

CHAPTER 4: ALTERNATIVE GENDER ORIENTATIONS:

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender

What Do “Gay,” “Lesbian,” “Bisexual”, and “Transgender” Mean?

“Gay”

The term “gay” has existed in the English language ever since William the Conqueror arrived in England in 1066. Duke William brought with him not only his victorious army, but also a distinctive, Scandinavian influenced dialect of French. This Norman French dialect rapidly permeated the Anglo-Saxon language spoken in England at the time, and contributed about half the words we now use, including “gay.” At first, “gay,” like its French ancestor, “*gai*,” simply meant “happy” or “cheerful.” By the 19th century it had acquired quite another meaning to England’s urban dwellers; women described as “gay” were prostitutes. And by the middle of the 20th century, in both Britain and the United States, the term had progressed from a somewhat restricted code word for “homosexual” to the term that people (especially men) who were sexually attracted to their own sex chose to describe themselves. Though some academics, medical practitioners, and political and law enforcement personnel continue to use the more clinical term “homosexual,” most American men and some women who are sexually interested in their own gender prefer the term “gay.”¹

Does this mean that any person who has sex with a person of his/her own gender is gay? No. Many children and young people are sexually curious and temporarily interested in sexual experimentation with others of their own sex. In addition, sometimes people who sexually prefer the opposite sex may find themselves in situations in which

there are no such individuals available. Such circumstances commonly occur in boarding schools, same-sex colleges (now very few in number), military installations, and prisons. In these situations individuals may establish sexual relationships with same-sex partners out of a felt sexual need rather than a preference, and will return to heterosexual activity when their circumstances allow for it. Such individuals, despite their homosexual activity, are not in Posner's (1992) terms "real" homosexuals. "Real" homosexuals are those who consistently select same-sex partners, regardless of whether opposite-sex partners are available. It is also worth noting that "real" gay men may occasionally have sex with women, especially when they are young. They may feel they must try to "be a man," live up to a girlfriend's expectations, or please a female friend who may have developed romantic feelings. But these sexual experiences are not likely to be very rewarding, and the sexual focus of gay men remains on men.

"Lesbian"

Lesbians are women who are sexually attracted to women. The term is derived from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos, off the coast of present-day Turkey, where in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE the poet Sappho lived. Sappho was a prosperous married woman who conducted a school for the girls of wealthy families and wrote poetry. Despite the general Greek feeling that women were the moral and intellectual inferiors of men, Sappho's poetry was widely and extravagantly praised by such leading intellectuals as Plato. Much of this poetry has been lost to us; what remains includes romantic lyrics directed to young women. Thus the term "lesbian," was coined by 19th century readers with an exaggerated and unrealistic notion of rampant sex between women in early

Greece. Sometimes the term “Sapphic” is also used to describe erotic attachment between women.

As is true for men, an experimental experience or phase of same-sex activity between females does not necessarily mean that a woman is a “real” lesbian. Nor do isolated sexual encounters with men indicate that a woman is *not* a lesbian, if her sexual interest is fairly consistently focused on women. But as we shall see later on in this chapter, lesbian identity should not be described as merely the gender-opposite of gay male identity. Many researchers, as well as some lesbians, point out that women’s gender orientation is more variable and flexible than that of men.

“Bisexual”

Surprisingly, bisexuality is a category about which there may be the greatest disagreement. Though the term obviously refers to persons who are sexually attracted to members of both their own and the opposite sex, some gay men and lesbians feel that most people who identify themselves as bisexual actually fall into one of two categories. Either they prefer their own sex, and just prefer not to have to cope with the cultural oppression of publicly “coming out,” or establishing themselves as gay or lesbian, or they prefer opposite sex partners, but in certain circumstances will take on a partner of their own sex. From a slightly different perspective, Posner contends that “there seem to be few genuine bisexuals in the sense of persons who are indifferent to the gender of their sexual partner....” (1992:298). Another student of sexuality, Richard Pillard, points out a gendered difference in bisexual identity. Though most men by the age of 30 or 35 consider themselves to be *either* gay *or* straight, many women consider their sexuality more flexible, and to be determined by the nature of the relationship in which they are

presently engaged (interview in Stein 1993). There is, in fact, relatively little systematic research into the lives and circumstances of persons who identify themselves as bisexuals.

“Transgendered/transgender”

Of all the terms in this chapter, “transgendered” or “transgender” (the terms are used interchangeably) is probably the most difficult to define. Some transgendered persons have characteristics of both males and females, behaviorally, stylistically, or, in rarer cases, biologically. They may be biologically classified as women and yet dress in men’s clothing, and cut their hair like men or they may be biologically male but emulate women in clothing and appearance. Sometimes such individuals may have surgery to further their appearance as the gender to which they are not biologically assigned. They are nearly always sexually drawn to members of their own biological sex, but they resist classification as the opposite sex for themselves. One such masculine woman says in her Web statement that she does not usually feel like a man, though many people who do not know her identify her as one. Instead, she says, she prefers to establish her own gender, with which she feels comfortable: “I define my own identity” (<http://www.journalism.sfsu.edu/www/pubs/gater/spring95/may11/gend.htm>).

Both masculine women and feminine men are often considered members of the transgendered community, and so are transvestites. Transvestites are persons who cross-dress, or wear the clothing, hairstyles, and other accoutrements of the other sex. The term is generally used for persons who merely assume the clothing and appearance of the opposite sex from time to time, rather than for persons who take on the social identity of the opposite sex. Transvestites may cross-dress for their own recreation, or as

performers. Though many transvestites are preferentially homosexual, this is not true of all.

The last group within the category of transgendered individuals includes transsexuals, those who take on the physical and behavioral characteristics and social identity of the other sex and live as members of that sex. Such persons frequently say they feel as though they are trapped inside the wrong body, a condition clinically labeled as “gender dysphoria.” A biological man, for example, may feel as though he is actually a woman, though he has the genetic and anatomical makeup of a man. In most places in the United States there is a lengthy process through which persons with gender dysphoria may seek to be transformed into members of the gender to which they feel they belong psychologically. This involves psychiatric assessment and counseling, a period of living and dressing as a member of the chosen gender while taking hormones that contribute to the alteration of some gendered physiological characteristics. If the gender dysphoric person comes through these processes, he or she is then scheduled for sex-reassignment surgery, during which a surgeon will modify primary and secondary sexual body parts to approximate those of a person of the chosen gender. Postoperative hormone therapy must continue for the rest of the individual’s life. The surgery is expensive, especially for female-to-male patients.

Have alternate gender orientations always existed?

Tribal societies

In this book we are concerned with gender in the United States. A discussion of alternative American gender orientation, however, would profit from a brief account of

alternative gender orientation elsewhere. In that way we can more easily evaluate the American patterns and claims. As will be discussed in Chapter 5 of this book, many American Indian groups, especially those in the western two-thirds of the continent, had a practice, called “berdache” by French missionaries, according to which men who wished to live as women took on female social identities, usually when they were boys. A few Plains Indian groups also permitted women to adopt a partial male identity, as “manly-hearted women.” Though these women married men, so did the berdaches, if they married at all. In Samoa the *fa’afafine* are biological males selected by their families in childhood to be raised as girls, a practice also followed in other Pacific islands. And in New Guinea, Herdt (1981, 2003) has reported on the Sambia, whose boys and young men are raised in men’s houses where the younger boys are encouraged to fellate the young men. This practice ends as the young men enter their early twenties, at which time they marry women and become officially off limits for homosexual activity.

