THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF HOMOSEXUALITY

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These cases also illustrate how the meaning of being homosexual may for the individual take on a different significance over time. It is of interest here to point out that sexual orientation is likely to be of more significance to those individuals who identify as homosexual or bisexual, given the stigmatization of same-sex relationships and the general assumption of a heterosexual orientation.

In conclusion let us summarize the important ways in which the model we have described differs from other models which have sought to 'explain' homosexuality. We have emphasized that the development, maintenance and meaning of a homosexual identity is unique for each person, and have attempted to describe the complex interactive process by which this occurs.

Within such a model the attempt to explain homosexuality by reference to specific etiological factors would be invalid on several counts. First, we would argue that it is not possible to generalize about a limited number of factors being influential in the development of a homosexual identity. Rather we would consider that for a given individual any number of factors may be significant.

Second, the importance of any one factor to the development of a homosexual identity will depend upon the meaning it holds for a particular individual. In this way factors which may have significance in the development of such an identity for one individual may, for someone else, have little or no relevance.

Third, we would emphasize that the concept of etiology, in its concern with causation, largely ignores the need to consider the process of maintaining a particular sexual identity. This, of course, rests on the assumption that a particular sexual orientation is a permanent characteristic of the individual. Our model, however, has described the various processes by which either stability or change of such an identity can occur.

Fourth, in this search for causation the individual is usually seen as a passive recipient of etiological influences. Our model focuses on the active role of the individual in selecting and ascribing meaning to factors which may, for that individual, be of significance in the development and maintenance of a homosexual identity.

Obviously, inasmuch as the concept of etiology has been important in many of the therapeutic approaches to homosexuality, our critique of the validity of this concept has important ramifications for therapy. This has already been discussed in chapters 1 and 2.

Finally, whilst we have chosen to focus on the development and maintenance of a homosexual identity, we would stress that the model we have presented in this Chapter is one which explains the development and maintenance of either a heterosexual, a homosexual or a bisexual identity. In other words, in contrast to many other models, rather than assuming a natural development we are here recognizing the need to explain the construction and maintenance of any sexual identity.

4 GOING GAY: identities life cycles and lifestyles in the male gay world

Kenneth Plummer

Until the 1970s, to talk of becoming a homosexual was to talk of etiological factors: chromosomes and heredity, strong mothers and weak fathers, Oedipal failure and faulty conditioning - these, and many others, have been variously invoked as the cause for homosexuality. In this Chapter my concern with what makes a person 'a homosexual' is very different. For whatever small contributory part such medical and psychological factors may play in establishing early preconditions, the path to becoming an adult 'homosexual' invariably involves a social dimension in later life; of learning, adapting to and creating homosexual meanings and incorporating these into one's life pattern. For a great many people, however, their responses to homosexual meanings may be very negative: they have a sense of themselves in some form (a sexual fantasy, a bonding with one's buddies, even direct physical contact), but they do not see it as homosexual - it is 'camaraderie', 'playing around', 'drunken foolery', 'macho' hustling. The wider cultural meanings that such experiences are homosexual can be kept firmly at bay by a series of rationalizations, and such men do not come to see themselves as homosexual, enter the organized world of homosexual and adopt a gay lifestyle. It is only the iceberg tip of homosexual experience - a visible tip that can therefore be observed and discussed. The larger, concealed world of homosexual experience must await exploration.

It is helpful to tease this process of 'going gay' through three dimensions. First, there is the ontological, which examines the very categories 'gay' and 'homosexual' - what is this 'thing' that people are becoming? Second, there is the cultural-historical, which examines the specific historical and cultural themes giving distinctive shapes to homosexuality - how might development differ according to one's historical experiences? Third, there is the life-cycle dimension, which questions the stages encountered in 'going gay' - what are the recurrent life crises involved in becoming a homosexual? In what follows, I will make some tentative observations on each of these three dimensions.
ONTOMETRY: WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED HOMOSEXUALITY?

My first concern is with the category 'homosexual'. Clearly it can be used simply as an adjective - to describe same-sex experiences (behaviour, fantasies, feelings) without suggesting a way of being. In this view, becoming a homosexual is no different from becoming a tennis player, a good cook or a stamp collector: it merely describes what people may do, and signposts a particular preference they may have for the time being, and suggests that such experiences are learnt in the same way as everything else is learnt (Gagnon, 1977, p. 2).

Not everybody devises special theories to explain why people opt for stamp collecting: why should they do so for homosexuality? To do so is to engage in 'the tyranny of isness', of converting doing into being (Sagarin, 1975; 1976).

This view has virtues: it captures the experience of many people who have homosexual experiences (sex, fantasies, intimacies, emotional involvements) but who do not see themselves as homosexual, and it breaks down the significance attributed to the sexual realm in this culture, by seeing it as an ordinary learnt phenomenon. It is a view strongly endorsed by Kinsey in 1948, and by the subsequent Kinsey researchers who coined the term 'homosexualities' to refer to the myriad ways of experiencing homosexuality (Bell and Weinberg, 1978).

