



A Question of Sexual Orientation

by John Matthews

PICTURE a bustling street corner. People hurry by on their way to work or home. Others congregate in little knots of two or three, talking and laughing. They are just passing time. Nothing special, just a fairly typical scenario for any major city in the world. ❖ Now consider that the people congregating on the corners are just a bit different. They are homosexual transvestites, men often referred to as “drag queens.” The scene is nothing out of the ordinary on corners in London’s Soho District or New York City’s Greenwich Village. Frederick Whitam remembers such a scene. But it was 1974, and he was in Guatemala City.

A professor of sociology at Arizona State University, Whitam taught in Guatemala for two years. The corner scenes in Guatemala City got him thinking. He had seen homosexual transvestites in the United States. Did such people exist in all societies? Did these people share similar behavioral characteristics? And on a larger scale, he wondered, did their behavior have a biological basis?

Whitam has sought answers to these and other questions related to the broader issue of sexual orientation across cultures for more than two decades. Results of his and colleagues’ work provide a growing body of evidence that favors a biological basis for sexual orientation.

“Despite controversy over research results which suggest that homosexuality might be an inborn trait, the exact mechanism that determines sexual orientation has yet to be identified,” Whitam says. But the ASU sociologist thinks there is too much evidence to

ignore the possibility of a biological basis for sexual orientation.

“During the past 30 years, a strong body of evidence has emerged to suggest that sexual orientation is biological,” he says. “During this same time period, not a single bit of scientific evidence suggesting that sexual orientation is learned has appeared.”

Whitam says that there is more at stake than lively scientific debate.

“In some cities and states of this country, gays and lesbians are regarded as a protected class. Some private industries also protect employees on the basis of sexual orientation,” he says. “An important legal criterion for inclusion as a protected class is the principle of immutability. This is the idea that certain groups of people merit protection because they are born that way.”

If a person chooses to be gay or lesbian, some might argue that he or she should not be entitled to protection since the sexual orien-

Frederick Whitam studies questions related to sexual orientation. His research suggests that gay and lesbian people are a permanent part of sexual orientation arrangements in all societies.

tation is a matter of choice, not birth.

“On the other hand, being born gay is a much stronger argument for inclusion as a protected class under civil rights laws,” Whitam explains. “The question of whether gays and lesbians constitute a true minority group and deserve protected class status is a complicated social question that likely will be debated for the rest of this century.”

When Whitam launched his sexual orientation research more than 20 years ago, he sought specific answers. “I wanted to know if homosexuals exist in all societies. If so, do they display similar behavioral characteristics regardless of culture?” he says.

His quest for answers has led him to Brazil, Peru, Guatemala, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and throughout the United States.

The societies I’ve studied represent a diverse cross-section of cultures,” Whitam says. “It’s highly probable that a small group of homosexual people exist in all societies and produce the same kind of continuum. There are the “macho” and “regular guy” homosexuals as well as highly cross-gendered homosexuals; the female impersonators and transsexuals. Lesbians also exist in all societies. They range from the ultramasculine to the very feminine.”

Whitam and other researchers know that homosexuals have existed in all societies for thousands of years. Records from the Brazilian and Portuguese Inquisitions contain evidence that transvestite homosexuals lived in

SUPPORTING THE BIOLOGICAL LINK

Frederick Whitam thinks that there may be a biological basis for sexual orientation. Results of an 11-year study conducted by the ASU professor of sociology, combined with similar findings in work conducted by other researchers, continue to provide support for the idea.

Whitam's research focused on pairs of twins in which at least one twin was homosexual. He says that the study's findings are welcomed by many gay and lesbian people.

"Homosexual people believe the biological position supports their claims to civil rights protections," Whitam says. "Also, it impacts the ongoing debate concerning gays in the military."

The questions are complicated and the stakes are high. As a result, the debate often gets heated. Whitam says, "One key to the inclusion of groups as 'protected classes' in civil rights legislation and rulings is the principle of immutability." This is the notion that certain groups, such as women and blacks, merit protection under the law because they were born that way.