Ancient Greece and beyond

Despite these and many other accounts of same-sex sexual activity within tribal societies, contemporary Americans are more likely to have a passing familiarity with the homoerotic practices of men in ancient Greece. As is clear from even the most cursory look at Greek vase paintings, with their lascivious naked men in perpetual pursuit of other, usually younger, men, homosexual interest was common in Greece. This interest is not only depicted on ceramics, but also described and referred to in plays, poetry, and even the philosophical dialogues of Plato. Mature men frequently sought out much younger men or adolescent boys as sexual partners, and penetration ideally took place between the younger man’s thighs (“interfemoral” or “intercrural” intercourse), with both

partners standing. This prevented the younger man from accepting the humiliating (recumbent) posture and penetration of a woman (Posner 1992: 38-45). Greek men were expected to marry women (often young girls), and nearly all of them did so. Their sexual interest in males was considered natural and unremarkable, as long as they were not anally penetrated, themselves-- a role ideally reserved for women and male slaves.

The Greek sexual interest in both males and females persisted into the Roman era, but with the establishment of Christianity in the Roman world, this permissiveness came to a crashing halt. The Catholic Church condemned same-sex sexual activity, but did not focus strongly on it. The Protestant Reformation was more concerned to root it out. Interestingly, Protestants and Catholics alike shared with Greeks and Romans a lack of interest in women's same-sex activities. In the first place, all these groups associated sexual activity with penetration, which they considered unlikely to occur in the absence of a penis. In the second place, it was widely assumed that normal women lacked sexual feelings; indeed, such feelings in women were widely considered pathological (Posner 1992: 28). As Rupp (2001) points out, as late as the 19th century English judges found it nearly impossible to believe that there could be anything sexual between women who shared a bed or a passionate embrace, so common were these practices, and so certain were the judges of women's lack of sexual feelings.

Homosexual activity in the early United States

The development gay identity

Despite its Puritan origins and a strong disapproval of sexual "deviance" such as fornication, prostitution, and homosexuality, Posner points out that after independence

from England, few Americans were prosecuted for homosexuality, and no one was executed for the offense. By contrast, such executions continued in England into the 1830s (Posner 1992: 61). But the United States, like England, was changing in the 19th century. The agrarian world that had been organized around a self-sufficient family and that had prevailed for centuries began to give way to a capitalist world in which individual wage labor was increasingly taking the place of the family as an economic unit. It is this increase of individuality and economic independence that D'Emilio (1992) identifies as the origin of what he labels "gay identity." He is not talking about an increase in the proportion of individuals who are sexually attracted to members of their own sex. Rather, he is talking about people who consider their sexual orientation a significant aspect of their lives and identities, and who form communities with others who share this sexual orientation and identity.

As the notion of a gay identity became more and more established, both among gay and lesbian people, themselves, and among heterosexuals, certain behaviors, manners of dressing, ways of speaking, occupations, and even areas of the country and of particular cities began to become increasingly associated with gay men and lesbians. Gay men were thought to move, act, and speak in an "effeminate" way, and to take up occupations in the arts, in interior decoration, or in hairdressing or dress design. Of course, these stereotypes *did* describe some gay men. Other gay men, however, were (and are) indistinguishable from straight, or heterosexual, men. They dressed and spoke like heterosexual men, and were as likely to be accountants or engineers or to run the family business as they were to be choreographers or interior decorators. But despite gay men's growing awareness of their distinctive sexual identity and their increasing support

from a community of others who shared this identity, the United States at the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th was not a safe or comfortable place for them. Many gay men felt it was essential to conceal their sexual orientation from all but their most trusted friends and family. Not only might they be rejected, even by parents or old friends, but many people feared the loss of their jobs if their sexual orientation should become known. This repression of one's sexual identity, known as being "in the closet" or "closeted," may carry a very high psychological price, which some men have endured for entire lifetimes.

The development of lesbian identity

For lesbian women the situation was similar, but not identical. In the first place, as already noted, it was widely assumed that women had little or no specific sexual appetite. In the second place, signs of physical affection between women were widely accepted in the United States, and occasioned no notice, though the same was certainly not true for men. In the third place, it was often argued that if a woman was romantically interested in another woman, this was either because she was so unattractive that no man would pay attention to her, or simply that she had never experienced male attention. People who held this perspective frequently argued that "a good man" was all **that** any woman really needed to set her straight. Occasionally this argument can be heard even in the 21st century,

As more and more schools and colleges were developed for girls and young women over the 19th century, the issue of lesbianism gained greater prominence. The term "lesbian" was seldom used, but there was discussion of "mannish" women, "Sapphic" affection, and "masculenoids" dominating women's colleges. There were

several reasons for this concern with lesbianism in girls' schools, and particularly in women's colleges. It is important to remember that until the establishment of Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia in 1836 and Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts in 1837, higher education had not been possible for women; it was considered unnecessary. In this context, higher education was considered "unnatural," and likely to alter women's fundamental nature. It is also significant that educated women often did not marry, either out of reluctance to immerse themselves in a subordinate, domestic relationship, or from the unwillingness of some men to accept the possible strains of marriage to an educated woman.

Some of these educated women were undoubtedly lesbians in the contemporary sense: women who were predominantly sexually attracted to women. Others, however, were simply independent and intellectually oriented, characteristics not common among women of the time. There was also in the 19th and early 20th centuries a phenomenon now often referred to as "passionate friendship" between women. Such relationships frequently lasted a lifetime, well after one or both of the women married. Before marriage, these women held hands, kissed and caressed each other, and slept in the same bed. The strength of passion involved in these friendships is quite striking to 21st century readers, as is revealed in the following excerpt from a letter written by the poet Emily Dickinson to a woman friend who later became her sister-in-law:

Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to?...I hope for you so much, and feel so eager for you, feel that I cannot wait, feel that now I must have you—that the expectation once more to see

your face again, makes me feel hot and feverish.... (quoted in D'Emilio and Freedman 1988: 126).

Indeed, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, such passionate friendships between women were generally tolerated, and as D'Emilio and Freedman (1988) point out, most of society saw them as platonic though passionate and even sexual. It was only as the 19th century neared its end that, in the view of D'Emilio and Freedman, "the separation of sexuality and reproduction made Americans more conscious of the erotic element of these friendships" (1988: 126) causing the relationships to come under suspicion and be discouraged. Smith-Rosenberg (1985) suggests that nineteenth century Americans permitted a wider range of emotional and sexual feelings between poles of "committed heterosexuality" and "uncompromising homosexuality" than did Americans of the later twentieth century or twenty-first. In her article "Romantic Friendship" (2001), Rupp, citing a story of Louisa May Alcott as well as other literary sources, points out that there was some awareness of lesbian sexual attraction even in the mid nineteenth century. But these relationships were widely accepted as platonic into the twentieth century. It was not until later in the same century that more modern observers began to question the sexual nature of passionate friendships involving some prominent women. By this time enduring partnerships between women, especially educated, elite women, had come to be called "Boston marriages," a term still used in New England today. Jane Addams, the Nobel Prize winning founder of the Chicago settlement institution, Hull House, participated in such a relationship with the philanthropist Mary Rozet Smith. Their relationship was such that Addams took pains to ensure that when they stayed

together in hotels they would be assured of a double bed, just as they had at home (Mondimore 1996: 59).