Yet detest this, and my own preference for the term as an adjective, roughly since the start of this century many people have come to use the term as a noun: 'the homosexual' refers to a type, a species, a form of being, a condition or an 'essence' (Foucault, 1979; Plummer, 1981). Homoerotic experience is transformed into core being - the description becomes the thing. Thus Humphreys (1973b) suggests that in this culture homosexuality is not comparable to stamp collecting. Indeed, homosexuality is likely to become a central identity because it is condemned, and because it is so firmly connected (in this culture, again) to those core identities of gender - masculinity and femininity. (By implication, Humphreys does suggest that if homosexuality was not stigmatized, and if it could be dis-connected from its intimate link with gender, then it would lose its current centrality.)

Now it is important to distinguish this view (held mainly by phenomenologists like Warren and Pone, 1977) that homosexuality is constructed as an essence from the view (held by clinicians and sociologists like Whitam, 1976 and Wham, 1980) that homosexuality is an essence: the constructionists and the essentialists respectively. Although they ultimately converge on the idea of homosexuality as a noun, they do so from starkly opposing angles.

For the essentialist, homosexuality is a universal, a form found across cultures and throughout history: and the 'homosexual' of ancient Greece is directly comparable to the 'homosexual' of modern London. Whitam, for example, views it as a 'non-dominant, universal manifestation of human sexuality' (Whitam, 1980, p. 99), and in comparing three different societies (the United States, Guatemala and Brazil) concludes that on at least six indicators (like playing with dolls as a child and 'dressing up') homosexuals differed significantly from heterosexuals in all three cultures. In contrast, for the constructionist, homosexuality is not a universal essence. Human gender and human sexuality is a diffuse open-ended matrix of potential and possibility - to be narrowed down and organized in specific ways by specific sociological formations (Kessler and McKenna, 1978). How we think, feel and act out our 'sexualities' will depend on the ways that family structures set boundaries to emotional development, and the wider society sets boundaries to cognitive categories. (And, of course, there is always the possibility that such boundaries could be transcended!) These - as every anthropologist and historian knows - are far from universally constant.

The very notion of 'the homosexual' as a type of being is an invention of the mid-nineteenth century that has slowly had profound implications for the way homosexual experiences are patterned in our culture (Plummer, 1981).

Essentialists thus differ from constructionists on the way people become homosexual. For the essentialist, people develop an orientation early in life (through biology or psychodynamics) and it stays with them, to define their real underlying sexual being throughout life. Learning sexuality entails discovering what one really is. People can be unaware of this 'real' being - in which case they remain cases of 'latency'. For the constructionist, becoming sexual is a question of understanding how people develop on a vast matrix of sexual and gender possibilities across time. Some indication of the variables involved is given in Table 4.1. Constructionists hold that there is no essential link between these components; a biologically male person can behave homosexually without seeing himself as homosexual, see himself as a woman without seeing himself as a homosexual, see himself as a man whilst seeing himself as a homosexual or see himself as a homosexual but not behave as one. The permutations from this chart are clearly numerous, and it is beyond my scope to discuss them here. The cornerstone of this theory of becoming centres upon the way in which the person's identity is socially created, socially bestowed and socially maintained (Dank, 1971; Weinberg, 1978). In this view, learning to become a homosexual is largely a matter of learning to see oneself as a homosexual.

A paradox that emerges from this contrast is that ultimately, despite widely differing sources, the two positions converge on the idea of 'essence'. For the essentialist, homosexuality is a form of being; for the constructionist, homosexuality becomes a form of being once it is defined as such. Thus, however, inadequate the term 'the homosexual', or 'the gay'
TABLE 4.1 Locating homosexuality on the sexual matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of analysis</th>
<th>Organic</th>
<th>Behavioural Acts</th>
<th>Emotional Feelings</th>
<th>Cognitive Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>Behavioural Acts</td>
<td>Emotional Feelings</td>
<td>Cognitive Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Sexuality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Key dimensions
A Gender: all those matters pertaining to the male and the female.
B Sexuality: all those matters pertaining to the potential, arousability and engorgement of the genitals (this is a very problematic definition).

2. Level of analysis
A Organic: all those matters pertaining to bodily function and physiology.
B Behaviour: all activity, and patterns of expectations surrounding activities (i.e. roles).
C Emotional: internal feeling states.
D Cognition: all those matters pertaining to the way we organize our thoughts.

Units
1. Biological sex: a biological dichotomy between female and male chromosomally determined (e.g. the possession of a penis/vagina).
2. Gender acts: momentary behaviours that are identifiable as distinctly masculine or feminine (e.g. the wearing of a dress).
3. Gender roles: the constellation of expectations which indicate to others or to the self the degree that one is either male or female or ambivalent (e.g. the male role, the female role).
4. Gender feelings: the emotions culturally associated with masculinity and femininity (e.g. aggression, for a man).
5. Gender orientation: the underlying constellation of emotional feelings culturally associated with masculinity and femininity (e.g. activity for a man, passivity for a woman).
6. Gender meanings: the meanings culturally identified with being a man or being a woman (e.g. intelligence for men, emotionality for women).
7. Gender identities: 'The sameness, unity and persistence of one's individuality as male, female or ambivalent, in greater or lesser degree, especially as it is experienced in self-awareness and behaviour; gender identity is the private experience of gender role' (Money and Tucker, 1977, p.13).