"I studied pairs of twins in which at least one twin was homosexual," Whitam explains. "I sought participants through announcements in the gay

press and through personal referrals from 1980 to 1991. One or both twins filled out an 18-page questionnaire that focused on obtaining information about the sexuality of twins."

When studying twins, scientists try to describe similarities. They use the term "concordance" to describe the level of similarity that exists for different characteristics. For example, body build, eye color, hair texture, hair color, and other physical traits tend to be 100 percent concordant in identical twins.

"But 100 percent concordance for more complex behavioral traits is rare, even in identical twins," Whitam says. Most researchers would say that a concordance rate of 60 percent is high enough to suggest some sort of biological basis for the behavior."

Whitam and his colleagues studied 38 pairs of identical twins (34 male pairs and four female pairs). Their results showed a concordance rate of 66 percent for homosexual orientation, which suggests that if one twin was homosexual, there was a 66 percent chance the twin brother or sister also would be homosexual.

The researchers also studied 23 pairs of fraternal twins. Those results showed a concordance rate of 30 percent for homosexual orientation for that group.

Is sexual orientation biologically determined, socially learned, or the result of some type of interaction? Whitam says the biological question has been debated by sex researchers for more than 150 years.

In 1952, F. J. Kallman's research with twins jarred the widely held notion that homosexual orientation was socially determined. In 1962, research by German scientist W.W. Schlegel supported Kallman's finding that homosexual orientation in identical twins had a 100 percent concordance rate.

More recently, in 1991, Whitam says that J. M. Bailey and R. C. Pillard's large study of male twins caused a stir among many social scientists. They found a concordance rate of 52 percent for homosexual orientation in 56 pairs of identical twins and 22 percent concordance for 54 pairs of fraternal twins.

"Our findings are more consistent with Bailey and Pillard's than with the early work of Kallman and others," Whitam says. "In both recent studies, the rates of concordance, while not 100 percent, are still sufficiently high to suggest a strong biological basis for sexual orientation." —*John Matthews*



JOHN C. PHILLIPS PHOTO / OPPOSITE: COURTESY FREDERICK WHITAM, PH.D.

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Brazil's colonial capitol of Salvador during the 1600s.

"When I was there in 1986, transvestites resided in the same apartment buildings which are passed down from one generation to the next," Whitam says.

The ASU sociologist says that many cultures accept homosexuality. But this is not entirely the case in the United States. American society tends to stigmatize the homosexual orientation.

Although the world of sex, gender, and sexual orientation is complex, most people simply do not like homosexuals. Whitam says that parents, as a rule, are unhappy with homosexual children.

"No one is immune. Homosexuality is part of the human condition," Whitam says. "We simply do not prepare parents for the possibility that they may have gay or lesbian children."

Attitudes differ throughout the world. Whitam is impressed with the Filipino attitude toward homosexuals. "They are extremely tolerant. Many believe homosexuality is simply God's will," he says. "Sexual orientation is explained as Nature's way."

Whitam says that the overwhelming attitude in Russia toward homosexuals is very repressive. Countries with an Anglo-Saxon heritage are somewhat more lenient, but still repressive to a large degree.

"Here in the United States, there still are 25 states that criminalize homosexual acts," Whitam says. "Some of these states, particularly in the South, have laws that carry severe penalties of up to 20 years imprisonment."

In contrast, criminal law does not touch the subject of homosexuality in Southeast Asian nations. And Latin America is influenced by the French Napoleonic Code of 1810, which adopted the principle of consenting adults and decriminalized homosexual relations.

In one of his studies, Whitam teamed with Swedish psychologists in an attempt to measure the level of hatred or fear of homosexuality that exists among four specific groups of people. They collected answers from people living in Arizona, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Sweden.

"We found that people who believe that homosexuals are born that way are more tolerant. They are less homophobic than people who believe that homosexuality is chosen behavior," he says. "Societies do not create homosexuality. But they do react to it in vastly different ways."

For more information about specific studies on sexual orientation across cultures, call Frederick L. Whitam, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.965.3546.