Social Construction of Western Sexual Identities

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Helping You Find Your Voice
In Times of Transition

Social Construction of Homosexual Identity

Although homosexual behavior has been known to exist in many cultures throughout history, there are those who assert that the concept of a "homosexual identity" is relatively recent. According to many scholars (Bulbeck, 1997; Katz, 1996; Lorber, 1996; Greenberg, 1988), the "homosexual person" is a relatively recent social construct. It has only been since the mid-nineteenth century that distinctions have been made between same-sex acts and homosexual persons. "The idea that sexuality is socially constructed was promoted by interpretive sociologists and feminist theorists at least two decades before queer theory emerged on the intellectual scene" (Stein and Plummer 1994, p. 183). Greenberg (1998:2) refers to homosexuality as an identity that has been socially constructed only in the previous century, and other writers assert that even heterosexuality, as an identity, has been socially invented. Katz, for example, dates the first account of homosexual identity to circa 1869 (1988:12-13). Even heterosexuality was not a term that described 'normal' behavior; it was considered one of the "abnormal manifestations of the sexual appetite," (Kiernan 1892:185-210). The definition of a

'normal' sexual appetite at that time was sex for the purpose of procreation. Early Americans who settled from Europe, who placed a high value on procreation, largely influenced this definition.

Norms for sexual behavior are influenced by economy and politics, and they change over time. Some sexual behaviors that were once considered unacceptable are now accepted, and vice versa. When looking back through history for examples of homosexuality, two cultures are worth mention here. The growth of competitive capitalism has helped shape the perceptions of sexuality that exist today, particularly regarding the categories of heterosexual and homosexual (Harris, 1989). Early colonialists were in desperate need to increase their numbers and - in order to compete in a capitalist society - their labor pool. As a result, they tended to marry earlier and have a higher birth rate than those in England and other parts of Europe at that time (Katz, 1996:37). Support for this came from the Bible's command to "be fruitful and multiply." Any sexual acts that were believed to interfere with procreation within marriage (adultery, sodomy, etc.) were interpreted as sinful. Adultery, for example, was punishable by hanging. Homosexual behavior was certainly considered to be sinful, yet no more so than adultery. In fact, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" even appeared (Feray and Herzer 1990:23-47), in the context of one's identity. Moreover, *neither* term was a compliment. While homosexuality was described as "unnatural fornication" (Feray and Herzer 1990:25), heterosexuality was described as "non-procreative perversion" (Katz 1996:54). (Many today might wonder what the implications

of this concept might have been for those who were heterosexual yet infertile, who wished to express their sexuality.)

It may sound surprising, even absurd, that sexual identities have come into existence so recently. It raises the questions of how sexuality was identified prior to the nineteenth century, and how members of society understood sexual attraction and behavior prior to this time. Norms for sexual behavior are influenced by the contexts of economy and politics, and they change over time. Some sexual behaviors that were once considered unacceptable are now accepted, and vice versa. Onanism (male ejaculation outside of the vagina) is considered a sin in the Old Testament yet is praised by many today as an effective means of birth control. Sexual norms also vary from culture to culture. When looking back through history for examples of homosexuality, many would find the ancient Greeks an acceptable model, while others would find their arrangements deplorable. Indeed, "secularized male homosexuality flourished in many of the Greek city-states. Nowhere did law prohibit it. Public opinion was complex and undoubtedly not uniform but did not generally stigmatize sexual contact between males" (Greenberg, 1988:142). It would be a mistake, however, if we attempt to understand sexuality in ancient Greek society within the dichotomous hetero/homosexual framework employed today. According to Foucault (1988), even the term, "bisexual" does not adequately explain the way in which sexuality was understood and expressed. He asserts that:

> [w]e can talk about their 'bisexuality,' thinking of the free choice they allowed themselves between the two sexes, but for them this option was not referred to as a dual, ambivalent and 'bisexual' structure of desire. To their way of thinking, what made it possible to desire a man or a woman was simply the appetite that nature had implanted in a man's heart for 'beautiful' human beings, whatever their sex" (188).

The examples above describe some of the ways that variations of homosexual activity have been incorporated into many societies. There are others who argue that, besides these, there have, in fact, been examples of homosexual identities throughout history. Mohr (1992), for example, insists that Foucault and other social constructionists have gotten so caught up in words and labels that they have lost sight of actual homosexual identities and lifestyles throughout history. He offers as an example the fact that there is no 'official' definition for the relationship shared between himself and the person with whom he has lived for the past several years:

> It is my hope that, just because culture, gay and otherwise, currently has no term for the relation that my lover and I have, some future, benighted constructionist won't look back from a time in the next century when the term finally has been coined and claim that the relation, for want of a word, did not exist, ye verily, could not have existed, as indeed it has existed, in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Mohr 1992:231-232).