8. Biological sexuality: the physiology of sexual and reproductive activity (e.g. the physiology of the orgasm – as discussed by Masters and Johnson, 1966).
9. Sexual activities: behaviour culturally defined as sexual (e.g. coitus, masturbation, fellatio).
10. Sexual role: the constellation of expectations culturally attached to certain forms of sexual activity (e.g. homosexual role, heterosexual role, sado-masochistic role).
11. Sexual feelings: momentary sexual excitement (e.g. 'fancying' someone who is passing by).
12. Sexual orientation: a person's central object and the aim of sexual expression (e.g. paedophilia, sado-masochistic, heterosexual).
13. Sexual meanings: whatever a person defines (momentarily) as sexual (e.g. a shoe, a dream).
14. Sexual identity: the sense a person holds of his or her sexual orientation (e.g. being a homosexual, being a heterosexual).

may be to social scientists, it does exist as a construct in the wider world that many people can opt to identify with. In so doing many people come to read their past as symptomatic of a 'real gayness' that was there all along. The ironic consequence can happen by which a sixty-year-old man - married with two grown-up children - can come to negate sixty years of heterosexual by announcing that he was 'really gay' all the time. The past is reread through the essentializing categories of the present. Clearly, this makes it very difficult to decide whether homosexuality really is an essence or whether it is simply learnt to be an essence, since on the surface they look the same. Yet one 'essence' flows from deep psychic necessity and the other from social learning; one sees labelling as mirroring reality and the other sees it as creating reality; one sees labelling as enabling and the other as restricting and controlling. It is the latter view of the constructionists that informs the remainder of this discussion.
THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL MOMENT: SEXUAL STIGMA AND THE HETEROSEXUAL ASSUMPTION

Central to the constructionist account of 'going gay' is the need to locate development in a historical and cultural context. A person never arrives out of the blue, but comes with a package of collective historical experiences that have shaped and influenced his or her life and while such experiences can be 'shaken off' they will normally leave a particular perspective for viewing the world and at later stages. The experience of homosexuality in the 1930s - criminal, sick and hidden as it was - is not like that of the 1980s - decriminalized, demedicalized and more visible as it is. Given the difficulties of being gay in the 1930s - bars were less common, 'cottageing' more prominent, gay couples more open to harassment, self esteem more threatened, gay organizations nonexistent, heterosexual marriage more necessary - it is likely that these shared experiences will linger with the older homosexual in the 1980s (Katz, 1976; Weeks, 1977).

Elderly gays may be more prone to being 'single', homosexually married and more fearful of gay meeting places and organizations because of their earlier experiences. Someone who has lived through the 1930s will find it hard to grasp the slight reductions in the homophobia that have occurred, and hence they will probably find talk of 'coming out' in 1980 very threatening, relating to their own 'cohort'. They may even feel angered and frustrated by the young around them who seem to positively flaunt their gayness; they will use the term 'queer' or at best 'homosexual' to describe themselves. In stark contrast, someone who has known nothing but the post-liberation period of the 1970s may take bars, organizations, and couples for granted - 'carrving' these shared experiences with them into the twenty-first century. Relating to their own cohort they may feel irritated by the 'closetness', 'conservatism' and self oppression of older gays and they will prefer the term 'gay' to apply to themselves - with all the pride, anger, openness, visibility, politics and health this implies (Morin, 1977; Kimmel, 1978, 1979).

While these specific yet shared historical perspectives are important, everyone living in the 1980s also has a common cultural experience which generates some of the most central problems of gay existence. This common experience centres around a twin process: the first - the heterosexual assumption - leads people to think in heterosexual terms; unless there are very good reasons for thinking otherwise everybody in our culture will be presumed to be heterosexual. The second process - sexual stigma - leads homosexuality to become enmeshed in a network of devaluation, hostility, fear, dread and even outright loathing. This twin process is overwhelmingly important because of the impact it will initially have upon any gay who believes that he may be homosexual, and because of the way it may subsequently fashion gay lifestyles.

The heterosexual assumption is the source of many gay problems; it will, for instance, provide the routine expectation that every adolescent will find a partner of the opposite sex, settle down, get married, ultimately procreate and raise children. But such an expectation may lead some to get married who will - in later life - come to wish they had chosen a gay lifestyle. Many adult homosexuals are likely to have spent some time of their earlier life in a marital situation - and this in turn generates a whole series of specific problems: of marital disharmony, of spouses who reproach themselves for the relationship, of divorce, of the problem of custody of wanted and unwanted children and of gay parents (Miller, 1979).

