

Nobody is 'born that way,' gay historians say



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Members of the London Gay Men's Choir perform in front of the Houses of Parliament in central London July 15, 2013.
REUTERS/Andrew Winning

Virtually no serious person disputes that in our society, people generally experience their gay or straight orientations as unchosen and unchangeable. But the LGBT community goes further, portraying itself as a naturally arising subset of every human population, with homosexuality being etched into some people's DNA.

Are gays indeed born that way? The question has immense political, social, and cultural repercussions. For example, some of the debate over applying the Constitution's equal protection clause to gays and lesbians focuses on whether gayness is an inborn characteristic. And the major argument gays and lesbians have made for religious affirmation has been, "God made me this way."

Thus, if it's proven sexual orientations are not innate, much of the scaffolding upon which today's LGBT movement has been built would begin to crumble. Given the stakes, most gays and lesbians are dismissive or hostile toward anyone who doesn't think being gay is an essential, natural characteristic of some members of the human race.

But a surprising group of people doesn't think that – namely, scholars of gay history and anthropology. They're almost all LGBT themselves, and they have decisively shown that gayness is a product of Western society originating about 150 years ago.

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Using documents and field studies, these intrepid social scientists have examined the evidence of homosexuality in other times and cultures to see how the gay minority fared. But they've come up empty. Sure, there's substantial evidence of both discreet and open same-sex love and sex in pre-modern times. But no society before the 19th century had a gay minority or even discernibly gay-oriented individuals.

(There weren't straight people, either. Only our society believes people are oriented in just one direction, as gay history pioneer Jonathan Ned Katz, formerly of Yale, explained in his book *The Invention of Heterosexuality*.)

According to the experts on homosexuality across centuries and continents, being gay is a relatively recent social construction. Few scholars with advanced degrees in anthropology or history who concentrate on homosexuality believe gays have existed in any cultures before or outside ours, much less in all cultures. These professors work closely with an ever-growing body of knowledge that directly contradicts "born that way" ideology.

Please don't confuse my points with the amateur [arguments](#) of people like Brandon Ambrosino. The subtle, counter-intuitive academic case that being gay is a social construction relies on abundant studies built out of actual data from leading scholars at major universities. Someone who quotes a few lines from Foucault and then declares that people choose their sexual orientations is making a mockery of this serious, vital subject.

Sexual orientations cannot be innate

Journalists trumpet every biological study that even hints that gayness and straightness might be hard-wired, but they show little interest in the abundant social-science research showing that sexual orientation cannot be innate. The scholars I interviewed for this essay were variously dismayed or appalled by this trend.

For example, historian Dr. Martin Duberman, founder of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, said "no good scientific work establishes that people are born gay or straight." And cultural anthropologist Dr. Esther Newton (University of Michigan) called one study linking sexual orientation to biological traits ludicrous: "Any anthropologist who has looked cross-culturally (knows) it's impossible that that's true, because sexuality is structured in such different ways in different cultures."

While biology certainly plays a role in sexual behavior, no "gay gene" has been found, and whatever natural-science data exists for inborn sexual orientations is preliminary and disputed. So to date, the totality of the scholarly research on homosexuality indicates gayness is much more socio-cultural than biological.

Historical perspectives

Knowing about the phantom gay past when everyone else is certain gayness has always existed can be frustrating. Gay history professor Dr. John D'Emilio (University of Illinois-Chicago) once lamented that even while gay historical scholarship accepts the “core assumptions” of the social-construction idea, “the essentialist notion that gays constitute a distinct minority of people different in some inherent way has more credibility in American society than ever before.”

Today's categories for sexuality correspond poorly with times past. Dr. Duberman put it this way: “Were people always either gay or straight? The answer to that is a decided no.” Instead, people from other eras who slept with members of their own gender “haven't viewed that as something exclusive and therefore something that defines them as a different category of human being.”

Many popular attempts to portray an age-old history of gayness start with ancient Greece. We do have much documentation — the poetry of Sappho, Greek vases depicting men *in flagrante* — that same-sex relationships and intercourse were common in that culture.

But scholars don't think the ancient Greeks had a gay minority. Rather, that civilization thought homosexuality was something anyone could enjoy. In addition to a wife, elite men were expected to take a younger male as an apprentice-lover, with prescribed bedroom roles. The system was so different from ours that to describe specific ancient Greeks as gay or straight would show profound disrespect for their experiences, and violate the cardinal historical rule against looking at the past through present-colored lenses.

