

**HOMOSEXUALITY** is the tendency to be sexually and/or romantically attracted to members of one's own sex. Today the colloquial terms "gay" for men or women and "lesbian" for women (each term can be either an adjective or a noun) are considered respectful ways of referring to homosexuals. People who are sexually oriented toward both men and women are referred to by some as homosexual, or by the more specific term "bisexual."

Although exclusive homosexuality is a culturally important subcategory, sexual orientation should be thought of as a continuum ranging from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality (orientation to the opposite sex), with all gradations in between. And, in fact, the reality is still more complex: people can be homosexual for many different reasons, involving a variety of combinations of constitutional factors, life experiences, or both.

Erotic orientation to members of one's own sex does not, in Western culture at least, necessarily imply any other alteration in what is thought of as masculine or feminine behavior, such as dressing, speaking, or gesturing like a member of the opposite sex, nor is it restricted to any one personality type.

Homosexuals can be found in cultures throughout the world, whether advanced or primitive, large or small, ancient or modern. Societies vary widely in their tolerance of homosexuality, ranging from strict prohibition through casual acceptance to active encouragement. Among the most tolerant was the culture of ancient Greece. Among the least tolerant is the Judeo-Christian tradition that has dominated Western civilization for centuries.

Although most creative individuals are heterosexual (since most people are heterosexual), some of the greatest contributors to Western civilization have been overtly homosexual. Examples include Socrates, the founder of the Western philosophic tradition; Sappho, the Greek poet; Michelangelo, the Italian Renaissance painter and sculptor; and, in modern times, the persecuted Alan Turing, one of the founders of computer science, whose code-breaking activities helped the Allies defeat Nazi Germany in World War II. Yet in Mosaic Law, homosexuality was considered an abomination punishable by death, and Christian tradition has carried forward this condemnatory attitude. Under Nazi rule, homosexuals could be sent to concentration camps and gas chambers. Less severe punishments have been common throughout the Western world, the Islamic world, and elsewhere, and bigotry remains common today.

**Occurrence of Homosexuality.** Assertions are frequently made about the proportion of people who are homosexual to a significant degree—for example, in the United States, 10% of men and 5% of women. In reality, these figures are rough estimates. Consider the obstacles to gaining accurate information about this in societies, such as in America, where a high degree of prejudice or even punitive sanctions against homosexuals exist. Nevertheless, if we are talking about individuals with substantial or exclusive homosexual experience, we are probably referring to a significant but small minority in modern Western countries. Consistently, the rates found for women are about half those found for men (at least for exclusive homosexuality), so this may be a reliable ratio. If we consider instead the pro-

portion of men and women who have had at least one homosexual experience, including adolescent experience, then the proportions are much larger.

Cultural and social context can markedly influence these percentages. This is proved by the higher rates of homosexual behavior in groups of people whose access to members of the opposite sex is limited, such as prison inmates, soldiers, and clergy of religions requiring celibacy of them. It is further evidenced by cross-cultural and historical variation in rates. One study compared 76 independent traditional societies around the world and found that homosexuality was permissible in 49; yet it occurred clandestinely to some extent in the rest. Another study comparing 70 such cultures found homosexuality to be "not uncommon" in 29.

A closer look reveals that although homosexuality is never the predominant form of sexual behavior, some traditional societies have institutionalized it for some individuals or some parts of the life cycle. Ancient Greece viewed the love between older and younger men to be the ideal erotic relationship, and Spartan warriors often fought side by side with their lovers. Among some North American Indian groups, such as the Mohave, as well as some traditional societies in South America and Polynesia, there is an accepted role for male transvestites (men who dress as women), even as wives. Among some cultures of New Guinea, such as the Sambia, all young adolescent boys must engage in regular homosexual relationships with older boys, a system that ritualizes this activity for every male in this phase of life. Yet after adolescence, all are expected to change to a heterosexual orientation, to marry, and to have children. Most boys progress through these phases as expected.

These examples contradict several widely held but erroneous beliefs about homosexuality: that the same percentage of individuals in every population are homosexual; that culture has little influence on this type of behavior; that sexual orientation cannot change; and that homosexuality can be abolished. The evidence about the occurrence of homosexuality thus does not support simplistic views of any stripe.

However, besides the actual forms of sexual activity, differences in behavior between male and female homosexuals, and between homosexuals and heterosexuals, have been found. There is evidence that infidelity is commoner among gay male couples than among heterosexual couples. Lesbian couples, however, appear to be more faithful than heterosexual couples. Data on sexually transmitted diseases support this view: these are most frequent in gay men and least frequent in lesbians, with heterosexual men and women falling in between.

Contrary to popular belief, most homosexuals do not restrict themselves to exclusively "active" or "passive" roles within their relationships. Typical forms of homosexual foreplay are similar to those of heterosexuals. Homosexual relationships contain a balance of affection, attachment, and sexuality not strikingly different from the balance in relationships between men and women. In societies like many in the West, however, homosexuals may experience distortions of their relationships as a result of the dominant heterosexual culture's severe prejudice against homosexuality.