Another crucial problem to flow from the heterosexual assumption occurs in many areas of social need, where professionals are blinded to important problems. Thus, for instance, in the area of residential care it will always be presumed that children, the handicapped and the elderly (if it is assumed they are sexual beings at all) are heterosexual. Discussions of elderly gays in institutional care are nil; and yet somewhere between 3 per cent and 10 per cent of institutional populations are likely to have homosexual interests. The same can be said for many other social problems: homosexual racial minorities are not discussed, yet given the traditional 'macho' West Indian culture it is arguable that the problems of being gay within that culture are much greater (Soares, 1979); likewise the homosexual 'poor' are ignored - it is all very well to counsel homosexuals to become involved in the gay scene, when the cost of membership, entrance, travel, drinks and cosmetics are so high as to preclude those who live at or below the breadline. In all these areas then, and many others, the heterosexual assumption is at work quite strongly.

The other element of this twin process is sexual stigma. This takes a number of forms: from the tangible operations of the legal and medical professions who still have the power both to criminalize homosexual experiences and medicalize them, to the less tangible and more abstract sense that homosexuality is at the very least 'odd'. This 'homosexual taboo' constitutes the kernel of the homosexual's problems, if it can be reduced or eliminated then the problems accruing to the homosexual experience will diminish too.

Two kinds of problems come with stigma: the objective and the subjective. The first involves the constant risk of direct physical exclusion from certain groups in society. Homosexuals are still potentially liable to imprisonment and hospitalization; they may still potentially be sacked from their places of employment; they may still potentially have their children taken away from them; and they may still potentially be excommunicated from their church, banished from their community or cut off from their families (CHE, 1979). While not true of all experiences, homosexuality is often regarded with such dread that it can result in direct exclusion from participation in most avenues of social life. Here, at the very least, real problems of civil
liberties are attendant. Even where the above direct forms of discrimination are not practised, the subjective consequences of stigma will still come into play. Once a man starts to contemplate homosexuality it can be immediately accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame; feelings which in turn lead to the need for caution and secrecy; which in turn may lead to a profound sense of being 'dirty and different'. Isolation grows, secrecy grows, frustration grows - as one feels increasingly unable to satisfy one's emotio-sexual needs. So too does the centrality of the experience; it becomes pivotal, pressing and engulfing. This is the core of the homosexual problem. Take the stigmatization, the problems of guilt, secrecy, isolation, 'differentness and dirtyness' and of gaining access to like-minded individuals begin to wane. So many problems surrounding homosexuality then could simply be removed if society eliminated its stigmatizing attitude.

Some homosexuals come to these kinds of problems very early in life, resolve them and thereafter lead relatively unproblematic lives. It is equally clear that some people cannot neutralize this stigma: they live with it until they are sixty or seventy, or until they usher their 'secret' into their grave. They wrestle with it, fight against it, push themselves into all kinds of unfulfilling avenues in order to fight off this dreadful affliction that they think they possess. These are the homosexuals who are likely to get caught up in the psychiatric nets - those who cannot or will not come to terms with their homosexual experiences. The problems, however, can be resolved fairly quickly. Once a man gains access to a non-stigmatizing, supportive gay person; once a man can come to realize that there are many other people in the same predicament who can lead good, useful, positive lives; once a man can come to meet, talk and be friendly with other homosexuals, then in many instances, if not most, his problems recede.

THE GAY LIFE CYCLE: SOME TURNING POINTS

So far, I have been concerned with the importance of locating the person's experience in history and culture. But each person's life also has a history of growth, crisis and change. Until recently, accounts of this history were notorious for focusing upon the earliest years of life to the relative neglect of patterns of adult development. Life seemed to end at five. More recently there has been a growing interest in lifespan development through which the predictable crises in adult life are charted. Through intensive studies of individual lives, portraits are becoming established of critical turning points that most people will encounter. Levinson (1978, p. 58), for example, suggests there may be an 'age thirty transition' which provides an opportunity to work on the flaws and limitations of the first adult life structure, and to create the basis for a more satisfactory structure with which to complete the era of early adulthood. With only a few exceptions, however, this work has been dominated by the heterosexual assumption. Erikson's (1977, p. 239) celebrated account, for example, highlights a sixth stage - of intimacy versus isolation - where 'a mutuality of orgasm with a loved partner of the other sex' (my emphasis) becomes essential. Homosexuality is here defined out of the model.

To avoid such devaluation, we need to analyse the specific turning points - or crises - entailed in gay life cycles. Only when we are clear about these should they be related to a broader conception of development from womb to tomb. For the time being, I would like to suggest two such crises: 'coming out' and 'opting for a lifestyle'.

Coming out

The first, and usually most momentous, moments in any gay life cycle are those involved in coming out. Given both the heterosexual assumption and the homosexual taboo, those who may later in life 'go gay' will initially be socialized to believe that they are heterosexual; nagging feelings of being different may emerge very early in childhood or adolescence, but a clear sense of being gay will only unfold later. Coming out refers to this complex process of moving from a heterosexual (and confused) identity, given to one in childhood, to a strong, positive and accepting sense of one's identity as gay being given to one through awareness of the gay community. It is a momentous, frequently painful, experience in any gay person's life - comparable in impact perhaps to the birth of one's first child in the heterosexual cycle. Experiencing it will dramatically reshape one's life-route: life will never be the same again. Quite when 'coming out' will occur in any particular life is - as yet - unpredictable; many will find it occurring during their first heterosexual marriage, some may find it taking place in mid-adolescence, and others can move through it during their retirement. Most typically, though - in America during the 1970s - it seems to occur somewhere between the late teens and early thirties (Dank, 1971; Crites, 1976; de Monteflores and Schultz, 1978; Weinberg, 1978; Harry and Devall, 1978).

