
What do different cultures tell us about homosexuality?

The huge variety of sexual expressions in different cultures sharing essentially the same genes shows genetic influence is minimal.

In 1994, an Italian-American geneticist, Cavalli-Sforza, published a huge genetic atlas¹ the outcome of a monumental study of the genetic characteristics of different ethnic groups. He found that the human race was remarkably homogeneous, genetically. The more genes his team studied, the more they found all ethnic groups shared them. Cavalli-Sforza eventually studied fifty genes, and found that all ethnic groups had most of them. His conclusion was that, in spite of superficial differences, e.g skin colour, the different races are essentially the same genetically. Later work shows in fact, that something between 99.7% and 99.9% of the genes in any two unrelated people are the same.^{2*}

If all ethnic groups share almost all their genes, we can make two assumptions about any behaviour that is claimed to be genetically produced:

- It will be very predictable, very specific and similar all over the globe.
- It will be present at roughly the same percentage in all cultures.

We also know that many genes, maybe hundreds, are involved in human behaviours, and that behaviours affected by many genes will change very slowly over very many generations (Chapter One). That is, they will be very stable for centuries, with only minimal changes from generation to generation. This is true not only in families, but also in cultures.

*Although there is a lot of variation in DNA coding reflecting different ethnic groups, these variations produce identical genes, so most genes remain the same.

But if we look at homosexuality, we find none of the characteristics of genetic properties.

- There is a huge variety of homosexual practices between cultures and even within them.
- The prevalence of homosexuality has varied considerably in different cultures. In some cultures, it has been unknown; in others, it has been obligatory for all males.
- There have been, and are, rapid changes in homosexual behaviour, even over a lifetime. Not only that, but entire types of homosexuality have disappeared over the course of just a few centuries.

In fact, anthropologists have found such huge variations in heterosexual and homosexual practice from culture to culture, and such sudden changes in sexual practice and orientation, even over a single generation, that they mostly want to say that all sexual behaviour is learned. In the words of one writer J. Rostand, “In the secret coming together of two human bodies, all society is the third presence.”

Let’s first take a brief look at heterosexuality where a wide variety of practices are already apparent.

Variations in heterosexual customs

In 1952, two anthropological researchers, Ford and Beach,³ reported the results of a project organized by Yale University, that surveyed 190 different cultures in a very large crosscultural study. There was a wide range of heterosexual activity. There was no breast stimulation in six cultures, no kissing in nine, in two others sexual excitement was correlated with scratching or biting, in one urination was part of foreplay, in another guest sex was practised (i.e, it was good hospitality to offer your wife to a visitor). Among the Lepchas, all young girls were sexually experienced by eleven or twelve, and even as young as eight. Bestiality occurred only erratically in cultures; in some it was unknown; in others, it was tolerated.

In a survey of preliterate cultures in 1971, Paul Gebhard⁴ of the Kinsey Institute and member of the original Kinsey research team

noted that fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and well-developed sadomasochism were very rare or absent, appearing only in more “advanced” societies.

What is sexually appealing in females depends on the culture. In Arabic culture, a fat woman is beautiful. In ours, a slim but well-rounded figure may be considered desirable. A broad pelvis is attractive in some cultures, a narrow one in others. In some cultures, the shape of the mouth is particularly sexy. In our culture, firm breasts are erotic, in others pendulous breasts, in others again the breasts are not erotic at all. In Japanese culture, there is a much greater erotic attraction to the nape of the neck and to older partners than in ours.

Even a superficial look at heterosexuality reveals a range of practices too broad to be genetically determined or strongly influenced.

Variations in homosexuality

We have established that a genetically induced homosexuality would tend to be fairly uniform in expression throughout the world. But neglecting minor variants two entirely different types of behaviour co-existed historically—the Greek model and the Melanesian model—and three co-exist today, the Greek model (secretly practised), the Melanesian model, and the Western model.⁵ The variety of practices outside these models, and even within the Western model, are also quite at odds with a genetically prescribed homosexuality.

The Greek Model

At the height of the Greek culture, according to the social custom, an older married man was expected to take a younger boy as a kind of squire and have sexual relations with him. Today, the West would call him a bisexual pederast. The older man would act as a mentor to the young boy and train him in manhood. He would even find the young boy a bride when he reached marriageable age. Then he would find another boy and start the process again. As described by one scholar:⁶

This sort of Greek male's ideal picture of himself was that he serviced his wife, had a sexual friendship with his mistress, and did his national duty by teaching younger men how to behave with bravery and honor—which more or less frequently involved bugging them in an idealistic manner. It was only the boy he “loved.”