By the 1920s and 1930s American culture was more aware of both male and female homosexuality. And though social class privilege protected many lesbian women from opprobrium, jokes and jeering disapproval, some of these women were privately discouraged from these relationships. Indeed, Franklin Roosevelt referred to some of his wife's "mannish" friends, including her longtime passionate friend, journalist Lorena Hickok, as "she-men" (Rupp 2001: 20).

At women's colleges, where many faculty members and administrators were themselves unmarried women, tolerance of physical affection between students ceased. To protect the fragile reputations of these institutions, students accused of sexual intimacy with each other were routinely suspended for "medical" reasons, a practice that endured into the second half of the 20th century. D'Emilio reported such an event at an "elite [women's] college in the Northeast" in the 1960s. Some students at the related men's college across the street had been watching two women students through the telescope they kept trained on the women's dormitory. When they saw the women engaging in sexual activity with each other, their stories reached the ears of the women's college administrators, who immediately suspended the women students. The male students suffered no penalty for their surveillance (D'Emilio 1992: 149).²

The Sexual Revolution of the 20th Century: Episode I

From the perspective of people of alternative sexual orientations, it may be argued that the sexual revolution of the 20th century occurred in three distinct episodes. The first

episode, as already mentioned, actually began in the 19th century, with the separation of the family unit from cooperative production, as capitalist wage labor and individualism replaced agrarian family units. This permitted for the first time the development of a gay and lesbian consciousness and a sense of gay and lesbian community. As gay and lesbian people began constructing their own consciousness, the academic community also began to take notice of them, and to construct its own conception of the nature of homosexuality and of homosexuals. In 1869 the term “homosexual” first appeared in a pamphlet in which Hungarian physician Karl Maria Benkert (writing under the name of Kertbeny) argued for the decriminalization of same-gender sexual activity in Germany. The plea failed, but the term stuck, popularized by English psychologist, physician, and sex researcher, Havelock Ellis. Along with the term, there developed an idea that “the homosexual” was a distinctive kind of person, at best unhappy and mentally ill, and at worst an evil and potentially treasonous criminal bent on the molestation and seduction of otherwise heterosexual children and youth. This stood in contrast to the long-held Christian view that “sodomy,” as all “unnatural” sexual activity was called, was a sin to which all flesh was heir. That is, sodomy was seen not as a characteristic of a particular category of person, but as a moral error, like theft, sloth, or gluttony, into which anyone could fall as a result of the sinful nature of humanity.

Not surprisingly, the issue of homosexuality was addressed by Sigmund Freud, founder of psychiatry, though his attitude toward the phenomenon is somewhat diffuse. On the one hand, as Posner points out, Freud makes abundantly clear that “vaginal intercourse within the framework of a stable monogamous marriage” is the defining trait of mature sexuality (1992: 22). On the other hand, in 1951 *The American Journal of*

Psychiatry published a copy of Freud's 1935 "Letter to an American Mother." In the letter Freud attempted to assuage a mother's distress over her son's homosexuality by saying the following:

Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be claimed as an illness.... Many highly respectable individuals in ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the greatest men among them (Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, etc.). It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime and cruelty too....

By asking me if I can help, you mean, I suppose, if I can abolish homosexuality and make normal heterosexuality take its place. The answer is, in a general way, we cannot promise to achieve it...(Freud 1951[1935] 107:737).

Freud had made a clear statement that homosexuality was neither an illness nor likely to be "curable." Yet at the time his letter was reprinted in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association was not impelled to alter its classification of homosexuality as a "mental disorder" amenable to psychiatric treatment."

It is not surprising that Freud's letter failed to change the minds of the psychiatric community, which had already resisted the massive empirical study of Alfred Kinsey and his collaborators, published in 1948. Officially titled *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, and informally referred to as the "Kinsey Report," it caused a popular furor because of its straightforward, nonjudgmental presentation of information on a great variety of male sexual activity, including same-gender sex. Kinsey contended, on the

basis of interviews with a wide range of men, that at some time in their lives nearly 40 per cent of all American men had engaged in same-gender sex (Kinsey et al. 1948: 664), and that roughly 10 per cent of all males had been more or less exclusively engaged in same-gender sex for at least three years between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five (Kinsey et al 1948: 651). A companion volume, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, appeared five years later and presented the finding that by the age of forty, 19 per cent of the women interviewed had had intentional sexual experience with other women (Kinsey et al. 1953: 453).

Today Kinsey's figure of 10 per cent of the male population as preferentially homosexual is widely criticized as too high, due to peculiarities in his sample population. A more widely accepted figure is nearer to 4 or 5 per cent (Posner 1992:294). And it is also likely that the proportion of preferential lesbians today is somewhat higher than what Kinsey's research showed. Still, in all areas of human sexual behavior the significance of the Kinsey report cannot be overstated. This is especially true with respect to its strongly stated conclusions that same-gender sexual behavior is merely part of the repertoire of human sexual activity, neither pathological nor uncommon, and certainly not something that should be prosecuted as criminal.

The Sexual Revolution of the 20th Century: Episode II

The first episode of the 20th century sexual revolution for people of alternative sexual orientations occurred in the period before World War II. This episode involved 1)

the beginnings of gay and lesbian identities and communities, and 2) academic and medical professionals' (often called "sexologists") consideration of homosexuality as a topic worthy of research. The second episode in the (homo)sexual revolution occurred in the period extending from the end of World War II to 1969. It involved an increasing sense of confidence among gay men and lesbians in their sexual identities, and the beginnings of movements aimed at securing political and legal rights for people of alternative sexual orientation.

Following World War II, the most frightening cultural phenomenon for many gay men and lesbians was the political campaign led by Senator Joe McCarthy in the United States. McCarthy is best known for his hysterical persecution of Communists and suspected Communists, but along with the witch-hunt for political traitors went a parallel hunt for sexual traitors. Barry Adam describes the postwar perspective that

associated maleness with toughness and effectiveness, in opposition to supposedly female weakness and failure [so that] male homosexuality symbolized the betrayal of manhood—the feminine enemy within men. (Adam 1987, 58)

Homosexuals were widely labeled as "destroyers of society" and traitors, and were hounded from public life by numerous commissions, committees, policies, and individuals at all government levels. In March of 1950 the chairman of the Republican National Committee announced his conviction that "Perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists are the sexual perverts who have infiltrated our Government in recent years" (Adam 1987, 58). Just as it was not necessary to be a proven Communist to have one's life ruined by the witch-hunts, it was not necessary to be a demonstrated homosexual,

either. Communist sympathies and homosexual “tendencies” were enough. What this meant in practice was that people were denounced by disgruntled employees, employers, students, teachers, neighbors, and business competitors—in short, anyone who might hold a grudge.

Thousands of gay men and lesbians lost their jobs, not only in government, but in private industry as well. The government informed employers of their employees’ suspected homosexuality; bars that catered to homosexual men and women were chronically raided; and police officers systematically entrapped gay men by posing as gay men themselves, and offering themselves for a sexual encounter. Equally frightening was the violence directed against homosexuals (usually men) by heterosexuals, a phenomenon that tragically has persisted into the 21st century. When a gay man was murdered in Miami in 1954, local newspapers urged that “homosexuals be punished for tempting ‘normals’ to commit such deeds” (Taylor 1982, 9, quoted in Adam 1987, 59).

