

THE ETIOLOGY OF GENDER IDENTITY AND THE LESBIAN*

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A. INTRODUCTION

Theories of the etiology of adult sexual orientation have focussed largely on male homosexuality and taken two major approaches. The first of these has involved the genetic and physiological explanations. Outstanding in this approach has been Kallman with his genetic theory (7). However, Marmor and Hooker (6, 8) have been specifically critical of such a genetic view; and Allen, as a medical authority, rejects any constitutional or glandular explanation (1). The second opinion has stressed early learning, and subsequent cognitional functioning, as the factors that foster adult gender role performance. In this consideration, Money has stated that homosexuality relates to disorders of cognitional eroticism established in infancy (9). Similarly, the research of the Hampsons' supports the opinion that an individual's psychosexual frame of reference is determined by the sex of assignment and rearing (4). The work of the Harlows has shown that, for monkeys at least, the mother-infant interaction plays a vital part in the development of heterosexual performance (5). Colley has theorized on the importance of interpersonal relationships as they affect the development of the sexual identity component of the "self" (2) and, echoing this, Greenstein has suggested that learning by differential reinforcement could be a critical aspect of acquiring sexual identity (3).

Logically interrelating and extending these notions, on cognitional learning and the development of sexual identity, provides a theoretical assumption as to the etiology of adult gender role performance that may be expressed as follows: In the beginning the human organism has the potential of pansexuality while, at the same time, entering a critical learning phase. The conditioning events taking place during this phase leave an indelible imprint on the

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psychological modalities referred to as personality. Physical interpersonal contact behavior and the related cognitional symbols are particularly susceptible to differential reinforcement processes because of the powerful tension reduction factors involved. Thus, the socialization process channels the erotic inclination and establishes the behavioral systems or sentiments that with maturity precipitate the psychosexual orientation. The cardinal actors in the child's development of gender orientation are the significant others who by gestures, overt behavioral manifestations and role model performance shape the adult erotic role behavior. This theorizing yields a major hypothesis: Heterosexual females have socialization backgrounds that channelled their erotic potential toward adult heterosexual role performance, whereas Lesbians experienced a socialization process that alienated them from such psychosexual role behavior. The purpose of this study was to determine if such a hypothesis had a degree of validity.

B. METHOD

1. *The Instrument*

Initially, open-ended questions concerned with early experiences were presented in interviews conducted with pilot groups of six heterosexual and six homosexual females. In the interviews it became apparent that for these individuals, at least, the socialization process, as it related to the salient aspects of gender role learning, varied by adult sexual orientation. The information gathered was synthesized into a set of 32 questions, 28 of which focussed on five areas perceived of as indicating a decided difference in socialization experience. These five areas involved childhood experience with heterosexual role learning games; early attitudes towards physical sex functions; the relationship between mother and daughter; the maternal role performance; and the relationship between father and daughter. In order to facilitate a relatively brief response time in semipublic environments, the questions were made as simple as possible, succinct and answerable in four categories, as, for example, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never.²

2. *The Sampling*

In 1968, with the instrument established, the research project moved out into the Greater Los Angeles area in search of 50 adult female respondents who would define themselves, on an anonymous questionnaire, as being Lesbian or homosexual or both and respond to the effect that their sexual preference was for women. Numerous bars and social clubs catering to homosexuals were

² Interested professionals may obtain copies of the questionnaire from the writer.

visited over a period of months and, after much difficulty, rapport was attained sufficient to provide for the completion of 50 questionnaires, but suspicion of the motives of the male researcher was never overcome to the extent that might be expected from a similar heterosexual group. Thus the cooperation achieved can only be described as minimal. The respondents were not informed of the theoretical assumption of the study although they were told of the researcher's sympathetic appreciation of the difficulties they experienced as social deviants.

With the acquisition of the homosexual sample, attention was turned to the heterosexual population. Due to the limitations of the study, matching, other than roughly for age, was not attempted. In the matter of age the homosexual group had a mean age 30 years with a range of from 20 to 44, while the heterosexuals showed a mean of 28 with a range of from 20 to 52 years. Most of the heterosexual 50 were taken from a college campus population of academic and nonacademic females and, therefore, there was a bias toward a higher education level for the heterosexuals. Lesbian women of high education level, often in professional positions, were extremely reluctant to respond to the questionnaire. It is this researcher's subjective observation, however, that their incorporation into the sample would not have changed the general homosexual response pattern.

Similarly, although conversely, the heterosexuals were defined for the purpose of this study as adult females who responded on the questionnaire to the effect that they were not homosexual or Lesbian or both and that their sexual preference was for men. The heterosexuals were not told of the theoretical assumption of the research before the administration of the instrument, although several were so informed at their personal request after the sampling had been completed. At the time of taking the questionnaire the heterosexual respondents were told that it was a research project on socialization experience.

C. RESULTS

The questionnaire response categories were fourfold, but for the purpose of analysis they were categorized as dichotomies. As an example, Often and Sometimes were categorized in opposition to Rarely and Never. The responses relating to the hypothesis of the study were subjected to the techniques of phi coefficient and chi square. The statistical processing involved four-celled tables with one degree of freedom and, as the expected frequency in some cells was less than 10, Yate's correction for continuity was applied. All five areas, in varying degrees, showed differences between the homosexual and heterosexual samples in regards to socialization experience.