Coming out is a complex business involving at least three intertwined stages, which probably most people can never quite complete. They are:

1 coming out to oneself - starting to see oneself as homosexual;
2 coming out in the gay world - starting to meet other gay people;
3 coming out in the straight world - starting to be open to non-gays about one's gayness.

The first step is often the hardest, since it usually has to be taken alone without support from others: the whole weight of
cultural indoctrination has to be broken down. This, to engage in understatement, is not easy. At home, at school, with one's peers or confronting the media the message has insidiously been the same: the only path is the heterosexual one, and 'queers' are few and sick. How can you - in spite of your vague feelings and fantasies - be one of that sick few? You can't - and even if by some freak chance you were, it must be kept as a dark and hidden secret to be carried quietly to your grave. Yet to even start to have such ponderings is to set in motion the spiral of signification by which the idea that you could indeed be homosexual slowly becomes more and more central to your life. At what point it breaks through - 'I am like that, I must do something about it' - is largely unpredictable; but that this breakthrough does happen - against all odds - is unmistakable (Harry and DeVall, 1978; Humphreys, 1979b). An open mind, a liberal peer group, access to gay books, articles and films, sight of a Gay Switchboard sticker, knowledge of a homosexual person, etc. may all play their contributory roles in facilitating this self awareness; but in the end it is only the individual himself who can make the decision that he is gay and act upon it.

These first tortured stages of coming out can usually be circumvented speedily once the second stage - of meeting other homosexuals - is reached. This involves gaining access to homosexual role models that openly counterbalance the hetero- sexual role models of the preceding years (Riddle, 1978). The earlier doubts about the guilt, identity confusion, secrecy and sexual frustrations can begin to fade once homosexuals are met who, curiously enough, are 'glad to be gay', living reason- ably contented and productive lives. The gay bar is extremely important in this 'meeting' process, and more recently the development of smaller, more intimate groups of gays have strengthened this supportive process in coming out.

The final stage in the coming out process centres around relationships with the non-gay world: to tell others, and thereby establish a continuity of identity between self and the world at large; or to keep it a secret, and thereby live a marginally dishonest, slightly dissonant existence. A whole range of people could be told of one's gayness - family, neighbours, workmates, spouse, children, community - and whom to tell and when to tell can become significant issues for the gay person.

In general, not coming out in this third sense does seem to be linked to a less positive gay adjustment (Weinberg and Williams, 1974, p.186). On the other hand, more and more gays do seem to be telling others; and although there are often initial traumas (it is obviously hard for many non-gays to understand what homosexuality is all about - they may never have thought about it before), acceptance usually follows. Often, indeed, it can be positively beneficial to all parties - and in the long run it can only serve to break down further the hostility and mytho- logy which surround the whole subject. Coming out to the straight world is often the first sign that the homosexual person has successfully navigated his own problems and has moved on to those of others. From an inward-looking perspective to the gay world which has helped him find himself, he can now look outward to the community which previously rejected him.

Opting for a lifestyle
The first set of turning points, then, are all concerned with establishing a sense of who one really is - an identity which ideally exists not just for oneself alone, but which is also at home in the wider world. To summarize from Rainwater (1970, p.375): 'A valid identity is one in which the individual finds congruence between who he feels he is, who he announces him- self to be, and where he feels his society places him.'

In coming out to himself, to the gay community and to the wider environment, the homosexual man can develop a consistent, integrated sense of a self; a sense of self as gay which studies suggest are most compatible with a reasonably well-adjusted life (Bell and Weinberg, 1978).

Knowing who one is, however, does not necessarily tell one what to do or where to go. And here the second set of gay turning points enter, which can be referred to as 'opting for a lifestyle'. Although, arguably, the issue of choosing a lifestyle is increasingly an option for all people in capitalist cul- tures - gay and straight alike - it is still true that for most heterosexuals there is little perceived choice: round about their late teens and early twenties, confusions and early twenty-year olds pulled into 'the rating-dating-going steady-engagement-marriage-raising children' syndrome. Many people who become gay later will initially move, more or less unthinkingly, into this pattern. But this is most unlikely for those who have fully come out - indeed it would usually be a contradiction of their gay identity.

For many homosexual men, then, there is no obvious and immediate lifestyle available: however dimly, it has to be re- flected upon, and this can be a painful and prolonged search. Confusion arises not from being gay - for that is clear and accepted - but from not knowing how to incorporate gayness into an overall life pattern. A host of questions will be pondered upon, but three can be pulled out as particularly significant.

First, the person will have to decide how far he wants to become involved in the organized gay world: he may decide to totally immerse himself in it and to sever contacts with non-gay people, or he may decide to keep a great distance from all organized gays. Second, the person will have to decide on the kinds of gay relationships he wants: he may decide to imitate the heterosexual world and establish a kind of psuedo-marriage situation; he may decide to be more diffuse, more diffuse, more diffuse, people relationships or he may decide to remain firmly single. Third, the person will have to decide on the pattern and type of sexual involvement he wants: he may decide to have a lot of sex partners and to experiment with different activities, he may opt
for a monogamous partner, or he may decide to forgo sex and remain celibate. These and many other questions may crowd into the homosexual man's mind, and whether by default or conscious choice, some outcome will have to be established. I will comment on each of the three options mentioned above briefly in turn.