Though antihomosexual hysteria died down after the decline of the McCarthy era, the 1960s continued to be a threatening era for Americans of alternate sexual orientations. Fearful of firing by employers and of rejection by friends and even family, many lesbians and gay men of the period lived partly or wholly “in the closet.” If a gay man or lesbian lived with a partner, the relationship was often masked as one of platonic roommates. Many such relationships were never mentioned at all at work, or even to family members. Thus a high school dean of girls and her partner, a (female) physical education teacher, who had shared their lives for more than 30 years, were forced to conceal their relationship until they both retired. And a businessman who had been aware that he was gay since he was in high school hid his sexual orientation from his conservative (and

straight) former college roommate for twenty years, fearing that the knowledge would destroy their friendship.

In some occupational communities, especially such applied arts as interior decoration, costume and dress design, and hairdressing and makeup, there was little need to conceal an alternative sexual orientation. Even heterosexuals often accepted the reality that a disproportionate number of men involved in such occupations were likely to be gay. And gay men in these occupations were frequently said to be “out of the closet,” or “out.” That is, they were open about their sexual orientation. But the accountant in a big firm, the hospital nurse, or the middle school teacher stayed firmly in the closet, at least at work. At home, especially if they lived in a city or in a town different from the one in which they worked, many professionally closeted people were able to live freer lives, more in tune with their natural inclinations. One outlet that developed for people of alternative sexual orientation was (and is) bars and clubs catering to a specifically gay and/or lesbian clientele. Like bars that cater to truckers, students, bikers, or yuppies, gay/lesbian bars offer a comfortable location in which people can meet old friends, make new ones, and share a comfortable environment with others with whom one shares a range of habits, assumptions, and interests.

One positive aspect of the second phase of the sexual revolution for gay men and lesbians involved the founding of two organizations aimed at increasing the acceptance of gay and lesbian people by the general public. In 1950, several gay men founded a small society in Los Angeles with the aim of educating members of the gay community about their civil rights and enhancing their identity as legitimate in itself. The Mattachine Society (named after masked entertainers in the courts of medieval Europe) gained

prominence after its involvement in a court case in which charges were dropped against the defendant, one of the founders of the Mattachine Society, who had been entrapped by a police officer in a case of sexual solicitation (Mondimore 1996, 235–236).

Shortly thereafter, the lesbian group, the Daughters of Bilitis, was founded in San Francisco. The name was derived from *The Songs of Bilitis*, a book of poems published in 1894 in France by Pierre Louys. Louys claimed he had translated the poems from originals written by a woman named Bilitis, who had been a protégée of Sappho, but Bilitis was a figment of Louys's imagination. Established in 1955, the Daughters of Bilitis was initially intended primarily as a social alternative to lesbian bars, which were in perpetual danger of being raided. With the publication of its newsletter, *The Ladder*, the group rapidly became more than merely social, following in the path of the more politically conceived Mattachine Society (Martin and Lyon 1972, 121).

The Sexual Revolution of the 20th Century: Episode III

Virtually anyone examining the lives of Americans of alternative sexual orientation would select Friday night, June 27th, 1969 as the beginning of the most recent episode of the alternative sexual revolution. On that night the New York City police raided a gay bar in Greenwich Village (a neighborhood in New York with a high gay and lesbian population) called the Stonewall Inn. The Stonewall Inn was a fairly seedy place, and it had been raided before. As noted earlier, police frequently raided gay and lesbian bars as part of the dominant culture's pattern of harassment. Instead of responding passively to the routine raid, as the police had expected, many of the bar's patrons fought back, initially in support of a lesbian who was struggling with her police captors. These

instigators were soon joined both in spirit and in person by gay men and women of all backgrounds and personal styles. By the end of the weekend, the Stonewall Inn had been burnt out and the area around it destroyed. But the news stories and photographs of gay men and lesbians violently confronting police harassment had transformed the more conservative efforts of associations like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis into a powerful gay and lesbian rights movement. Alternative sexual consciousness in the United States would never be the same.

Life after Stonewall has been marked by an increasing unwillingness on the part of self-identified gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people to allow themselves, their identities, and their possibilities to be defined by the straight majority. One of the earliest victories of the newly militant gay rights movement was the vote by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 to remove homosexuality from the category of “mental disorders” from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (the current edition of which is usually referred to as “DSM IV-TR” [4th edition, text revised]). This caused a serious rift within the Association’s membership, some of whom were so committed to the notion of homosexuality as pathology (despite Freud’s position in his letter, quoted in the previous section) that they demanded a plebiscite on the question. The appearance of DSM IV represented a significant symbolic victory with concrete implications, and was hailed by alternatively gendered people throughout the country. But this same population contended that other vital cultural issues still remained to be resolved, including such civil rights as marriage, employment, military service, and the extension of medical and insurance benefits to homosexual partners.

We will take up the issues of same-sex marriage and the service of gay men and lesbians in the military in the next section. But to close our discussion of Episode III of the sexual revolution, we turn first to the epic gay tragedy of the twentieth century: HIV/AIDS. By the beginning of the 1980s the progress of gay rights seemed steady, if not speedy, despite some continuing opposition. There was substantially less police harassment of gay men and lesbians and of such gay institutions as bars, clubs, and bathhouses. Gay political figures were elected to public office at the local, state, and federal levels. Liberal corporations and localities established policies and passed laws to protect gay employees and citizens. However, when it became obvious in the early 1980s that there was a sexually transmitted fatal illness that disproportionately afflicted gay men, some conservative heterosexuals interpreted it as a scourge sent by God to punish homosexuals for their homosexuality. Others were inclined to believe that gay men had brought this plague upon themselves simply by having too much sex with too many partners, though it became evident that AIDS is transmitted in ways other than sexually, and that even in the U.S. large numbers of heterosexuals suffer from it in. In other parts of the world, AIDS primarily afflicts heterosexuals.

As a result of the AIDS crisis, violence against gay men began to increase in some areas, as did grassroots campaigns in some states and cities to enact legislation that would allow discrimination against homosexual persons in employment and housing. Some of this proposed legislation was soundly defeated, but other campaigns were successful.

AIDS did, however, serve as a powerful organizing force for gay men in the 1980s and 1990s. Anger at the devastation of AIDS drove many gay men into activism in support of those living with HIV or with full-blown AIDS. Out of the tragedy of AIDS

came a purpose, a unity, and a commitment to a personal and group identity that might not have been forged by a less searing flame. One of the groups that arose as the result of the AIDS crisis is ACT-UP, a coalition of activists who use confrontational tactics to address a variety of political and social issues related to AIDS. Another group, which addressed a broader range of gay and lesbian issue, also in the confrontational style of ACT-UP, is Queer Nation. Their slogan sums up their approach: “We’re here; we’re queer; get used to it” (Stein 1999:10). Clearly, both ACT UP and Queer Nation demonstrate an approach to gay and lesbian activism quite different from the go-slow, integrationist approach favored by the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, several decades earlier. Even the appropriation of the term “queer,” in place of “gay” and “lesbian” demonstrates a more self confident, less compromising attitude. Though it has not replaced “gay” and “lesbian,” “queer” is used with specific intent by some scholars and activists. It is frequently used by those involved in the academic theoretical field of “queer theory,” most of whom are found in departments of English, gender studies, and American Studies. By appropriating a term of contempt to their own use, gay and lesbian activists have disarmed their opponents and strengthened their own cause.