Accounts of homosexual identity and lifestyles have also been suggested in literature before 1869, the time that the term, "homosexuality" became officially used in Western cultures. In fourth century China, for example, an affair between Duke Ling of Wei and Ni Xia, his minister has been chronicled (Ng 1989). Ng describes how the two men came to share a peach while walking together. This came to symbolize the other facets of their relationship that were shared, and from this relationship comes the term for male romance, *fen tao zhi ai* (sharing the peach).

In seventeenth century Japan, both *nanshoku* (male love) and *joshoku* (female love) were considered sexual options available to men (Schalow 1989). For a man to engage in nanshoku did not preclude him from engaging in joshoku. Schalow has found evidence, however, that there were some men who were exclusively interested in nanshoku; the term

onnagirai referred to a man who was not sexually interested in women (Schalow was not able to find a term that indicated similar options for women who were not sexually interested in men).

Essentialist Position of Homosexuality

Richardson (1984) describes an *essentialist* position that is used to account for homosexuality. This position suggests that a person's sexuality is biologically determined or created by God. In the King James version, for example, Psalm 139 claims that, "you have created my innermost parts," while Psalm 100 assures that, "[i]t is he that hath made us and not we ourselves."

Adopting such a position may offer an explanation or solace to a person who struggles for self-understanding of his or her homosexuality, in that he or she does not have to feel personally responsible for his or her sexuality. Given the difficulties that many homosexuals confront, this position seems sensible. History is rife with accounts of compromise, shame and physical danger that homosexuals face. If one's sexuality is a choice, then it would make sense that at some point along the way many persons with same-sex attractions and desires would have decided that it was easier and safer to opt for the more favored identity of heterosexual. To believe that one's sexuality and sexual preference is a choice is to suggest that the sex drive, or the desire to live a homosexual lifestyle, is so powerful that it motivates homosexuals to live double lives, or to "come out" with their sexuality and risk discrimination, stigmatization, and physical harm.

This essentialist position, however, does not address the social processes that have influenced the development of the sexual identity. Further, if sexuality is genetic, or predetermined, the essentialist position does not explain the various sexual arrangements that have occurred throughout history, or those that exist in other cultures today. Many writers (Bleys 1995; Boswell 1994; Talley 1996; Nederman and True 1996) suggest that there have been homosexual identities and lifestyles before 1869, although finding such documentation of these activities has been problematic, because of the need for homosexuals to keep their activities secret. According to Bullough (1979), this means that for the most part, only the famous would be included on lists of homosexuals throughout history, since historic accounts are not generally kept of ordinary people (Bullough, 1979:139). Moreover, traditional means of tracking people, such as checking marriage licenses, have generally not been effective, since homosexual partnership ceremonies have not been legally recognized (and for the most part, still are not). Also, unlike many heterosexual unions that are considered illicit, most homosexual couples do not have and raise children as a couple, which would offer evidence of their existence. In fact, many homosexuals have been married to a member of the 'opposite' sex, in order to conform to societal norms. There are those whom history suggests have been homosexual (the list is long, and often titillating - for further reading on this, see Bullough, 1979). Still, actual documentation has been problematic.

These examples of how sexuality has differed across culture and time raise the question of how people have come to adopt identities as homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual. Considering that terminologies such as handicapped, disabled and differently-

abled are recent and also socially constructed may provide an example to help one understand this. There have been those throughout history whom we would now, in retrospect, consider handicapped or challenged. The nomenclature used to define and describe these persons, however, has influenced the treatment they received from society at large, and has had an impact on their identities (Anspach 1979).

Homosexuality as a Social Movement

In the discussion of social movements, Melucci (1994:102) asserts, "Conflicts are carried forward by temporary actors who bring to light the crucial dilemmas of a society." Gamson (1990) suggests three elements necessary for the collective action involved in social movements. First, the actors must define the problem and its solution collectively, rather than a problem that actors must face and correct as individuals. Second, boundary lines must be drawn delineating "us" and "them." Third, the collective actors must identify an unjust situation or process that can be rectified through collective action.

The term, "homosexual" is believed to have been coined in 1869, by a Hungarian doctor named Karl Maria Kertbeny (Katz 1996). This was in response to the proposal by the Prussian Reichstag of paragraph 175, a provision of the penal code that made homosexual acts punishable by death. Kertbeny argued that homosexuality was inborn, not acquired, and therefore should not be punished. He believed that if heterosexuals could understand this, they would not have to fear that homosexuals would proselytize their form of sexual expression, or that the society at large was in any moral danger (Lauristen and Thorstad 1974). This was the first account in modern Western society of a homosexual

rights movement (Katz 1996; Lauristen and Thorstad 1974). "It was not so much an effort to make concessions to the potential wrath of an assumed heterosexual majority but was mainly an attempt to lay the basis for launching an aggressive assault on the contradictions and hypocrisy of prevailing morality" (Lauristen and Thorstad 1974). It was this political activism, then, that has helped to shape the homosexual identity as we understand it today.