Another example in which evidence of same-sex relations has been misinterpreted to depict a gay minority involves 18th-century upper-class female romantic friendships. Even those women who probably had genital contact with each other in that context thought about sex, gender, and intimacy in such culturally specific ways that scholars have spurned the viewpoint (nearly universal among non-scholars) that any two females who wrote each other love letters and shared a bed were obviously lesbians.

Anthropological perspectives

LGBT anthropologists have also found no gay minorities in their studies of cultures around the world. In fact, Dr. Newton noted in an essay that her field has “no essentialist position on sexuality, no notion that people are born with sexual orientations. The evidence, fragmentary as it is, all points the other way.” Thus, Dr. Newton wrote, “Western lesbian and gay anthropologists, for the most part, have not run around the world looking for other lesbians and gay men.”

Instead, different cultures have a panoply of understandings of sex, gender, and desire specific to their own worldviews. For example, the Native Americans known as *berdaches* or two-spirits have generally taken on feminine dress and social roles, and almost exclusively partnered with non-*berdache* men. From an anthropological perspective, if *berdaches* are a gay minority, then the term “gay” loses all meaning.

Many Arab, African, and Latin American cultures have organized sexuality around the masculinity/femininity or active/passive role of the sex object, rather than the biological sex of the individual desired. Such cultures have plenty of same-sex activity, but many of them didn't have a gay minority until recently.

Our gay/straight/bisexual system seems obvious and logical because we exist within it, but anthropology provides an important corrective to our ethnocentric assumptions. Dr. Newton asserted without hesitation that she knows of no non-Western cultural system that divides people into the categories of men who like women; men who like men; women who like men; and women who like women the way ours does.

When and where did being gay originate?

So why did a gay minority first appear only a century and a half ago, and only in the West? Some scholars say it's because that's when and where doctors began to pathologize people who spoke of same-sex desires or experiences. Those patients developed homosexual identities, which led others to distinguish themselves as heterosexual.

Another kind of analysis spotlights Western economic and demographic trends. Dr. D'Emilio has argued that subsistence outside the nuclear family first allowed urban young men to experience same-sex eroticism in ways that could lead to gay identity. And Katz has pointed to the increased "sexualization of commerce and commercialization of sexuality," in which entrepreneurs profited from sex-linked books, magazines, films, bars, and baths.

While each approach assigns the genesis of the gay minority to the mid-to-late 19th century, in many places gay identity didn't develop until much later. For example, Yale historian Dr. George Chauncey's studies of New York City and Newport, Rhode Island before the Second World War include many individuals involved in same-sex activities who cannot be fairly called "gay."

Nonetheless, gay-rights organizations present gayness as ubiquitous and timeless. One Web site for straight allies of the gay community (pflag.org) even says:

Is there something wrong with being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender? No. There have been people in all cultures and times throughout human history who have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).

If that were even partly true, gay and lesbian social scientists would have reason to celebrate. Identifying the first gay minority outside our milieu would make their careers.

If it's natural, it isn't cultural

How can gayness be natural, if it is also culturally specific? The possibilities are underwhelming:

The difference is semantics. It's really not. Gay and lesbian historians aren't just claiming that before the 19th century nobody was called "gay." They're saying nobody was gay (or straight). While various societies had different ways of thinking about and expressing gender, love, and desire, homosexuality was generally something one could do, not something one could be.

Gays in other cultures couldn't come out because homosexuality wasn't accepted. But we have loads of evidence of same-sex intercourse and love, which would be unlikely if the problem was homophobia. We have no convincing evidence that the people leaving such records were unresponsive to the opposite sex or considered themselves to be oriented differently than those who expressed passion for opposite-sex individuals.

The gay minorities from other societies left no records. Doubtful. We have documentation of so many aspects of people's public and private lives that if there were long-ago gay people, we'd know about them. For example, there are thousands of 20th century letters and novels and speeches and diary entries that say some version of, "My parents want me to marry an opposite-sex person, but I don't want to, because I only like my own sex." But to my knowledge, there are virtually no such 10th-century documents.

By definition, people who want or have same-sex love and sex are gay, and those who don't are straight – yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It's tempting to look for versions of our own lives and identities in other eras, but responsible history tries to understand the past on its own terms. Saying Shakespeare was gay makes about as much sense as saying he was a Republican.

Of course, none of this means people don't have sexual orientations today, it just means sexual orientations are specific to our culture, and thus not basic human nature. In tech-speak, that means being gay is in the software of some people's lives, but it's in nobody's hardware.

The compelling evidence nobody's born gay doesn't necessarily have to shred the LGBT agenda. Legitimate reasons for more liberal attitudes and policies regarding gays and lesbians still exist, such as freedom of association, the right to privacy, and respect for other people's experiences. But those who demand social or political change because gays are born that way just don't know much about history.

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