Current Cultural Issues in the Alternatively Gendered World

We have examined a number of issues affecting persons of alternative sexual orientation and their communities as these issues have developed through time in the United States. We turn now to three issues that are being played out in the present: gay men and lesbians in the military, same-sex marriage, and the presence of gay themes and characters in American popular culture.

Gay men and lesbians in the military

In classical and Hellenistic Greece, it was widely assumed that sex between soldiers served only to strengthen their success, since they were even more likely to want to protect each other. Alexander the Great was not only a first-rate strategist and a man of great physical courage who personally led his troops into battle. He was also a man who was married to several women, and had a number of male lovers, with no loss in his courage or military prowess. But in the United States, despite the fact that closeted gay men and lesbians have long served in the military, the official position has always been that homosexuality is at odds with military service. Military personnel whose homosexuality has been discovered have been discharged immediately. There have been a number of reasons advanced for this policy. The most common is that homosexuality interferes with the “good order” of military operations. This is pretty vague, but **it** presumably means that emotional involvement resulting from sexual activity among soldiers will complicate military discipline. Another reason offered is that there will be mistrust and enmity between heterosexual and homosexual soldiers, weakening the cohesiveness of military units. And a third reason, less often suggested, but lurking just below the surface, is the belief that homosexual soldiers lack such manly characteristics as courage and strength, and thus cannot be relied upon for support of their fellows.

Federal officials had to contend with two opposing positions. Gay men and lesbians argued with increasing vigor that they should not be barred from military service, thus preventing them from serving their country and from the considerable economic benefits that accompany this service. And military personnel generally maintained that if prohibitions on gay men and lesbians in the military made sense in the

past, there was no reason to think it should be altered now.

In 1993 a ruling was issued that is surprising in its indecisiveness. This is the famous “don’t ask; don’t tell” decision, which states that military personnel must not be officially asked about their sexual orientation, and that they in return must not divulge this orientation (if it is not heterosexual). Although the decision was considered a partial victory by lesbians and gay men, since it offers them a legal way to enlist in the military, few gay activists are content with the ruling. Though they are no longer forced to lie about their sexual orientation if they want military careers, they still do not have the same rights of ease and self-expression enjoyed by heterosexuals.

It seems likely that “don’t ask; don’t tell” is only a temporary solution to problem that is not likely to dissolve on its own. This view is reinforced by results of a Today/Gallup poll conducted at the end of 1993, the year in which “don’t ask; don’t tell” was enacted. Of all persons surveyed, 79 per cent favored the right of gays and lesbians to serve openly, as did 91 per cent of respondents from 18 to 29, the age group from which most military personnel are drawn (Mohr 2005: 113). It seems likely that these figures would only be higher now, almost fifteen years later.

One last, related, point is worth making. Though much of the resistance to gay men serving in the military is probably drawn from the stereotype of gay men as weak, womanish, and cowardly, some of it is likely also to spring from the notion that gay men cannot resist straight men, and are likely to try to force sex on them. This view is reinforced by the revelations in the opening years of the 21st century that a fairly large number of Catholic priests had molested boys in their charge. There are also numerous reports of widespread homosexual rapes in American prisons, though these are generally

conceded to be the product of situational rather than preferential homosexual perpetrators.

In the face of this evidence, it is worth pointing out that, despite the high profile accumulation of molestations of boys by Catholic priests, the overwhelming bulk of molestations are committed by heterosexual men. Posner cites Canadian and U.S. surveys that indicate that roughly 20 per cent of women reported that they had been sexually abused by the time they were eighteen, but only 4 per cent of men reported having been sexually abused by eighteen (Posner 1992:399). The figures demonstrate clearly that the focus on molestation by homosexual men is greatly exaggerated. As for the issue of homosexual prison rape, the subject of numerous films and works of fiction, this, too, seems to be a disproportionate focus of concern. A recent study conducted by anthropologist Mark S. Fleisher for the National Institute of Justice and based on more than 564 inmate interviews contends that though inmate rapes do occasionally occur in prison, they are uncommon. Instead, most inmate sex is to some extent consensual, though it may be conditioned by unequal power relationships that are inherently coercive (Fleisher 2006). Fleisher's findings are controversial, but both they and the controversy they have engendered highlight the longstanding fear that American men have of homosexual rape as well as the notion that gay men are disproportionately likely to be sexual predators.

Same-sex marriage

The most prominent national issue presently involving people of alternate gender orientation in the United States is the question of same-sex marriage, a topic introduced in Chapter 3. Should any two adults be allowed to marry, or should this right be confined

only to two adults of different sexes? Most Americans are aware that there are cultures in which marriages involve parental arrangement rather than spousal choice, the marriage of children, and polygamy (marriage to multiple spouses). But, though these practices have existed in Western cultures in the past, few Americans consider them serious contenders for national attention today. Ironically, the alternative marriage practice that preoccupies Americans in the early years of the twenty-first century is same-sex marriage, which most Americans believe has no precedent anywhere in the world. In fact, there are two kinds of same-sex marriage that *have* been practiced in various cultures for at least hundreds of years. One of them is female same-sex marriage, practiced in some 30 tribal societies in sub Saharan Africa, including such well-known groups as the Yoruba, Nuer, Zulu, and Kikuyu (Carrier and Murray 1998). These African same-sex marriages exist so that a childless woman can become the parent of a child, who will become a member of her father's lineage. Such a woman will take a female wife, who is impregnated by a man, and when the child is born, the female husband becomes the child's social father. These woman-woman marital unions are not sexual. This practice is not common, but it is a culturally acceptable way of filling human desires. Another well-known system of same-sex marriage, already mentioned earlier in this chapter and discussed further in Chapter 5, is the practice of *berdache*. Some berdaches (biological men who had chosen to live as women) married men, often high status men with also had other wives, since the berdache could not produce children. The entire community was aware of the berdache's biological origin, but there was no opprobrium attached to the berdache or to his male husband.

When they arrived in the New World, Euro Americans found the practice of

berdache sinful, repulsive, and unacceptable. They simply held that decent, civilized people would never follow such practices, and never questioned their own variation on Judeo-Christian tradition. Part of this tradition, variously observed at different times and in different parts of the United States, was a notion that sexual activity should be “productive,” or potentially generative. Thus, many states had laws that prohibited “sodomy,” usually defined as all non-vaginal intercourse, but often specifically interpreted as anal intercourse. Anti-sodomy laws usually applied to both homosexual and heterosexual participants, but recently they have been applied primarily to gay men. In 1986 the Supreme Court upheld the Georgia sodomy conviction of two gay men in the case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*. Writing for the majority of a divided court, Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote

Condemnation of those practices is firmly rooted in Judaeo-Christian moral and ethical standards.... To hold that the act of homosexual sodomy is somehow protected as a fundamental right would be to cast aside millennia of moral teachings (quoted in D’Emilio 2005: 6).