The gay world Since coming out will usually involve some contact with other gays, the most apparent initial lifestyle decision concerns either staying with gays and maybe becoming more and more immersed in the gay world, or else trying to disengage. Most people, I suspect, will opt for the former route initially - and will gain much security from it. For the gay world can provide solutions to many of the homosexual's problems. Where once he felt he was the only one, he is now provided with visible evidence of thousands of similar people. Where once he felt ashamed, he is now provided with an array of justification and legitimations of homosexuality from others in the world. Where once he felt confused and secretive, he is now confronted with open guidelines - gay role models he can learn from. Where once he was frustrated sexually he is now confronted with a tangible pool of sexual and emotional possibility. The gay world can become the gay man's 'haven in a heartless world'.

What is this gay world? At its most general, it refers to all those cultural forms which take male homosexuality as a key concern - gay bars, discos, clubs, saunas and the like. Until the 1970s such a world had existed in England and America, but it was fairly restricted in scope, substantially hidden from sight, and fairly culturally impoverished. While such small worlds still exist in small communities, it is perhaps now more appropriate to see larger cities as spawning 'satellite cultures' (Humphreys, 1978a) where homosexuality comes to be a broadly available and visible alternative culture for many, with its own media and services. Within this embracing alternative culture can be found a wide range of institutions (from varied gay bars to baths, from varied churches to political organizations), a range of special scenes and maybe even a gay ghetto - an urban neighbourhood which contains gay institutions in number, a conspicuous and locally dominated gay subculture that is socially isolated from the larger community, and a residential population that is substantially gay' (Levine, 1979, p. 364).

Since the early 1970s, especially, a new lifestyle option has also evolved for many gays: that of working in and for gay organizations. It is a much more feasible option in America, where every large city has spawned its own gay community centre and where the 'Gay Yellow Pages' lists every organization in the land. But even in England, there is enough happening for gay men to make a strong central commitment to gay causes: working for the rights of other gays, through the Campaign for Homosexual Equality; for the homosexual in the church, through the Gay Christian Movement; for the commercial organization of the gay community, through gay magazines, gay 'd上述services', gay products; for political change, through groups like Gay Left; for support and counselling, through groups like Gay Switchboard, Friend and Icebreakers; and for 'entertainment', through groups like Gay Sweatshop. Most of these organizations are significantly 'middle class' and have frequently attracted more youthful gays who have come out since the early 1970s.

Relationships Many diverse kinds of relationships and friendships are open to homosexual men, but probably the one which most men seek, many men find and relatively few sustain is that of the couple - a fairly permanent relationship between two men based upon a social, emotional and sexual foundation. Most gay men at some point in their lives seem to seek such a relationship, and it is easy to see why. Brought up in a culture which highlights the value and naturalness of 'coupling' - through the family of origin, through education, through religion, through the media - it is a difficult task for any individual to estrange himself from such concerns. A partner is a necessity - even if that means a heterosexual partner and all the later attendant problems of such 'mixed' marriages (Ross, 1971). Although it can be very difficult to find such a partner in the 'gay world' - partly because its institutions cater for people who have little in common but their gyness, partly because bars often establish expectations of 'casualness' in sexual relationships and partly because of continuing worrying doubts experienced by homosexual men because of social hostility - it is nevertheless the case that most 'out' gay men nowadays seem to pass through a stable relationship for two or three years. Only a minority, however, seem to reach silver or diamond anniversaries. We cannot, of course, be sure of this - since gay couples largely constitute the unresearched and 'hidden segment' of the gay world: those who establish long-term relationships may simply vanish from sight into their havens of happiness (Tuller, 1978).

The reasons for short-lived relationships are at least two-fold. On the most positive front, homosexual men can find after their first affair that the expectations of coupledom given to them by the 'straight world' are opposed to their personal growth and maturity: expectations of coupledom grounded upon male and female roles, procreation and childrearing in the straight world simply do not have the same relevance in the gay world. Couples are seen as restricting relationships, and the gay world is seen as providing the possibility of more variable patterns of stable friendships. What may be right for 'straights' is decidedly damaging to gays. On the more negative front, however, homosexual men who want their couple relationship to work may find themselves thwarted on all sides: not only are there most of the usual difficulties which any heterosexual couple faces - incompatibilities, misunderstandings, jealousies, practical housekeeping worries; sex, etc. - there are also many problems
which arise because of the lack of external validation given to their relationship. Social hostility to homosexual men, for example, may mean the relationship has to be hidden from family and workmates; it may mean difficulties in obtaining a joint mortgage, writing a mutual will or even visiting a sick partner in hospital; it may mean a general lack of support from others at times when the relationship is under severe stress. As hostility decreases, so these kinds of problems diminish - nevertheless they have played a paramount role in the past.