Intersection of Sexual, Cultural and Gender Identities

An important framework to understanding sexual identity is to also understand gender identity, and the sex/gender distinction. In other words, biological features may not correspond to socially normative sexual practice, sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual desire (Sterling, 2000). Research to date shows that throughout history, gender was expressed beyond the current binary Western categories (Bornstein, 1998: Feinberg, 1996; Herdt, 1987; 1981). Yet it was not until 1975 that the concept of the "third gender" appeared in Western literature. According to Towle and Morgan (2002), the term, "third gender" was introduced by Martin and Voorhies, to illustrate to the ethnographic evidence of gender categories in some cultures that could not adequately be explained using a two-gender framework.

Further, the "third gender" concept does not fully describe the identities of Hawai'i's Mahu population, the Fa'afafine of Samoa, India's Hijra population, and many others for whom Western languages are not comprehensive enough to fully articulate (Basirico, Cashion, Eshleman & Morgan, 2013). It can even be difficult for a transgender person from a Western culture, to understand the cultural aspect of what it means to be Mahu.

Nangeroni (1998, p. 24), who identities as transgender, visited Hawai'i and met a person named Molokai, in the hopes of "interviewing some transgender people who [had] been fortunate enough to grow up in a climate that was more accepting of gender difference than was ours." Nangeroni soon learned, however, that Molokai did not see herself as transgendered, which offered limited insight into her cultural identity.

'O Au No Keia in Hawai'ian language means, "This is who we are." Those who are mahu today are not in a position to take for granted who they are, since the mahu identity today is one that is often misunderstood. In Hawai'i, the term, "mahu" has historically been used to describe a two spirited person, a person of mixed gender, or one who embodies a third gender. Unlike transgendered persons, or persons who identify as homosexual, the mahu transcend binary male/female gender roles, and is not limited to choose one gender, or to *transition* from one gender to the other. Instead, the mahu represent a blending of genders (Robertson, 1989).

Little recorded information exists about mahu, even in Hawai'ian literature. Matzner (2001) suggests that this confusion can be attributed to zealous Christian missionaries who were aghast by what they found to be deviant sexual customs and were vehement in their attempts to quash them. In Hawai'i, the term, "mahu" has traditionally been used to describe a person of mixed gender, or who embodies a third gender. Unlike transgendered persons, a mahu transcends the binary male/female gender roles, and is not limited to choose one gender, or to *transition* from one gender to the other. Instead, the mahu represent a blending of genders (Robertson, 1989).

By the time that Kingdom of Hawai`i Constitution was enacted in 1840, the influence of Christianity was present, as declared in Article I: "That no law shall be enacted which is at variance with the word of the Lord Jehovah, or at variance with the general spirit of His word. All laws of the Islands shall be in consistency with the general spirit of God's law." Over time, the term, "mahu" has become unclear, even to many Hawai'i ans. The term has gone through many definitions, which have been influenced by capitalism, colonization and social norms brought by Christian missionaries (Matzner, 2001).

One such missionary was Cochran Forbes, who maintained a journal of his time in Hawai'i. In one entry, from March 26th 1838, Forbes (1984, p. 62) wrote, "Among the baptized, was the man who formerly wore women's clothes, for the first time in his life he had a shirt & male costume on. I asked him if he thought he could endure the shame of wearing men's clothes, he replied, that he could, for the love of Christ – he meant to follow Christ." Of course, it's unclear if the man described by Forbes would have identified as mahu, yet this entry illustrates the Christian norms brought to Hawai'ians by missionaries.

Over the years, the term, mahu has become less of a gender or cultural classification, and more of a pejorative for homosexuality. By 1865, the term, "mahu" was used to describe "a man who assimilates his manners and dresses his person like a woman" (Andrews, 1865). By the latter part of the twentieth century, the term became understood and defined by a respected Hawai'ian dictionary (Pukui and Elbert, 1986) as both "homosexual of either sex" as well as "hermaphrodite."

Today, the term, “mahu” has become an encompassing pejorative, synonymous with other stigmatizing labels under the “fag” discourse umbrella that is now common in Western culture, which penalizes biological males for failing to demonstrate various masculine competencies; the label serves to enforce male gender norms, and to stigmatize those whose behavior falls outside of expected social norms. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the term has also been used to describe prostitutes who are not biologically female (Matzner, 2001). Thus, it is now used interchangeably to denote a sexual identity as well as a gender identity. In both cases, the term is disparaging.