Seventeen years later, in 2003, the Supreme Court reversed itself in the case of *Lawrence v. Texas*, which again involved consensual sodomy between two gay men, and in which the Supreme Court’s judgment overturned the Texas anti-sodomy laws. Writing for the majority of an again divided court, Justice Anthony Kennedy took a historical perspective in pointing out that the decriminalization of private sexual acts between consenting adults had been recommended in 1955 by the American Law Institute, in 1957 by the British Wolfenden Report, and in 1981 by the European Council of Civil Rights (D’Emilio 2005: 12).

The result of the 2003 *Lawrence* decision was to nullify all existing sodomy laws throughout the United States. But ironically, by this time two-thirds of all **states** had already decriminalized same-gender sex acts. Empirical studies were conducted in these states to determine whether the abolition of the anti-sodomy laws had resulted in a rise in crime. The studies demonstrated conclusively that there had crime had not increased (Mohr 2005: 32).

Though the *Lawrence* decision was an undeniable victory for persons with alternative sexual orientations, particularly gay men, it contained the seeds of another problem. In his decision, Justice Kennedy took pains to point out that the Court's reversal of its 1983 *Bowers* decision (which he stated explicitly had been in error), applied only to private sexual acts. But Kennedy stated firmly that "The present case does not involve whether the government must give formal recognition to any relationship that homosexual persons seek to enter" (quoted in D'Emilio 2005: 12). That is, the *Lawrence* decision should not be construed as a wedge providing support for same-sex marriage legislation.

As of the present writing of this text, only one state permits legal marriage: Massachusetts. The issue is under legal exploration in New York, and both San Francisco and Multnomah County, Oregon (dominated by the city of Portland), temporarily permitted same-sex marriage, before having their policies countermanded by state authorities. There are currently more than ten states, as well as additional localities and some corporations and institutions that accommodate the concept of domestic partnership. There is one state, Vermont, that has instituted the legal category of civil union. And there are more than 100 counties and cities that protect against discrimination

in housing, employment, and public accommodation based on sexual orientation (Mohn 2005:32-3). Both domestic partnerships and civil unions provide same-sex couples with many of the legal protections and benefits of marriage. However, like same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, these arrangements do not permit the protections and benefits to be transferred out of state, nor are they necessarily recognized by insurance companies, medical institutions, and the like. By way of a broader comparison, most Canadian provinces permit same-sex marriage, as do increasing numbers of European countries.

Whether or not they personally wish to marry, most gay men and lesbians, as well as many other Americans who support them, argue in favor of extending the right to marry to any two unmarried adults in the United States. Their arguments are of three kinds. First, they point out, as already noted here, that marriage offers certain protections and economic benefits that other kinds of civilly recognized relationships do not. Second, they contend that the traditional structure of marriage provides a sense of social and psychological security now available only to heterosexuals. And third, they say they wish to have their committed relationships and way of life acknowledged as legitimate through the symbolic process and legal institution of marriage.

Those opposed to same-sex marriage argue along two converging lines. First, they cite religious and cultural precedent in contending that since the settlement of what became the United States by Europeans, marriage has been possible only between one man and one woman (at a time), and that this limitation stretches far back into European antiquity. To this it may be pointed out that the institution of slavery and the legal incompetence and disenfranchisement of women also have great antiquity, but that despite their antiquity, these practices were abolished in the United States. Second,

opponents of same-sex marriage claim that allowing the practice would erode marriage as a whole. This curious argument was explored by Democratic Congressman Barney Frank, an openly gay member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts, during the congressional discussion of the Defense of Marriage Act in July, 1996. Speaking to supporters of the Defense of Marriage Act, Frank asked them how the marriage of a gay couple threatened their marriages. The response was always the same: It wouldn't threaten *my* marriage; it threatens the *institution* of marriage (Rauch 2004: 104). Considering that the American divorce rate hovers around 50 per cent, it is difficult to see that heterosexuals need any help in threatening the institution of marriage.

One might also object to the argument that same sex marriage threatens the institution of marriage on more ancient, philosophical grounds. The Congressmen questioned by Frank were apparently unwittingly arguing in favor of the Greek philosopher Plato's theory of Forms, according to which abstract qualities have independent, transcendent existence. In recent times, however, most philosophers have sided with Aristotle (a former student of Plato's). Aristotle countered Plato's notion of Forms with the argument that qualities have no independent existence, but that they inhere in the things that manifest them. Thus, Aristotle and his followers would argue that if same-sex marriage did not injure any actual, individual marriages, it could not be held to injure the Form, or abstract concept, of marriage. Of course, Aristotle would undoubtedly have disapproved of same-sex marriage on other grounds! Ancient Greek culture strongly encouraged reproduction. But the question still remains as to how, in concrete terms, same-sex marriage injures heterosexual marriage in any way.

Though most of the issues relating to same-sex marriage have to do with gay men

and lesbians, Coombs (2001) discusses complicated issues in several states resulting from marriages involving transsexuals. In one case a female-to-male transsexual still in transition was sued for annulment by his wife, who had not realized that her husband was an incomplete transsexual incapable of sexual penetration. The court agreed that the transsexual was not a man and that no marriage existed. In another case a male-to-female transsexual widow was prevented from suing her deceased husband's surgeon for malpractice in having caused or irresponsibly not prevented his death. Again, the grounds for preventing the suit were that because the (transsexual) widow had been born a man, no marriage had existed, and thus the widow was not really a widow and therefore had no right to sue. Clearly the issue of same-sex marriage touches more lives, and in more ways, than is immediately apparent.

Depictions of alternative gender orientation in popular culture

It is undeniable that more and more representations of persons of alternative gender orientation have begun to appear in American popular culture, especially movies and television, in the last decades. Although many—even most--entertainers who are gay or lesbian continue to keep their sexual orientation secret, this is no longer true of all of them. Elton John has publicly acknowledged his bisexuality; Ellen De Generes, and Rosie O'Donnell have publicly established their identities as lesbian. Yet these performers continue to maintain active public careers. Clearly, the world has changed.

Mass-market television now frequently features gay men and lesbians, not merely on shock-value tabloid talk shows, but in such mainstream programs as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which gay men give clothing advice to fashion-challenged straight men, or the very popular *Will and Grace*, a sitcom featuring a gay man, Will, and his best

friend, Grace, a straight woman. Though the show is a comedy, it deals straightforwardly with issues of sexual orientation, including romantic and sexual relationships, same-sex marriage, and cultural stereotyping. Even *Friends*, the extremely popular (though now defunct) sitcom that focused on a group of straight, aimless twenty-somethings, featured a lesbian marriage as early as 1996 (Eaklor 2001: 289). Equally significant may be television programming that features people who are clearly living in gay and lesbian relationships that are neither hidden nor disguised, but that are also not the focus of the program. Thus the Home and Garden Television channel frequently features programs exploring interior decoration and renovation, as well as house hunting and purchasing, in which the homeowners or prospective homeowners are obviously gay men or lesbian, sometimes with children. Such program participants are identified in passing as each other's partners, and their master bedrooms and bathrooms are as likely to be discussed as any other rooms in their houses, but their sexual orientations are not mentioned. What is important in these episodes is not any personal or sexual relationship; it is whether there are hardwood floors in the living room or French doors in the den. Surely this must count as substantial progress toward tolerance of variation in sexual orientation.

