirt, close cropped hair and, above all else, a moustache.

In smaller communities, particularly in the American mid-west, the Clone uniform was not popular. In such places, it could be dangerous to identify your sexuality by wearing a uniform. Also, many men did not like the Clone look: these were often men who were perhaps less concerned to “prove their manhood” or who, even wearing such a uniform would have not seemed convincingly “butch” (or ultra-masculine) to even their nearest and dearest.

Gay men, even before Stonewall, have been notoriously preoccupied with body image. This may be because, like women, we are conscious of being other men’s sex objects. Perhaps more importantly, most people in Western Society are not really proud of our bodies and the belief it is deficient or deformed in some way soon adds up to body shame.

1st Sunday of Every Month  
**Butch**  
A Bear Party for the South Bay  
Party from 3 - 9 PM  
NO COVER  
Beer Bust  
Hot Men  
VJ John Miranda  
Spinning the Hottest Music Videos  
**★ RENEGADES BAR**  
501 West Taylor Street | San Jose, CA 95110  
408.275.8902 | www.RenegadesBar.com  
Extra parking across the street at AJ's Auto Detailing Shop

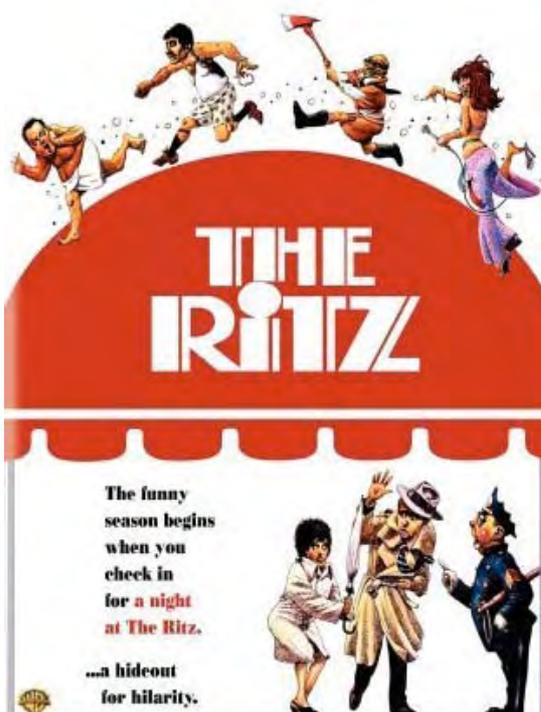
Either way, concerns over masculine identification and bodily attractiveness over the years has led to new movements and associations within the gay community the function of which has been to make outsiders feel like insiders. Examples which come to mind include clubs for leathermen and gay bikies, gay rigger-buggers and perhaps now the biggest of all, the so-called



*Bears (but what is the collective noun?)*

Bears clubs started out describing themselves as clubs for “hairy men and men who liked hairy men” but this was just a catchy slogan: most importantly, the Bears ethos stressed that all gay men no matter what age, colour, shape or size were welcome. Being a Bear meant meeting your fellow members, usually in a member’s home or some other private place, sitting down together, sharing a meal

"Bears" movement. This manifestation of "real men" started back in the 1980s in San Francisco but did not gather much momentum until after the first shock wave of AIDS had passed and "Safe Sex" became a possibility. Then, from the late '80s, Bears grew into a world-wide brotherhood as a member of which a man can travel the world and have friends — and sex — wherever he goes.



and talking personally to each other. For many gay men, the hardest thing they have to learn is to trust other gay men (after all, we were brought up to not trust the deviant) and so, sitting and chatting about your personal life to another member was a very valuable experience, especially since many men had only had rather impersonal sexual experiences in bathhouses or even in public toilets for much of their lives.

However, by the mid-‘90s the Bears clubs which had sprung up all over North America and eventually in Europe were changing, becoming less inclusive, more exclusive and doing so for several reasons. First, because of the sudden popularity of the Bears movement, clubs expanded to the point where they could no longer meet in

private homes and cater by pot-luck dinners. Security also became a problem, especially so in the US mid-west and South where many fundamentalist Christian groups increasingly turned their hostility onto gays — and abortionists — when they no longer had the USSR to hate. The upshot was that Bears clubs moved to gay bars as venues for their meetings but this brought with it many of the problems which had prompted the Bears' Movement in the first place – gay bar culture, including the meat-rack mentality and music so loud you cannot make conversation, men standing up, drinking rather than sitting down together to eat and chat.... A night out with the Bears started to be like just another night out “on the tiles”.....

But there was another and just as significant change. Back in the 1976 a popular movie comedy called “The Ritz”, directed by Richard Lester and based on a play by Terrence McNally, had audiences in stitches as they watched the antics of a plump straight man who was trapped in a gay bathhouse and pursued by a so-called “chubby chaser”... While most people probably believed the terms “chub” and “chubby chaser” were invented for the movie because stereotypically no one could possibly be sexually excited by a fat man, that very same year a social group called “Girth and Mirth” was founded in San Francisco to cater for overweight and obese men and the men who were attracted to them. Such was the appeal, similar clubs sprang up all over North America and eventually, in parts of Europe, especially in France and Belgium.

Then, at some point in the early ‘90s, many over-weight and obese men found it perhaps more acceptable to identify as “bears” rather than as “chubs” and converged on the Bears clubs instead. This was no problem for bears: their charter



welcomed all shapes and sizes of men.... But over the years, fat has become the norm and these days, bears are generally identified not so much as “hairy men”, the catch-cry of the earlier period when “masculinity” was the top fetish, but as “fat men”. “You can’t be a bear,” my partner was once told when we went to a function run by the bears club in Lisbon where we were living. “You’re not fat enough!”.

So what was once a gay men’s movement which started because men rejected body fashion, dress codes and sex objectification now has almost gone in the opposite direction and become exclusionist, rather than

inclusive in its outreach. Personally, I regret much of this change in outlook. I have been associated with the Bears Movement almost since the beginning because I saw in it not only the opportunity for ordinary gay men to join with others and overcome some of the shame and fear they had always felt because they were gay, but also to overcome some of the body shame which most of us in the Western World suffer as a birth-right of our culture.



## The Metrosexual

Nowadays the social construct “gay” is changing and some argue, is already on the way out. In recent times, the hedonistic aspects of “gay” have been emphasized, and “gay” has come to mean to many a life-style which includes sex, drugs — but definitely not rock-and-roll which is far too *passé*. High on the list of what makes one gay is a good disposable income, a sense of sexual freedom, lots of hi-tech appliances and above all else, “looking good”, by which of course is meant the right haircut and designer clothes.

In an article in the gay magazine DNA, *Don't Shove Your Metrosexuality Down Our Throats*, writer Matthew Denby<sup>6</sup> argues that *"We are being told that gayness is irrelevant now straight men are increasingly happy to shop like queens."*

He goes on:

*Have you heard? Gay is over. David Beckham is wearing nail varnish, straight guys are buying cosmetics and so, according to those in the know, gay is gone and “metrosexuality” is now in. This new phenomenon is, apparently, making our previous sexual identity redundant.*

*We're gasping and clutching our string of Ian Thorpe pearls.*

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<sup>6</sup>“DNA” magazine for June 2003 p.46