In the Greek model, a boy starts out exclusively homosexual in his relationship to his bisexual mentor, and then is strongly encouraged to become bisexual at maturity.

In Greek culture, homosexuality between adults—as we have it in the West today—was considered despicable (mainly for the receptive partner). One classical writer,⁵ talking of the mature male who was also receptive, said, “we class those who enjoy the passive part as belonging to the lowest depth of vice and allow them not the least degree of confidence or respect or friendship.” Boys were not denigrated for being receptive—it was appropriate to their status.

The Greek model⁷ was found in early imperial Greece, medieval Persia, and at various times in China and Byzantium. It was found in the Sudan, in feudal Japan among the samurai, and in the Libyan desert, where, fifty years ago males “talked about their masculine love affairs as openly as they discussed their love of women.”³ The Mameluke rulers of Egypt imported young boys from the Asian steppes. The Aztecs and Mayans also subscribed to the Greek model. According to one account from the early 1900s, Arabic speakers in North Morocco believed young boys would not learn the Koran properly unless they had sexual relations with their teachers. Sexual activity with boys or slaves was sometimes regarded as a right among those with power and status. Amongst the Big Nambas in Vanuatu, a father actively sought ‘guardians’ for his sons who would mentor them and have sexual relationships with them.

The Melanesian Model

The Melanesian model⁸ is not well known in the West. In it, men pass through three compulsory and sequential stages: passive exclusive homosexuality, active exclusive homosexuality, and

exclusive adult heterosexuality. Many of the cultures practising it were in Papua New Guinea, and perhaps the best known group was called the Sambia (a pseudonym).

The Sambia believed that boys were naturally girl-like and would not develop manly qualities and sexual maturity unless they ingested semen. The culture required adolescents to fellate regularly (often daily) young boys after they were taken from their mothers at about age seven. When the boys reached the initiation rite at puberty, they then had to repeat the process with younger boys as their social duty. They continued to do this throughout adolescence, until they reached marriageable age. Then they had to stop all homosexual activity, become exclusively heterosexual, and marry. Any man who still wished to engage in homosexual activity with those of his own age or younger was considered aberrant, a “rubbish man.” (About 5% continued with the practice.) However two such radical shifts in behaviour in one lifetime would not be possible if homosexuality were genetically-mandated. One missionary familiar with the New Guinean tribal cultures (Don Richardson) suggests the prescribed homosexual behaviour among youth might have been insisted upon by polygynous older men to keep youths away from the young girls they wanted as their own wives. Many anthropologists believe an extraordinary fear of contamination from women in this culture may have contributed to the practice (i.e. marriage was considered highly dangerous). Whatever the cause, anthropologists agree that it was culturally mandated.

The Melanesian model was found mostly in southern Papua New Guinea, and in the islands to the northeast. Overall, some 10-20% of Papua New Guinea cultures fell into this category. Sometimes the sexual expression was anal, sometimes oral. In some places, a youth was not permitted to fellate his friend, but could fellate his potential enemy. In others, boys were “grown” by friends within a group. In the Marind, an older youth who practised pederasty on a younger boy had to later marry that boy's sister, a practice also followed by the Etoro, Kiwai, and Keraki, except that in the latter two groups, sodomy was practised rather than fellatio.

The Western Model

The Western male homosexual model⁵ is comparatively recent and is quite different from either the Greek or Melanesian models, which institutionalized pederasty. The Western model is characterized by exclusive homosexuality between adults, usually of approximately equal status, and an insistence that the behaviour is intrinsic. It is also highly politicized.

The first appearances of the Western model appear to have been adult homosexual networks in cities in France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; for lesbians, some records date from the late 1700. Mollyhouses in England, in the 1700s, appear to be another pre-echo of modern homosexuality. These appear to have been essentially “adults only” houses of male prostitution, in which the receptive partners were very feminine in appearance. Homosexual relations between adults do occur in the historical record before that time, but the new element in the Western model is the relative absence of bisexuality and pederasty. Historically, exclusive homosexuality was a very small fraction of bisexuality.