Moral, Medical and Legal Positions

Many institutions in modern Western society consider homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexual, transgender and non-binary gender individuals to be immoral (Irwin and Thompson 1977), illegal (Fajer 1992; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993) and insane (Hooker 1993; Minton 1996). The medical opinion of homosexuality has been used by many to pathologize homosexuals in the U.S. (Martin 1993). D'Emilio (1983) argues that part of this movement was to oppress new homosexual communities that were forming in urban areas. Hooker (1993) was one of the first in the field of psychotherapy to note that many of the homosexuals who were studied were already institutionalized; samples from studies on homosexuality had previously come from those who had been incarcerated or been placed in asylums.

The American Psychiatric Association has not included homosexuality as a disorder in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of disorders since 1973 (Downey and Friedman

1994). Removing the diagnosis from the DSM led to a gradual and important shift from asking questions about "causes" of homosexuality and "treating" it (Drescher, 2015) to addressing mental health needs of LGBT patient populations (Graham et al 2011).

Richard Isay (1992), former chair of the American Psychiatric Association committee on gay lesbian, and bisexual affairs, warned in that era that suppression of sexuality, whether by state, religion or the medical and mental health communities who attempt to 'fix' or 'cure' homosexuals is particularly damaging. He warned that this repression would lead to "interiorized self-hatred," and contribute to an extraordinarily high rate of suicide among young people who perceive themselves to be homosexual. Isay believed that as many as thirty percent of youths who committed suicide in the latter part of the twentieth century, did so in relation to their internalized homophobia.

On the legal front, many homosexuals have been fired on the basis of their sexuality, after their employers learned of their sexual orientation. In many cases, they are fired for obscure reasons, such as not getting along with others. A 2015 report from the Human Rights Campaign showed that many LGBTQ employees still fear termination or discrimination at work, and many actually encounter it. As of 2019 (http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws), it was legal in 26 states to fire and individual based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In 2020, however, in a landmark 6-3 ruling (Bostock v. Clayton County), the U.S. Supreme court held that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, protects LGBTQ employees from workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The majority argued that this protection falls under Title VII's prohibition on discrimination

based on “sex.” These protections are not guaranteed, however. In 2025, Texas judge Matthew Kacsmaryk issued a ruling declaring that Title VII no longer protects LGBTQ+ people from workplace discrimination. This decision directly contradicts the Supreme Court’s landmark 2020 Bostock v. Clayton County ruling. The case was brought against the EEOC by the state of Texas alongside the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing organization that supports Project 2025 which calls for repealing LGBTQ+ federal protections. According to journalist Erin Reed, the judge argued that Title VII only protects “firing someone simply for being homosexual or transgender,” but that it does not protect transgender or gay people from “harassment”: “In sum, Title VII does not bar workplace employment policies that protect the inherent differences between men and women,” Kacsmaryk writes in his ruling. Legal rights for LGBTQ+ people continue to be volatile in the USA, won and lost from one year to the next. No ruling can be perceived as final.

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About Dr. Dan Morgan

Dr. Morgan mentors and coaches people in transition; from relationships to jobs to completely reinventing themselves. He has worked with everyone from student-athletes, entertainers, persons recently released from prison, academic peers, and those who identify as transgender and non-binary. He is an expert at creating a space where you can show up and do your work. He will kindly and compassionately encourage you to facilitate your transition from one phase of your life to the next.

Dr. Dan is also a Sociologist, Trainer, and Consultant. His exceptional professional background includes many awe-inspiring transitions. His coaching/consulting expertise grew from his own life experience. Between earning a bachelor's degree in Psychology, a master's degree in Sociology and a Doctorate Degree in Education, he worked in the fitness industry and as a tour guide, eventually moving into the entertainment industry where he began writing and performing stand-up comedy, as a working touring comedian. He later transitioned into working with comedians, agents, and producers. During all of this, he skated with the Bay Bombers Roller Derby team and was selected to the USA All-Stars team that traveled to Tokyo to skate in a tournament with the Japan All-Stars.

Dr. Morgan has served as a Department Chair and Graduate School Dean. He continues to teach courses in Sociology, Education, Writing, and Comedy, paying special attention to intersections between personal identity, culture, and society.
He is also co-author of a Sociology textbook and has published scholarly articles in the field. His memoir, ***Hiraeth: The Voice of Home***, was released in 2015. He is currently working on two other books.

Dr. Dan Morgan specializes in helping people find their voices, especially during times of transition. He has coached a wide variety of people, ranging from those entering the workforce from prison, reentering civilian life from military service, and a former Miss Universe. He has worked extensively with addicts and those who love them. Whether you

are starting a career or changing career paths, starting over after ending a relationship, going through a profound change in your health or moving on after losing a loved one – whatever the transition may be, he will create a space for you to show up and do your work. He is eager to spend time with you in your work.

"When one door closes, another opens -

See you in the hallway"

Dr. Dan Morgan

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Transition Coaching and Consulting for Individuals, Groups and Organizations