Change is also evident in the treatment of gay and lesbian themes in feature films. Early films such as *The Boys in the Band* (1970) and *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* (1971) made an effort to deal thoughtfully and honestly with issues related to gay life. But these films tended to present gay life as ineluctably marked by personal unhappiness, implying that homosexuality will inevitably doom one to tragedy.

Films made two or three decades later show a remarkable change. Tragedy can still befall gay characters, of course, as occurs in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Part of the

film's tragedy is the result of the era in which the story is set (the 1950s). And part is arguably caused by the characters' failure to understand the consequences of decisions they make. The tragedy is not a foregone conclusion of homosexual love; it is the kind of tragedy that can occur to anyone. Similarly, homosexual characters face difficulties in the 1993 film *The Wedding Banquet* (directed by Ang Lee, who also directed *Brokeback Mountain*) and the 1996 comedy *The Birdcage*. But these films do not portray the characters' sexual orientations as the inevitable cause of enduring unhappiness. In short, though gay and lesbian people in recent films have difficulties related to their being gay or lesbian, citing gender orientation as the fundamental cause of their unhappiness is no more sensible than citing heterosexuality as the cause of the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Gender Orientation: Choice or Chance?

The question heterosexuals most frequently ask about people of alternative gender orientation is "Why are they that way?" That question has not yet been conclusively answered. Exploration of the cause of same-gender sexual attraction is a controversial undertaking in the gay and lesbian community itself. Though many homosexual individuals encourage research into the question, others say that the question itself is fundamentally heterosexist in formulation. No one, they say, questions the origin of heterosexual interest. Why, then, the focus on homosexual interest?

In his 1999 book, *The Mismeasure of Desire*, Stein repeatedly stresses the complexity of determining the cause of homosexual desire. Noting that scientific analyses and arguments follow fashions, as do other intellectual trends, he points out that the postwar fashion for explanations of homosexuality in terms of early life experiences has

largely disappeared. Where once psychologists looked to childhood circumstances and “close-binding” mothers to account for why a child became a homosexual or gender dysphoric adult who feels s/he is inhabiting a body of the wrong sex, now researchers are more likely to turn to biology or genetics. Despite his reservations about what he sees as an incautious stampede to a premature paradigm shift, Stein gives science its due:

“Science has great explanatory power.... It seems certain that, in the long term, science will make important contributions to our understanding of sex, sexual orientation, and sexual desire” (Stein 1999:8).

A growing number of studies point to a biological basis for homosexuality and for gender dysphoria. Some studies point to differences in the neuroanatomy of the brains of gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbians (LeVay 1993). Others point to the fact that identical twins manifest a much higher than random rate of both having a homosexual orientation if one does (roughly 50 percent, see Bailey and Pillard 1991; Bailey et al. 1993). Another series of studies demonstrated that, at least in some families, male (but not female) homosexuality could be associated with a specific location on a specific chromosome (Hamer et al. 1993). Despite their inconclusive nature at this date, studies like these suggest that however complex the etiology of same-gender sexual attraction turns out to be, a biological component is likely to be involved for many individuals.

While biologists, geneticists, psychiatrists, and psychologists continue their research, gay men and persons with gender dysphoria themselves tell remarkably consistent stories about awakening to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Virtually all feel that the notion of sexual “choice” is a misnomer. Though they may have felt compelled to deny it at first to themselves and/or others, same-gender sexual interest (or

in the case of persons with sexual dysphoria, the sensation of inhabiting a wrongly-gendered body) was as spontaneous and as natural for them as cross-gender interest and a sense of ease with one's physical gender are for heterosexuals.

The situation is somewhat different for some lesbians. There are many lesbians who fit the pattern described above, of having been sexually drawn to females from the first time they were aware of any sexual interest. Other lesbians, however, whom we may distinguish as "elective" lesbians, have come to their sexual orientation as a result of more or less conscious choice. These choices may be inspired by unpleasant personal experiences with men and or by a feeling of identification and solidarity with women as a result of strong feminist convictions. Indeed, Card (1995) argues that though men and straight women may, as they claim, simply have *discovered* their sexual orientation, lesbians have always enacted at least some choice. Needless to say, this extreme position is opposed by many lesbians.

Articulation with the Straight World

Coming out

For most gay men and lesbians the process of "coming out" to friends and family is an important milestone in their self-identity and self-acceptance. It is, of course, an event whose contemplation is fraught with fear and tension. Given the negative view much of American society has of homosexuals, many people fear that their families or their friends will reject them outright, and this does happen. Several of the gay men Kath Weston interviewed were beaten by male relatives after they came out, on the grounds that they were an "embarrassment to the family" (Weston 1991, 51). The father of

another told his son, “You’re homosexual. You’re diseased, and I don’t want you back in the family” (Weston 1991, 64). One lesbian said of her mother, “To her it was just this social embarrassment, and she doesn’t want to deal with it ... if I’m willing to be quiet and pretend I’m not who I am, then she’s willing to accept me.... I haven’t spoken to her in about three years” (Weston 1991, 63).

On the other hand, many parents reacted with love and acceptance when their gay or lesbian children came out to them. Some had known about it for many years, like the mother who told her son, “Look. You lived with Jorge for fourteen years. We knew you were gay” (Weston 1991, 66). Others responded much like the Irish-American mother of a gay son and a daughter who had married a black man—not acceptable in their working-class white community: “When Sharon married William, I realized that I can’t control you kids. That each one of you is gonna find your love wherever you can, and I can’t control that. And I accept that. And I still love you” (Weston 1991, 69).

For all the acceptance of their families and their straight friends, many gay men, lesbians, and transgendered persons feel that their partners are not accepted as fully as a heterosexual spouse would be. Further, gay men and lesbians often feel that they are expected by the heterosexual majority, even by their straight friends, not to talk about their domestic, romantic, and sexual lives, nor to publicly show any physical affection toward their partners. This amounts to an informal “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. It is as though these heterosexuals, having accepted the fact of a friend’s or relative’s homosexuality, are psychologically too exhausted to contemplate a larger world in which gender-based roles and relationships fail to conform to traditional, heterosexual stereotypes. Or, as the late Sonny Bono (father of a self-identified lesbian daughter) is

reported to have said about his opposition to legalized gay marriage, “I’m not a bigot, I just can’t handle it” (*Newsweek*, 19 January 1998:47).

Partners and partnerships

Heterosexuals tend to believe that in homosexual relationships there is a strong, “masculine” partner and a weak, “feminine” partner, and that these individuals pursue gender-stereotypical tasks within the relationship. In fact, this is not the case. Gender-stereotypical activity is a characteristic of heterosexual relationships, and in fact it usually intensifies in two stages: first after marriage and second after the birth of the first child (Green et al. 1996, 217). But it is not a characteristic of most homosexual relationships, whatever the personal style (clothing, hairstyle, demeanor) of the partners. Though some lesbians adopt a “butch” (masculine) or “femme” (feminine) appearance or persona, in fact, gay and lesbian couples exhibit substantially more flexibility and egalitarianism than straight couples. This is particularly true for lesbian couples. The ability to construct such balanced relationships has for many lesbians “meant a way to escape this society’s constraining gender expectations” (Laird 1996, 105).