Greenberg⁵ a well known researcher of social contexts of sexuality, comments that modern western homosexuality implies that “erotic attraction originates in a relatively stable, more or less exclusive attribute of the individual,” whereas in Western history or in non-Western forms of homosexuality, “distinctions of age... and social status loom larger.” Modern lesbians, however, are uneasy about agreeing homosexuality is intrinsic, preferring in their commitment to the empowerment of women to see lesbianism as a choice. In the Western model, a person identifies himself as “homosexual,” though the word was coined only in the late 1800s.

The Western model tends to encourage promiscuity in males (though AIDS has partially restrained this). A small subset of the male culture encourages a “monogamous” relationship with another adult, though usually with substantial amounts of “recreational sex” on the side. Bisexuality is often viewed as latent homosexuality; there is strong pressure to make a choice to be exclusively homosexual. Though sexual interest in pre-pubertal children is very minor there is significant interest in young post-pubertal

teenagers, as far as is possible in Western countries, which universally proscribe it. Lesbianism has, until recently, placed considerably higher emphasis on sexual faithfulness among partners, though there is a recent new emphasis on sexual pleasure for its own sake. But even among the modern gay community, sexual expression varies from country to country; anal intercourse is more popular in some than others.

The modern homosexual movement is so unusual that some authors’ have talked about “the uniqueness and particularity of the modern structuring of homosexuality into a gay world compared to precapitalist forms.” For instance, in some cities, such as San Francisco, gays have created urban ghettos—entire suburbs in which gays live and provide a full range of gay professional, social, and sexual services.

Rotello¹⁷ a gay man, in a thought-provoking survey argues that the Western model essentially originated between World War II and about 1970. He mentions that before the war it was medically considered that same-sex relations were safer than opposite-sex relationships with prostitutes —rates of sexually transmitted disease were higher in the latter. Now, it has reversed. He says “Few groups in history appear to have changed their overall sexual behaviour as rapidly and profoundly as homosexual American men in the decades before AIDS”. He describes it as “a culture of unprecedented sexual extremism”. Although he says “many have less than total control over what they are doing” he is not arguing this is genetically mandated, but implying it is a cultural shift.

The Western model is, therefore, nearly unique historically. Its appearance has been too sudden, its evolution too swift, and spread too considerable to have been genetically produced. Its low occurrence in some cultures, such as Arabic-speaking cultures (which more usually contain a Greek model), is also inconsistent with a genetically prescribed condition. The lesson of history and culture is that cultural homosexuality is self-taught.

Summary

These three coincident homosexual streams, each very different from the other, in a context in which humankind shares more than 99 % of its genes, means homosexuality does not conform to any genetically prescribed model. In a genetic model, homosexual behaviours would be practically identical.

Not only are there quite different models—the Greek, Melanesian, and Western—co-existing today, but there are a myriad of other homosexual customs and practices, not the behavioural uniformity associated with a genetically dictated homosexuality.

More permutations...

For other cultural variations see the references^{7,9,10,11,12}. Many of these are not just variations in individuals but in whole people-groups. They are minor models, but extremely varied. They included the *Berdache*, a kind of third sex among USA native Americans. Lesbian variations were much less common and Ford and Beach³ recorded only 17 cultures in which that behaviour was known at all, and the behaviours were all quite different.

Cultures without homosexuality

If homosexuality were significantly influenced, let alone dictated by genes, it would appear in every culture, but in 29 of 79 cultures surveyed by Ford and Beach in 1952,³ homosexuality was rare or absent. It was very rare in the Siriono, even though there were no prohibitions on homosexual relationships in that culture. The researcher observed only one man displaying slight homosexual traits but apparently not sexually involved with another man. Homosexuality appears to be historically rare among Orthodox Jews,¹³ so much so that learned rabbis, the interpreters of Jewish law, usually allowed men to sleep in the same bed, because likelihood of sexual contact was considered negligible. Kinsey also found very low homosexual incidence among Orthodox Jews.¹⁴

Some anthropologists have questioned Ford and Beach's findings, believing that irregular sexual intimacy is not something foreign researchers can easily get information about. One sexual

anthropologist, Whitam,¹⁵ thought homosexuality must be genetically enforced because he found it practised in some isolated groups in South America and East Asia who knew nothing of the practice elsewhere.

