

Letter to the Editor

The Heterosexual/Homosexual Distinction: A Reply to McConaghy (2005)¹

In McConaghy's (2005) recent Letter to the Editor, entitled "Time to Abandon the Gay/Heterosexual Dichotomy?," he stated that it was time that contributors to the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* "acknowledge the evidence questioning the community view that people are either heterosexual or gay." This evidence, we are told, comes in the form of several studies showing that "about 20% of men and women reported awareness of some homosexual feelings, with the majority of the 20% reporting predominantly heterosexual feelings" (p. 1).

McConaghy then singled me out as one of those contributors who needs to acknowledge this evidence. The contribution in question was my book review of Herdt's "Sambia Sexual Culture: Essays from the Field" (Giles, 2004). In this review, I argued that Herdt's claims about Sambia culture "scripting" the sexual orientation of its male members were based on a biased interpretation of the data, an interpretation that lacked any awareness of nonsexual motives or fantasy that might cause sexual behavior. I raised the possibility, for example, that it might well be fantasy about fellatio with a female that caused most Sambia adolescent males to be sexually aroused while being fellated by a younger boy, rather than the genuine homosexual desires that Herdt claimed were there. Strangely, Herdt never even considered this obvious interpretation, one which seems likely when it is seen that Sambia adolescents are prohibited from contact with females, are not allowed to masturbate, and, when the taboos at last allow them access to females, find sexual intercourse with them intensely exciting.

McConaghy criticized my view here saying that in order to account for the adolescent's sexual arousal "Giles found it necessary to suggest the older boy may be fantasizing that the younger boy is a girl. However, if the evidence is accepted that 20% of adolescent boys in western culture experience homosexual feelings, it would seem necessary to exclude the possibility that this is equally true of Sambia boys" (p. 1). He then stated that

"Giles' . . . conclusion that 'if there is a bawdy enthusiasm shown in the performance of fellatio, it is only shown by a minority of boys at the extreme end of the continuum' . . . seems influenced by the community belief that people capable of homosexual arousal are an extreme minority" (p. 1). He further claimed that I suggested that any boy who had erections while performing fellatio "would later become exclusive homosexuals" (p. 2).

There are, however, many problems with McConaghy's assertions. First, it seems that McConaghy is attacking a straw man. Is it really true that the community view is that people are either heterosexual or gay? It seems pretty obvious that most people accept the existence of bisexuality in its varying degrees and, consequently, do not hold the view that all people are either heterosexual or gay. I certainly do not hold this view, as should have been obvious to McConaghy from the discussion of bisexuality in my review.

Secondly, I fail to see how the fact that only 20% of people report having "awareness of *some* homosexual feelings" (my emphasis) means we should abandon the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This is like arguing that the existence of hermaphroditism proves that we should abandon the distinction between male and female. Of course, the presence of bisexuality means it is wrong to hold the view that *all* persons are either exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, but it is unlikely that anybody seriously entertains such a view.

Thirdly, although it is an empirical question, I doubt that contributors to this Journal, or even "the community," hold the view that the terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" (or "gay") are synonymous with "exclusive heterosexual" and "exclusive homosexual." As Kinsey suggested long ago, there exists a degree of blending of heterosexual and homosexual desires stretching from exclusive heterosexual at one end of the continuum to exclusive homosexual at the other. The existence of this continuum does not mean, however, that a woman in her 40s, for example, who, as a 14-year-old had "some homosexual feelings," but since then has had only heterosexual desires, is not properly considered a

¹Editor's note. Dr. McConaghy's passing in 2005 precludes a direct response to this letter.

heterosexual. This is because the terms “heterosexual” and “homosexual,” if I am not mistaken, are normally used to refer to a person’s *predominate* orientation (which is why the term “exclusive heterosexual” is not redundant). Of course, as Kinsey’s scale shows, there are areas where it will be unclear whether a person should be considered heterosexual rather than bisexual, or bisexual rather than homosexual, but this hardly shows that the terms “heterosexual” and “homosexual” can only mean “exclusive heterosexual” and “exclusive homosexual.”

As for McConaghy’s claim that I was influenced by the community view, when I concluded that, if there was bawdy enthusiasm, it was only shown by a minority of the Sambia boys, McConaghy did not notice that I was merely drawing a conclusion from Herdt’s own statements. In one place, Herdt tells us that the young Sambia boys show “bawdy enthusiasm” in their performance of fellatio, while in another place he tells us that “some boys evince from the start a low interest, and they seldom participate in fellatio; on the other hand, some novices feverishly join in. These are the two extremes: the great majority of Sambia boys regularly engage in fellatio for years, as constrained by taboo” (Herdt, 1999, pp. 108–109). Thus, it follows from Herdt’s own words that the enthusiasm referred to only occurs at the extreme end of the continuum.

Concerning McConaghy’s further assertion that I suggested Sambia boys who have erections while performing fellatio would later become exclusive homosex-

uals, this is simply false. Nowhere did I say such a thing. What I said was that the only example Herdt gave of a boy fellator who had such erections was of a boy who later became an exclusive homosexual. I pointed this out to show the paucity and inappropriateness of the data upon which Herdt based his assertions about the Sambia “scripting” of homosexual desires in the majority of Sambia boys.

Because of all this, I do not think McConaghy has presented any grounds for abandoning the heterosexual/homosexual distinction (it never was a dichotomy) or has he shown anything to be wrong with my criticisms of Herdt’s view of Sambia sexual desires.

REFERENCES

- Giles, J. (2004). [Review of the book Sambia sexual culture: Essays from the field]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 33, 412–417.
 Herdt, G. (1999) *Sambia sexual culture: Essays from the field*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 McConaghy, N. (2005). Time to abandon the gay/heterosexual dichotomy? [Letter to the Editor]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 34, 1–2.

James Giles, Ph.D.
College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences
University of Guam
UOG Station
Mangilao, Guam 96923
e-mail: shobogenzo@hotmail.com