Despite such precautions, there is no doubt that large numbers of homosexual men do establish permanent relationships and more knowledge is needed of such relationships, comparable at least to that accumulated by marriage guidance counsellors for heterosexual couples. For instance, on the surface it appears that male gay couples have more egalitarian relationships than heterosexual couples - rigid role playing seems to be comparatively rare and that these are much more likely to allow, accept and even encourage non-monogamous experiences. Even more apparent is the fact that male homosexual couples do not usually have children to cement and give a focus to the relationship - although here there are signs of change as both 'gay fathers' and 'gay fostering' become possibilities (Miller, 1979). Such differences notwithstanding, however, the counsellor would probably be best served at present to presume that there are more similarities than differences between homosexual and heterosexual couples (Tripp, 1976).

Sexual experience A final, but highly significant, dimension out of which a gay lifestyle is assembled concerns sex. Whilst it is quite wrong to screen all understanding of homosexuality through sex, and to finally view all homosexuals as people obsessed with sex, it is equally wrong to minimize it. The cornerstone of homosexual experience has to be - by definition - an emotive-erotic relationship with one's own sex; and any gay lifestyle that denies (or minimizes) this must lead to hypocrisy or bad faith.

In the heterosexual world there are a number of avenues of sexual possibility, but the central route - of marriage - is clearly signposted. The times, of course, are changing, and increasingly extramural sex - wife-swapping, sexual monogamy, singles bars - are becoming acceptable; but marriage rolls on as the master plan. Likewise, in heterosexual relationships, coital sex is likely to remain the supreme goal - oral sex, masturbation and 'variations', while widely practised, usually take a subordinate role to the art of coitus: the final and most glorious act. In the gay world, neither of these seeming absolutes - marriage and coitus - hold. Alternatives have to be worked at.

The newcomer to the gay life does not know quite what gay sex is about; he will have his fantasies, it is true, but it is not uncommon for him to ponder aloud to the counsellor: 'Well, what do gay men actually do?' Nobody tumbling out of the womb knowing about the arts of sexual conduct, and gay sex - like everything else - has to be learnt. The variety of gay sexual practices is enormous; the newcomer will have to be exposed to this range - through talk, reading or practice - until he is in a position to know what forms of sexuality are preferred. Ironically, for some it may be that sexual practices offer little - it is the simple physical comfort and closeness to another man that appeals. For others, though, there is a well-organized network of diverse sex available through what Lee (1978, pp.8-9) calls a 'gay ecosystem'; a system which supplies sex to the people involved, at any hour of the day or night, every day of the year. The supply is convenient and well organized. It is usually inexpensive. It is almost inexhaustible. It comes in an amazing variety of options. It is available to all seekers, the young and old, the beautiful and ugly, though naturally not in equal quantity or amount. The supply is generally free from serious risks to health and safety, provided that sensible precautions are taken.

Indeed, Lee goes so far as to suggest that this gay ecosystem is 'better organized in the matter of getting sex' than the heterosexual world, and that 'heterosexuals could learn from this gay wisdom' (Lee, 1978, p.13). Lee's study is a detailed catalogue of those parts of the gay world where sex is readily available; certain streets, bars, baths, tearooms, discos, beaches, classified ads and so on. Anybody, with enough learnt self-confidence and awareness of the rules of the game, can find sex here.

Lee is not saying that all homosexual men want instant sex; nor is he saying that it is the only thing that matters in their lives. What he is saying is that for those men who do seek casual sex, it is readily available. It is not without pitfalls, but it is available.

IN CONCLUSION: THE PARADOX OF CATEGORIZATION

In this Chapter I have sketched three dimensions - the ontological, the historical and the life cycle - involved in men 'going gay', of transforming marginal homosexual experiences into full-blown gay identities and lifestyles. Especially in the last two sections I hope to have provided 'non-gay' practitioners with some very basic materials about gay development that may enhance their practice. At base, the message is a very simple one: since the wider culture - with its attendant 'heterosexual assumption' and 'sexual stigma' - is the key creator of problems for the homosexual experience, the main resolution lies with reducing the impact of this stigmatizing culture by facilitating access to the more supportive gay culture, with its gay role models as sources for positive identities.

But life, of course, is not that easy, and problems not that
simply resolved; every 'answer' brings its own problems. To facilitate access to a positive gay identity or a positive gay lifestyle is potentially to provide security and the path to psychological well being (Weinberg and Williams, 1974; Bell and Weinberg, 1978); but it could also be a path which forecloses diverse possibilities and openness. In the main, gay counselling organizations would not see this as a dilemma. Their task is to create conditions of positive support and thereby to usher their client into a positive gay role - the role most conducive to both personal happiness and political change. For them, the entire process of 'going gay' that I have described is necessary to counterbalance the tyranny of the dominant culture in socializing the child to heterosexuality in its earlier years. Nobody complains about the way in which such heterosexual socialization forecloses possibilities and openness - it is presumed, part indeed of the heterosexual assumption. To worry about such foreclosures of gay identity, therefore, is to lend support to the ultimate superiority of heterosexuality.

