



Anthropology

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Anthropology is the systematic study of the origin, development, and diversity of the human species. From its nineteenth-century origins, its practitioners have affirmed the need for a multidisciplinary perspective in the study of humanity, incorporating the study of human biology, language, history, and social life.

Anthropologists utilize a wide variety of research methods in their work; the most characteristic of these is participant observation, where the anthropologist lives among a group of people for a prolonged period, learns their language, and participates in their day-to-day activities in order to understand their way of life from a privileged vantage point.

The relationship between anthropology and the study of human sexuality is an old but ambivalent one. While anthropology was the first of the social science disciplines to take sexuality (and particularly homosexuality) seriously as a field of intellectual inquiry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropologists and sociologists relinquished their predominance in this area to medicine and psychology in the post-World War II period.

It was only with the advent of feminist and gay liberation-inspired scholarship in the 1970s that the study of sexuality was once again placed squarely on anthropology's scholarly agenda, and earlier achievements in this field were regarded with renewed interest.

Beginnings

Some of the first European writings on homosexuality as such were by nineteenth-century forensic and criminal anthropologists such as Cesare Lombroso and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. These authors were invested in demonstrating connections between human behavior and human physiology. In essence, they were responsible for imagining homosexuality as a condition that inhered in individual human bodies, a form of delinquency that marked certain persons as constitutionally delinquent.

Contemporary apologists for homosexuality who agitated to overturn European sodomy laws, such as Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld, frequently cited these medico-anthropological writings as evidence that homosexual behavior, like its heterosexual counterpart, was not elective but a deep-seated, biologically ingrained human drive that homosexuals could not defy.

The notion that all sexual behavior was biologically and not socially determined enhanced and continues to bolster political claims that homosexuality is intrinsically "natural" by virtue of being common to all human populations as well as many other species and therefore should not be criminalized.

Other anthropologists disputed such claims. The European idea that sexuality was a natural substrate undergirding and precipitating all human social interaction, promulgated by sexologists and psychoanalysts, was given its first serious challenge by anthropological research.

Widely credited with having developed contemporary anthropological research methods, Bronislaw Malinowski challenged Sigmund Freud's dictum of the pre-cultural prohibition on incest as a universal determinant of human social behavior, including homosexuality. Malinowski's 1927 analysis of his own data collected in the Trobriand Islands (near Papua New Guinea) demonstrates that, in this society where children's primary relationship with an adult male is with their maternal uncle, an incest taboo prevails but is nonetheless structured very differently from its European counterpart.

At the same time, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict labored to demonstrate that norms of gender-appropriate behavior were not grounded in biological sex but rather determined by cultural context. In some societies, women's aggressive or sexually assertive behavior as well as men's subservient or effeminate behavior received social sanction. Such behavior, seen as a transgression against European ideas of innate masculinity and femininity, included the apparently "homosexual" berdache or two-spirit persons common to many native North American groups.

While Mead and Benedict as well as other anthropologists were inclined to suspend negative assumptions about homosexuality common to their own culture in treating the tremendous variety of gender and sexual behavior they observed--indeed, their works function as powerful critiques of Euro-American beliefs about gender and sexuality--their continued dependence on medical models for interpreting human sexuality is evident in the vocabulary they employ.

Moreover, the argument that homosexuality was contextually dependent spurred claims that its global prevalence was extremely limited, namely to "civilized" societies who paid for their civilization with a greater degree of social deviance and disease.

Scores of anthropologists, including Malinowski, studying "primitive" (that is, non-European) populations asserted on the basis of scant evidence that homosexuality did not exist among these people--or, if it did, that it was a "cultivated perversion" introduced through the pernicious influence of European missionaries or colonial officials.

Anthropology and Homosexuality in the Mid-Twentieth Century

Thus, there was no real consensus among anthropologists about homosexuality, either regarding its cause (the "nature versus nurture" debate) or its universality. In any case, variances in gender and sexual behavior were not perceived as bearing directly on the key debates that had begun to coalesce within the discipline, including the relationship between human biology, culture, and language, the development of social relations and social structure, and the impact of economic life and environmental interaction on human behavior.

While information about sexual diversity from many cultures around the world continued to be cataloged in the Human Relations Area Files, compiled in Clellan Ford and Frank Beach's *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (1951), it was rarely subjected to any sustained anthropological analysis, other than intermittent reports on berdache, which were a recurrent item in professional journals such as *American Anthropologist*.

With scientific inquiries into homosexuality from other disciplines mounting in the mid-twentieth century, spurred both by U. S. research on the occupational fitness of its military troops and civil servants, as well as Nazi research on the reproductive fitness of its imagined German citizenry, research into homosexuality became the domain of the biological sciences as well as psychology.

Homosexuality was seen as a problem of the constitutional or psychic makeup of individuals who stood at odds with their societies as a result. It was believed that this "problem" could be corrected through improved breeding or through therapy, although few interventions of this kind could claim successful outcomes.

Countering this general trend in research was a handful of psychologists and sociologists who employed ethnographic methods developed by anthropologists to investigate the lives of homosexuals outside of a clinical setting. Alfred Kinsey and associates' groundbreaking (and yet to be paralleled) research into human sexuality that culminated in the publication of two best-selling volumes (in 1948 and 1953) asserted that while there were relatively few persons who were exclusively homosexual in their behavior, a vast number of both men and women demonstrated at least some homosexual response over their lifetimes.