But evidence from other remote tribes in New Guinea—all genetically related—suggests differently. This evidence comes from missionaries who commonly spend decades living in one culture, far more than almost any anthropologist. The anthropologist will argue that the sexual practices will never be admitted to missionaries; on the other hand it could be argued that missionaries will be unusually sensitive to practices transgressing Christian teaching. Overall they can be considered as reliable witnesses. For example, in contrast to groups like the Sambia in the New Guinea highlands, where homosexuality was compulsory, only about 2-3 % of Western Dani (also in the New Guinea highlands) practiced it. However, in another group of Dani who were closely genetically related, homosexuality was totally unknown. Missionaries report that when they were translating the Bible into Dani for this group, their tribal assistants, who knew their own culture intimately, were non-plussed by references to homosexuality in Romans 1; they did not understand the concept. Another missionary, with the same group for 25 years, overheard many jests and sexually ribald exchanges among the men, but never a single mention of homosexuality in all that time. When Dani went to help with missionary work among the Sambia, they were astounded at some of the homosexual practices they saw for the first time. Although it is always difficult for a foreigner to be completely sure whether a rare and stigmatised behaviour exists, it is certainly true that if three such different experiences of homosexuality can occur in groups of people so closely related genetically, 100 % genetic determinism of homosexuality is an impossibility.

Sudden changes

We have mentioned that human behaviours associated with many genes change slowly over many generations or centuries. But history shows us that homosexual practice has disappeared quite suddenly—in some cases over a couple of generations—as the

culture has changed. For example, there were many berdaches among the North American Crows in 1840, but by 1900 only one was left. Among the Potawatami, there was a huge decrease in berdaches between 1870 and 1930. The transvestite Koniags of Kodiak Island disappeared between 1800 and 1850. The “men turned women” (manang bali) of Borneo were common in 1850, rare in 1911, and are now unknown. The Samurai pederastic practices vanished long ago. Among the Aymara (South American), the homosexuality, lesbianism, and transvestism recorded in historical times has now disappeared. Tahitian mahus are far less common now than in the late eighteenth century. Anthropologists attribute many of the changes to Christian influence. In some cases, homosexuality disappeared so rapidly that accurate information on homosexual practices was hard to collect. The customs of the Sambia vanished, under missionary teaching, about 1984. Even at the height of the Sambian pederastic culture, the sudden change required of men of marriageable age from homosexuality to heterosexuality argued against its being genetically innate, and in favour of a substantial cultural basis to homosexual orientation and practice.

But change was not always missionary-mediated. Men’s houses, besides being homosexual hot-houses, were also venues for planning war raids. In some cases, the government stepped in and simply closed the houses down, sometimes jailing offenders. This worked; it also completely disrupted and contributed to the disappearance of pederastic activity in a few years.

The Greek model (cultural pederasty), after becoming popular in Rome, disappeared slowly with time as the culture absorbed several ascetic philosophies. There was a further decline after the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. But even this change over a few centuries was probably too sudden for a genetically dominated behaviour. The sudden rise and disappearance of lesbian practices, such as the Pearl River communities in China and the “Mummies and Babies” movements in southern Africa, were incompatible with any genetic model.

Even within the modern gay scene, there have been changes in practice, which have been far too swift for anything genetically

induced. Fisting (insertion of the hand into the rectum) was virtually unknown in the forties and fifties, but a large minority of gays (at least in San Francisco¹⁶) have now experienced it at least once, and the practice has spread to lesbians with both anal and vaginal expression. Feminine mannerisms have decreased among male homosexuals, and a recent trend has been an exaggerated maleness.

Another trend has been a huge increase in homosexual experimentation by heterosexuals documented, for example, in the Netherlands¹⁸ and in New Zealand (women)¹⁹.

By 2010 the Western Model, in spite of catastrophes like AIDS, seemed fairly well established, and had persuaded itself it was innate.

Summary

When Greenberg comments that “it is reasonable to suppose that if a bunch of Melanesian infants were to be transported in infancy to the United States and adopted, few would seek out the pederastic relationships into which they’re inducted in New Guinea,” he summarizes the essence of this chapter. If sexual behaviour were genetically driven, the Melanesian infants would seek out pederastic relationships in their new culture.

The diversity in homosexual activity in different cultures also argues against genetic enforcement. If homosexuality were genetically mandated, the type of homosexual behaviour would be tightly defined by the genes involved and almost uniform in all cultures. If we want to argue genetic homosexuality, Vines² report that the human race shares more than 99.7% of its genes, means that of the 22,500 human genes in the human genome, between 23 and 70 genes would have to account for all the variation in homosexual practice that exists globally, in addition to all other non-sexual differences. This is highly unlikely—probably impossible.

