

Letter to the Editor

Time to Abandon the Gay/Heterosexual Dichotomy?

Surely it is time that contributors to the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* acknowledged the evidence questioning the community view that people are either heterosexual or gay. Several studies have shown that, when questioned anonymously, about 20% of men and women reported awareness of some homosexual feelings, with the majority of the 20% reporting predominant heterosexual feelings (Dunne, Bailey, Kirk, & Martin, 2000; McConaghy, 1987; McConaghy, Buhrich, & Silove, 1994; Sell, Wells, & Wypij, 1995). Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) and Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard (1953) had earlier reported a similar distribution of the ratio of heterosexual/homosexual feelings in subjects who were questioned non-anonymously, as did Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) in their non-anonymous investigation of a representative sample of the United States population. If it is accepted that a significant percentage of the population have predominant heterosexual feelings and identify as heterosexual but are aware of some homosexual feelings, the issues discussed in the recent letter by Wilde (2004) and the book review by Giles (2004) become more complex than these writers indicate.

While probably the majority of readers would agree with Wilde's major point that it is a myth that gay men are sexually out of control and incapable of sustaining mature relationships, many who are therapists would have encountered some gay men who report being sexually out of control, to the extent of being involved in risky sexual behavior against their wishes. They are also likely to have been consulted by men living heterosexual lifestyles who have predominant heterosexual feelings but report involvement in homosexual activities which they wish to cease but experience as compulsive. It seems unjustifiable to label as neurotic, as Wilde does, the desire of these men for treatment to cease expressing homosexual feelings and behaviors which are unwanted and possibly life-threatening to them and their partners. While agreeing with Wilde that guidelines for a "reorientation" treatment protocol are needed, once the existence of heterosexuals with homosexual feelings who at times seek treatment for these feelings is accepted, it becomes necessary to conceptualize such treatment as other than "reorientation."

In his review of Herdt's "Sambia Sexual Culture: Essays from the Field," Giles (2004) considered that, in Western culture, bisexuality usually refers to the engagement in both heterosexual and homosexual behavior during the same period of life, whereas in Sambia culture there tends to be a period of exclusive homosexuality that is then followed by a sudden shift to exclusive heterosexual activity. In fact, the Sambia form of bisexuality appears to be more similar than that described by Giles to the bisexuality reported by the United States sample studied by Laumann et al. (1994). Bisexual behavior decreased with age in both men and women, being reported by about 6, 4, 2, and 1% of men and 3, 4, 1.5, and 0.3% of women, over the four periods since puberty, since age 18, in the previous five years, and in the previous year, with the majority shifting to exclusive heterosexual activity. The highest percentages of subjects reporting homosexual behavior were adolescent men and young adult women, 6.6% and 4.4% of whom respectively reported this. The lowest percentages of subjects who reported homosexual behavior were those who reported carrying it out in the previous year, 3% of men and 1.3% of women, respectively. The reduction in the percentage of men and women who carry out homosexual activity with age may be due, in part, to a reduction of homosexual feelings in the predominantly heterosexual. Of the male twins who answered an anonymous questionnaire, 20% reported awareness of some homosexual feelings by age 15, but only 12% currently (McConaghy et al., 1994). A similar trend had been found in studies of medical students, less representative of members of the community than the twins (McConaghy, 1987).

To account for a Sambia heterosexual adolescent boy being sexually aroused when experiencing fellatio by a younger boy, 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 about 20% of adolescent boys in Western culture experience some homosexual feelings, it would seem necessary to exclude the possibility that this is equally true of Sambia boys. Giles's (2004) 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” (p. 416) seems influenced by the acceptance of the community belief that people capable of homosexual arousal are an extreme minority. His acceptance of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy is further indicated by his doubting the existence of men who happily made the transition to exclusive heterosexuality who earlier had erections while performing fellatio. He suggested that any boys who showed erections in this activity would later become exclusive homosexuals. Of course, for a number of Sambia boys, Giles’s explanation may be correct that they become sexually aroused by using heterosexual fantasy and, as he pointed out, sexual behavior can be engaged in for numerous reasons, many of which have nothing to do with sexual desire. The evidence that homosexual feelings are more widespread than is commonly accepted does not conflict with Giles’s criticism of the implication in the book he reviewed that the sexual behavior of the Sambia boys is due to homosexual desires that their culture has through deep scripting implanted in them. The dimensional distribution of homosexual and heterosexual feelings in boys and men in Western cultures could be compatible with the distribution of these feelings in Sambia boys and men. In both groups, the extent to which such feelings are due to cultural or biological factors or an interaction of the two would appear to be as yet unresolved.

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