The situational nature of homosexual behavior for many men in American society was corroborated by Albert Reiss's 1961 study of teenage male prostitutes in Nashville, as well as by Laud Humphreys's 1970 study of clandestine sex between men in public toilets in St. Louis.

Meanwhile, Evelyn Hooker's work with openly gay men she befriended in Los Angeles demonstrated that they were socially well-adjusted by any available measure.

Nascent political organizations, which were just beginning to mobilize in order to achieve social equality for gay men and women in this period, quickly enlisted experts such as these and the scholarly evidence they offered in support of their cause. Mattachine Society founder Harry Hay even lectured on the political value to the homophile movement of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, as well as Ford and Beach's more recent work, in an address at the ONE Institute in 1957.

Lesbian and Gay Anthropology

The late 1960s saw the increasing radicalization of many areas of the civil rights movement in the United States, including the movement for lesbian and gay rights. Gay liberation's repudiation of psychology as the ultimate arbiter of the social status of its political constituency coincided with a revival of studies of homosexuality in other social science disciplines.

The increasing importance of feminist studies in anthropology was already demonstrating that the analysis of gender and sex roles was key to an understanding of social structures such as kinship and economic exchange. Gay and lesbian politics provided an additional impetus for this kind of study.

Anthropology as a discipline, too, was changing and radicalizing. The Vietnam War had made American anthropologists aware of their colleagues' complicity in the war effort by providing intelligence to the United States government; this in turn prompted a critical reflection on anthropology's tacit support of past colonial and genocidal regimes.

Anthropologists also began to challenge hitherto unquestioned assumptions about their field methods, including the social identity of the anthropologist while in the field, as well the taboo topic of sexual relations with one's informants.

It was during this self-critical but expansive period in the discipline's history that a lesbian and gay anthropology--typically the study of apparently homosexual people that did not seek to reduce their behavior to a question of social pathology, conducted by anthropologists who were usually themselves lesbian or gay--began to take shape.

The Anthropology Research Group on Homosexuality (ARGOH), a professional organization, was formed in the early 1970s and had its first official meeting in 1978. The 1972 publication of Esther Newton's *Mother Camp*, a study of professional drag queens in Chicago and Kansas City based on research conducted in the mid-1960s, marked the first book-length study of gay people by an anthropologist and spurred much additional work in the area by the end of the decade.

During the 1980s and 1990s, anthropological research on homosexuality tended to cluster around a handful of topics. Primary among these, in defiance of the New Right's emphasis on "family values" and continual

attempts to deny civil rights to lesbian and gay people, were studies that focused on lesbian and gay family life in the United States. These included studies of "chosen families" of friends, lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies, and children of lesbian and gay parents.

Research on gender variant persons, long an important topic, was taken up within the new rubric of transgender identities.

In response to the AIDS pandemic, an increasing amount of social research has been devoted to a deeper understanding of sex roles and sex practices among many peoples, notably among men who have sex with men, in order to develop more effective strategies to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV.

Linguistic anthropologists have focused on ways in which lesbian or gay identity may be constituted or expressed through particular uses of language; these initiatives culminated in the annual conference on Lavender Languages and Linguistics, begun in 1993.

The professional status of lesbian and gay anthropology and its practitioners continued to be elevated during this period. In 1987, ARGOH was renamed the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA), which in 1998 became an official section of the American Anthropological Association.

New Directions, Old Quandaries

Despite a tendency toward internal coherence, lesbian and gay anthropology remains fraught with tensions around precisely those issues that an earlier generation of anthropologists could not reconcile.

Though its scope continues to expand, recent research has preserved the historical bias toward the study of biological males and the study of Euro-American populations. This reflects the intense legal preoccupation with policing homosexuality in these societies, as well as an ongoing reluctance on the part of research institutions to lend support to overseas projects of this kind.

Moreover, the questions of causation and universality continue to divide practitioners. While cultural anthropologists have generally dispensed with research on the social origins of homosexuality, it remains a pressing concern to biological anthropologists and behavioral ecologists, who are invested in demonstrating just how much (if any) of homosexual behavior is in fact socially determined.

Cultural anthropologists are frequently dismissive of research that suggests that homosexual behavior may have a biological as well as a social basis. Many cultural anthropological studies, meanwhile, tend to take identity categories such as "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," or "transgender" more or less as given, even in cultural contexts where such identities may not be meaningful for the persons being studied.

This practice echoes the tendency of early anthropologists to assume that "homosexuality" was a universal human condition simply because it was believed to be a pathological one. This essentializing tendency has come in for criticism among anthropologists in recent years, who have argued (following queer theory) that sexual and gender identities are highly culturally and historically specific.

All societies have their particular social identity categories and ways of understanding what appears to Euro-American anthropologists to be "homosexual" behavior. These categories and understandings must be granted legitimacy independent of what is arguably an ethnocentric (if politically efficacious) point of view that "lesbian and gay people" exist in all the world's cultures.

Yet the virtual omnipresence of what we might term "homosexuality" is invaluable insofar as it prompts us to call into question what our own social identity categories mean, how they have been formed, and how they might be re-imagined.

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