If homosexuality were genetic in origin, it would appear at about the same percentage in all cultures. But this is clearly not so. Among the genetically related tribes of the New Guinea Highlands, homosexuality was simultaneously practiced as mandatory pederasty among the Sambia, was unknown in another group even

as a concept, and practised by 2-3 % of a closely related group. A significant number of cultures appear not to have practised homosexuality at all.

The rate of change of homosexual practice also argues against genetic causation. Slight changes in practice would appear over 1000 years if there were some strong genetic pressure for it, but not the extensive decline of whole models over several centuries (e.g the Greek model), not the entire disappearance of homosexuality from some cultures over several generations, and certainly not the very sudden 30-year rise of the modern Western model, with characteristics so different from its predecessors, and its own swiftly changing practices. The latter is the least likely to be 'genetic.'

The expression of homoerotic desire does not seem to be genetically imprinted. Sexuality appears to have an overwhelmingly cultural component, ebbing and flowing with changes in cultural values and expectations. Certain sexual expressions may be historical phenomena which flourish for a time because of particular circumstances, and then cease, e.g Pearl River lesbianism which ceased in 1935. Pederastic homosexuality can be culturally mandated, as among the Sambia, or culturally proscribed, as in the West.

When anthropologists survey the evidence, they are, to a surprising degree, united in the belief that behaviours such as homosexuality and lesbianism are not produced genetically, but by social conditions. If they tried to put a figure on the genetic content of homosexuality, most of them would probably argue for something near zero.

Did their genes make them do it? Not according to the anthropologists.

References

1. Cavalli-Sforza LL, Menozzi P, Piazza A. 1994. *The History and Geography of Human Genes*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press
2. Vines G. 1995. Genes in black and white. *New Scientist* 147 July 8:34-7
3. Ford CS, Beach FA. 1952. *Patterns of Sexual Behaviour*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode
4. Gebhard PH. 1971. *Human Behavior: Variations in the Ethnographic Spectrum*. New York: Basic Books
5. Greenberg DF. 1988. *The Construction of Homosexuality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
6. Seymour-Smith M. 1975. *Sex and Society*. London: Hodder and Stoughton
7. Adams BD. 1986. Age, structure, and sexuality-reflections on the anthropological evidence on homosexual relations. In *The Many Faces of Homosexuality: Anthropological Approaches to Homosexual Behavior*, ed. Blackwood E, 19-33 pp. New York: Harrington Park Press
8. Herdt GH. 1981. *Guardians of the Flutes. Idioms of Masculinity*. New York: McGraw-Hill
9. Fry P. 1986. Male homosexuality and spirit possession in Brazil. In *The Many Faces of Homosexuality: Anthropological Approaches to Homosexual Behavior*, ed. Blackwood E, 137-153 pp. New York: Harrington Park Press
10. Callender C. 1986. Men and non-men—Male gender-mixing statuses and homosexuality. In *The Many Faces of Homosexuality: Anthropological Approaches to Homosexual Behavior*, ed. Blackwood E, 165-178 pp. New York: Harrington Park Press
11. Sankar A. 1986. Sisters and brothers, lovers and enemies—marriage resistance in Southern Kwangtung. In *The Many Faces of Homosexuality: Anthropological Approaches to Homosexual Behavior*, ed. Blackwood E, 69-81 pp. New York: Harrington Park Press
12. Gay J. 1986. "Mummies and Babies" and friends and lovers in Lesotho. In *The Many Faces of Homosexuality: Anthropological Approaches to Homosexual Behavior*, ed. Blackwood E, 97-116 pp. New York: Harrington Park Press
13. Prager D. 1990. Judaism, homosexuality and civilization. *Ultimate Issues* 6(2):24
14. Kinsey AC, Pomeroy WB, Martin CE. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. 1948. Philadelphia, W.B.Saunders
15. Whitam FL, Mathy RM. 1986. *Male Homosexuality in Four Societies. Brazil, Guatemala, the Philippines, and the United States*. New York: Praeger
16. Cameron P. 1992. *Medical Consequences of What Homosexuals Do*. Washington, DC: Family Research Council
17. Rotello G. 1997. *Sexual Ecology. AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Dutton
18. Kuyper L, Vanwesenbeeck I. 2009. High levels of same-sex experiences in the Netherlands: prevalences of same-sex experiences in historical and international perspective. *Journal of Homosexuality* 56(8):993-1010
19. Dickson N, Paul C, Herbison P. 2003. Same-sex attraction in a birth cohort: prevalence and persistence in early adulthood. *Social Science and Medicine* 56:1607-15