**Theories of Homosexuality.** The question of why

a given human being may become homosexual, heterosexual, or some combination of the two has always fascinated thoughtful people. Although some psychologists and psychiatrists believed they had answers to this question 30 years ago, recent discoveries have shown that most such answers were highly questionable. The fact is that scientific understanding of the solution to this puzzle is in its infancy.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing and other 19th century authorities believed that homosexuality always involved a strong constitutional (biological) predisposition and that it was always associated with mental illness. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, developed a more subtle perspective. In a letter written in 1935 to the mother of a homosexual man, Freud declared that homosexuality "is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness." But he also attributed it to "a certain arrest of sexual development." Yet he went on to say that in most cases no therapy or analysis could change a homosexual into a heterosexual. "What analysis can do for your son runs in a different line. If he is unhappy, neurotic, torn by conflicts, inhibited in his social life, analysis may bring him harmony, peace of mind, full efficiency, whether he remains a homosexual or gets changed."

But by the 1950's, Freud's disciples had become convinced that homosexuality was a treatable illness. Furthermore, they had devised very specific theories about the type of mother or father likely to produce homosexual orientation in a boy or girl. Subsequently, much evidence accumulated to contradict these views. In the early 1970's, homosexuals in Western countries became bolder in asserting their rights and their identities—"coming out of the closet" or "coming out" are terms for this. Psychiatrists and psychologists began to reassess their own convictions as the idea of homosexuality as an illness came to be seen by many as little more than a scientific transformation of the ancient Judeo-Christian prejudice.

Accordingly, in 1974 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of illnesses, treatable or otherwise, in its official *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. In several subsequent editions the only category listed was "ego-dystonic homosexuality," meaning a condition of emotional distress about one's homosexuality. By the time the 1987 edition of the manual appeared, all that was left of this category was "persistent and marked distress about one's sexual orientation," a subcategory of a miscellaneous category called "Sexual Disorders Not Otherwise Specified." With this change, psychiatrists came to recognize that either heterosexuals or homosexuals could be unhappy about their sexual orientation. It seems probable that some of these people can undergo a change in their sexual orientation through psychotherapy. (A few have even had surgery and hormone treatments to change their bodies to conform to their ideas of themselves.) But others may use psychotherapy to become better adjusted to their sexual orientation, whatever it may be.

Studies by investigators at the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University have disproved the idea that homosexuality is subject to easy generalizations. Homosexuals may be happy or neurotic, similar to their own or to the opposite sex in their behavior, faithful or promiscuous,

gentle or aggressive, and may exhibit any degree of bisexuality. As Alan Bell and Martin Weinberg note, "There are 'homosexualities' and there are 'heterosexualities.'" With their colleague Sue Kiefer Hammersmith, they also prepared a study of how these different types of homosexuals develop. They found little support for traditional psychoanalytic ideas. Instead there was evidence of the power of many separate factors, working at different points in childhood and adolescence, to influence the outcome of lifelong sexual orientation. Their approach is called "path analysis," emphasizing the long, complex course of events in life that lead cumulatively to sexual orientation.

However, they did arrive at several generalizations about homosexuality. Homosexuals were much more likely to have been uncomfortable with their roles as boys or girls when they were children than were heterosexuals—even though they did not necessarily carry this role discomfort into adulthood. They were likely to have strong feelings of attraction to members of the same sex beginning at age 13 for boys and 16 for girls, an average of three years before their first actual homosexual experience. Both male and female homosexuals reported poor relationships with their fathers, but it was not clear whether they were the cause or the effect of their gender nonconformity. Harking back to Freud and Krafft-Ebing, the authors viewed inborn biological factors as playing an important role. They speculated that such factors might be more important for exclusive homosexuals than for bisexuals. Other studies conclude that genetic factors are important in many if not most cases and various hormonal studies also point to biological factors.

The ultimate path analysis, which is still many years away, will almost certainly point to a combination of genetic and experiential factors. Some individuals will be seen to be inescapably predisposed to becoming gay, while others will be more malleable and respond to many different kinds of experience. In any case, the prejudice that continues to pervade our society causes untold suffering to people who are basically just trying to find out who they are. Fear of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, strengthened prejudice, because male homosexuals were the first community in the West to get AIDS in large numbers. However, their prompt response to the epidemic, with the adoption of safer sex practices, curtailed the spread in their community and protected others as well. Eventually a medical victory over AIDS will make it possible for homosexuals to resume their search for identity, love, and respect; for now, many are preoccupied with the tragedy of a devastating illness.

MELVIN KONNER, Ph.D., M.D.  
Emory University

#### Bibliography

- Bell, Alan P., and Weinberg, Martin S., *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women* (Simon & Schuster 1978).
- Bell, Alan P., Weinberg, Martin S., and Hammersmith, Sue Kiefer, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* (Ind. Univ. Press 1981).
- Herdt, Gilbert, *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity* (Columbia Univ. Press 1981).
- Isay, Richard A., *Being Homosexual: Gay Men and Their Development* (Farrar, Straus 1989).
- Rich, Adrienne, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (Norton 1978).
- Weinrich, James, *Sexual Landscapes: Why We Are What We Are, Why We Love Whom We Love* (Scribner 1987).