I have much political sympathy with this view and counsellors who worry about labelling somebody too quickly as homosexual should be firmly reminded of the heterosexual assumption which this harbours. Yet the paradox of categorization does pose very real practical problems.

On the one hand, labels are useful devices - they give order to chaos, structure to openness, security to confusion. Knowing that one is gay is much more comforting than living with the precariousness of confused sexual identities. On the other hand, labels are destructive devices - they restrict where other choices are possible, they control and limit possible variety, they narrow human experimentation. In the short run, labels are comforting; in the long run, they are destructive.

All this leads one back to the issue of ontology. The two views that I raised earlier will take different stands on this dilemma. For the essentialist the label homosexual identifies a real essence, while for the constructionist the label is socially created, socially bestowed and socially maintained. On the surface, therefore, it would seem that essentialists would accept people labelled as homosexual, while constructionists would be critical of labelling. But ironically this is not strictly true.

In the main, essentialists are clinicians who, whilst recognizing that homosexuality is an essence, would like to change the homosexual back into a heterosexual: essentialism totters towards absolutism, and in this case the absolutism is that of heterosexuality. Likewise, constructionists are sociologists, who - whilst recognizing that homosexuality is a historical invention, agree that gay self-definitions have played a very positive role: constructionism totters towards relativism, and an openness to diversity in human experiences. Labels become half-way houses towards further change and diversity: whilst the label is needed now, it will ultimately be eliminated.

The task of practitioners is not an easy one: to label too soon may prematurely close possibilities, and to label too late may add to the weight of suffering. The unifying theme of theory and practice must be a constant sensitivity to the contradictions and paradoxes common to both.

NOTES

1. The classic source of 'incidence' figures is still Kinsey et al. (1948), with his contrast between a third of the male population who have orgasms with the same sex at some point in their life and the 4 per cent who become 'permanently' gay. I suspect that nearly all research has gravitated to the 4 per cent, and we know very little about the remaining 30 per cent.

2. These terms are also used by Morin (1977) and Ponse (1978). Ponse also suggests that once inside the gay world a new assumption becomes operative: the homosexual assumption whereby all are presumed to be gay unless shown to be otherwise.

3. For a helpful review of this whole literature, see Kimmel (1980) and the studies mentioned therein. My quote comes from the popular study by Sheehy (1976). Most of this work is American - but for an English equivalent see Nicholson (1980).

4. The main exception to this is the case history of Poe to be found in Valliant (1977) - a San Franciscan gay who appears at the end of this longitudinal study, and in a telling chapter challenges the author's heterosexual assumptions of development. Kimmel also includes a gay - George aged twenty-seven - as the first case history in the revised (1980) edition of his book.

5. In the 1950s Erikson published his celebrated discussion of the 'eight stages of man', tentatively outlining his view of life as a 'ground plan', out of which 'the parts arise, each having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole' (Erikson, 1968, p.92). These eight stages are well known, leading from the initial problems of trust and mistrust in the first few months of life to the problems of integrity and despair in later life. Erikson's work was deeply influential - in part because it simply lacked any rivals! - but at the same time it raised many problems. Formally, the stages posited were deemed necessary, universal and linear; and although Erikson is rightly credited with both historical and cultural interests, he ultimately presents a model which reduces such interests to timeless human need. Likewise, substantively, while acknowledging the variations across culture, he tacitly sides with specific features of his own culture and prejudice. For discussions of Erikson's work, see especially Roazen (1978), and for a feminist critique Millett (1970).
5 LESBIAN IDENTITIES

Diane Richardson

INTRODUCTION

The process whereby a person develops and maintains an identification as homosexual has received very little attention in the literature. This is hardly surprising, however, given the kind of theoretical assumptions that have been prevalent in conceptualizations about homosexuality. Three major influences can be identified as being especially important in this respect.

1. The view of homosexuality as a permanent characteristic, the result of particular etiological factors occurring relatively early on in life.

2. The definition of homosexuality largely in terms of sexual orientation and sexual acts, coupled with the failure to distinguish between same-sex acts and an identification as homosexual. This has fostered a unidimensional view of homosexuals as sexual creatures, in which a homogeneity of motivating influences and a certain personality type have been assumed.

3. The predominance of personal pathological models in which homosexuality is viewed as a 'condition' of the individual.

In this way, lesbianism has been seen primarily as a permanent and inherent quality of the individual. The emphasis, therefore, has been upon the development of such a state of being, of the homosexual 'condition', rather than on the development of a lesbian identity per se. However, as Plummer (1975, p.135) points out:

One cannot see the individual 'automatically' or 'intrinsicly' 'knowing' that he is a homosexual - as the simple interpretation of prior elements. Rather, we must analyse the social situations and interaction styles that lead to an individual building up a particular series of sexual meanings, a particular sexual identity.

I would further add that we must also consider how a homosexual identity is maintained, the assumed fixity of sexual orientation having resulted in a lack of attention to this question.

In this Chapter it will be argued, then, that it is both inadequate and highly oversimplified to consider identification as a lesbian as an inherent quality of the individual. Rather we need to view lesbian identities as socially constructed and maintained via the process of social interaction. In this way,