There are differences between gay male and lesbian relationships beyond the greater egalitarianism of lesbian couples, and most of them have to do with sex. In the early days of a relationship, men are likely to have sex more frequently than women. As the relationship matures, men may have sex with each other less and less frequently, though women’s rate of sexual contact diminishes much less dramatically. Some gay men (like some straight men) turn to other sexual partners while maintaining a committed relationship, a pattern that is uncommon with lesbians. Finally, the relations of power in many gay relationships may turn upon money and differential emotional investment.

Whoever has access to greater wealth and less psychological need to maintain the relationship is more likely to control the terms of the relationship. This is a pattern not usually seen in lesbian partnerships, but it is quite common in heterosexual unions. The greatest difference is that in heterosexual unions the power variable is likely to be gender linked (Green et al. 1996).

Because same-sex marriages are so recent, there is not yet much information on their structure, workings, or successes. In the first year of same-sex marriages in Massachusetts, two trends are clear. First, after an initial burst of more than 6,000 same-sex marriages, the rate has declined. Presumably, the backlog of same-sex partners who have waited for some time to marry has now subsided, and fewer same-sex couples will marry each year. Second, more female couples marry than male couples (Greenberg and Neuwahl 2005). The variation in motivation for these marriages and in the structure that organizes them is yet to be explored.

Summary and Discussion

As Posner (1992:101) points out, homosexual behavior exists among numerous non-human species, including other primates. In addition, homosexual activity has been reported among most, if not all groups of humans. It is thus part of the range of “natural,” or naturally occurring, behavior, though statistically in the minority. Most adult humans prefer sex with members of the other gender, but some prefer sex with their own gender, and a few, mostly young or female, enjoy sex with both genders. What is significant, as cultural anthropologists are inclined to point out, is not the fact of these sexual inclinations (which is undeniable), but their significance within a specific culture

(which is extremely variable).

The first European settlers in what became the United States brought with them a general Christian European distaste for same-gender sexual activity, along with a religious conviction that it was immoral. In this approach they ignored their Greco-Roman cultural roots, which had both countenanced and celebrated sexual activity between men. Though Euro Americans strongly condemned Native American alternative sexual identities and practices, their approach to the same phenomena in their own culture was originally less harsh than was true in many European countries.

As capitalist wage-labor increased, and the economic and social cohesiveness of the family unit was increasingly replaced by individualism, persons with an inclination toward same-gender sexual activity increasingly incorporated **homosexuality** as a part of their personal and sometimes social identity. Communities of gay men began to develop toward the end of the 19th century, as also, to a lesser extent did communities and the self-identification of lesbians. Affectionate, even passionate, friendships had long been accepted among women, who were widely believed to have no sexual interests; thus these relationships could have no sexual dimension. As the 19th and 20th centuries wore on, however, women's higher education became more available to a small group of well-to-do women. This was believed to foster these passionate female friendships, which were increasingly seen as perverse.

After World War II the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis were founded to channel the efforts of gay men and lesbians respectively to seek legal and political rights, to resist political persecution related to McCarthy-inspired Communist witch hunts, and to counter frequent police harassment. In the 1980s, the assimilationist

approach of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis was replaced with a more assertive one as a result of a combination of events. The AIDS epidemic radicalized many gay men, who felt they had no further incentive to go slow and accommodate to straight behavioral norms. The women's movement of the 1970s had also radicalized many lesbians and other feminists to work to pursue specifically lesbian interests and agendas. And finally, the legacy of the African-American civil rights movement underlay all struggles for self-determination and rights for all people of alternative sexual orientation.

At present Americans of alternative sexual orientation can count some victories and some battles yet to be won. Increasingly, American popular culture is representing lesbians, gay men, and transgendered people as part of the normal range of human variation, with the same span of capabilities, limitations, joys, and sorrows as any other group. Private sexual acts between consenting adults have been decriminalized throughout the United States, and lesbians and gay men can now serve in the military, though they must not discuss their sexual orientation (a fact that continues to distress them). Twelve states, as well as some counties, cities, commercial entities, and other institutions have instituted the category of "domestic partner," which affords some economic protections, and privileges; more than one hundred locales have clauses protecting against discrimination against persons of alternative sexual orientation in terms of housing and employment. Vermont permits civil union for persons of the same sex, and Massachusetts permits same-sex marriage. But Americans of alternative sexual orientation point out that despite these advances, their partnerships are generally still seen as deviant copies of heterosexual relationships, and they continue to struggle for the same

access to marriage that any two persons of different sexes have. One of their most powerful arguments is based on the assertion that these marriages simply do not cause any injury to anyone.

There continues to be serious debate over the cause of homosexuality and gender dysphoria, especially as to whether it is biologically, possibly genetically, determined, or whether it is caused by individual choice or early conditioning. Most gay men, transsexuals, and many lesbians believe their sexual orientation is biological and inborn, while some lesbians describe their sexual orientation as a choice or attitude. Whatever the ultimate conclusion, persons of alternative sexual orientation continue to grapple with such issues as coming out, or publicly identifying themselves, articulating with the dominant, heterosexual world, and maintaining intimate relationships. This last effort is difficult for heterosexuals, too, but it is made even more difficult for persons of alternative sexual orientation because they lack access to many of the cultural institutions that help to maintain these relationships for heterosexual persons.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many heterosexual people who think of themselves as tolerant of variation in sexual orientation are inclined to say with some exasperation, “I don’t care what gay people do in private; it’s completely their own business. But why do they have to be so *obvious* in public.” In response, most persons of alternative sexual orientation are inclined to ask why they should be obliged to keep their gendered self-expression under wraps when straight people feel no such obligation. What is your position on this issue? Why do you take the position you do?

2. Throughout history there has been greater tolerance of lesbians than of gay men, and this continues to be the case? Why do you think this is? Have the reasons changed? What do you think will happen in the future? Why? In general, women as a group are more tolerant of variation in sexual orientation than men are. Most of us are more or less aware of this, but the reasons are not obvious. Why do you think accounts for the difference in levels of tolerance?

3. For many gay and lesbian individuals, their sexual orientation is a major part of their identity. Some gay and lesbian activists argue that sexual orientation *should* or *must* be central to their personal identity. Why do you think this argument is made? Do you think heterosexual people think of their sexual orientation as central to their identities? What makes you think (or not think) so? Can you envision a time in which having an alternative sexual orientation would be no more definitive of an individual’s

identity than being left handed or being a Republican? Do you think such a world would be preferable to the one we have now?

5. What would American culture be like if persons of alternative sexual orientation had exactly the same rights as heterosexual persons? Be specific, and discuss ways in which life would change for each group.

NOTES

1. In this chapter we will use a variety of terms to identify persons of alternative sexual orientation. Though we do sometimes use terms like “lesbians” or “heterosexuals,” we try also to refer to “gay men” and “heterosexual persons. Though this may be a bit cumbersome at times, we feel it helps us and our readers to resist the temptation to reduce individuals to their sexual orientations.

2. This example is striking, not only because it demonstrates the devastating power of the mental illness model of homosexuality, but because it is almost certainly a case that occurred when one of the authors (McKee) was a student at the “elite college in the Northeast,” and the students involved were her classmates. Information reached the administration by way of a college telephone operator who had listened in on one of the male students as he reported his evening’s viewing to a woman friend. The “offending” students were immediately suspended on medical grounds, lest they taint other students or the reputation of the college. Ironically, the same college is now prominent in lesbian studies

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