The most significant questions of the areas under consideration yielded the following data.

Area One. Experience with heterosexual role learning. The question relating to recollection of playing "grown-up lady" revealed a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .67). The heterosexual sample showed 92% experienced such a game often or sometimes, as opposed to 76% of the Lesbians who experienced it rarely or not at all. Recalling playing "mother with dolls" exposed a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .60). The Lesbian sample showed only 22% sometimes or often played this game as contrasted with 84% of the heterosexuals. Playing at "having a baby" provided a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .58). Only 16% of the Lesbians recalled much experience with this game, whereas 76% of the heterosexuals reported such recollection. Recollection of playing "house with yourself as mother" revealed a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .48). Of the homosexuals 78% rarely or not at all experienced this game but only 28% of the heterosexuals responded in the same manner.

Area Two. Attitude toward physical sex function. The question of favorable or unfavorable reaction to the onset of menstruation produced a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .35). Heterosexuals showed 54% being pleased as original reaction to menstruation, while 18% of the homosexuals reported similarly. Early understanding of the sex act as being "dirty-strange," as opposed to "interesting-pleasant," illustrated a $p \leq .05$ (ϕ .22). Of the Lesbians 68% responded "dirty-strange" in contrast to 44% of the heterosexuals. Responses to the question dealing with thoughts of the genital area of the opposite sex showed a $p \leq .01$ (ϕ .28). The heterosexuals revealed 70% as having had interesting or stimulating thoughts on the subject as opposed to 40% of the Lesbians who reported similar such thoughts.

Area Three. The mother-daughter relationship. Questioned as to mother's influence the analysis of the data showed a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .41). The heterosexuals in the extent of 90% of the sample reported influential mothers in contrast to 50% of the homosexuals so reporting. Recollection of their mother being affectionate and understanding exposed a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .36). Only 10% of the heterosexuals recalled their mothers lacking in this regard, while 44% of the Lesbians mentioned the lack.

Area Four. The mother's role performance. As regards the mothers being happy in their roles the data revealed a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .37). Only 4% of the heterosexual group reported relatively unhappy mothers, but 36% of the homosexuals so reported. Responses to the query on the mother's attitude toward the subject of sex revealed a $p \leq .001$ (ϕ .37). Sex disapproving mothers were recalled by 68% of the Lesbians while 28% of the heterosexuals reported similarly.

Area Five. The relationship between father and daughter. As regards the respondent's perception of the father being affectionate and understanding, the data indicated a $p \leq .001$ ($\phi .36$). Homosexuals in the sample to the extent of 62% reported fathers lacking in this regard, while only 24% of the heterosexuals so reported. The question of the father's disapproval of the subject of sex yielded a $p \leq .01$ ($\phi .26$). In the Lesbian sample 60% declared for their father's disapproval of the subject as opposed to 32% of the heterosexuals who so reported.

D. DISCUSSION

Any interpretation of the results of this study must be tempered by the observation that the individuals responding to the questions were by no means random selections from a known universe and generalizations must be modified accordingly. However, despite the limitations, certain tentative opinions appear justifiable. The data analysis did provide support for the hypothesis. Therefore, some measure of merit was also provided for the theoretical assumption of the study, that adult gender role performance has its etiological roots in the socialization process. Adult heterosexuals, of the sample, were observed to have been socialized by significant others, in the form of parents, towards a positive acceptance of the conventional female sex role. In contrast Lesbians reported relatively few childhood experiences that could have channelled their erotic potential towards the heterosexual role, rather their exposure tended to be of a nature that would result in their negatively defining vital aspects of the adult heterosexual female performance.

An appropriate interjection here questions why those females of the sample, who did not experience positive socialization towards heterosexuality, turned specifically towards homosexuality. In response it is to be pointed out that their early need satisfactions took place in social interaction and thus they were motivated to continue this association and derive from it emotional satisfaction. This motivation, coupled with a mature physiological need for erotic tension reduction, moved them to desire intimate association with other human beings, but not men, for their socialization experience alienated them from male sexuality and the requirements of the complementary female role.

If the findings of this study are considered cumulative, a summarization of particular results provides the suggestion that adult Lesbian sexual identity is correlated with a socialization experience in which the parents did not encourage positive participation in the role learning games that have distinct connotations of adult heterosexual performance, the mother was inclined to be unhappy in her role and both parents tended to lack affection and under-

standing while they disapproved of the subject of sex. Conversely, adult heterosexual female identity is correlated with a positive childhood exposure to female heterosexual role learning games, an influential mother happy in her role, and both parents manifesting affectionate understanding while being without disapproval of the subject of sex.³

E. SUMMARY

On the basis of empirical observation and the opinion of various authorities, a theoretical assumption of the etiology of adult gender role was developed which opined that the child's early learning experience channels the erotic inclination and establishes the behavioral and cognitional processes that with maturity precipitate the psychosexual orientation. A hypothesis was derived from this assumption to the effect that heterosexual females would recall socialization experiences that channelled their erotic potential towards heterosexual role performance; whereas, in contrast, the Lesbians would recollect socialization experiences that alienated them from such psychosexual role behavior.

A questionnaire was created and administered to 50 self-admitted Lesbians and 50 self-admitted heterosexuals. While the statistical analysis of the responses has to be tempered with caution, because of the unavoidable nonrandom nature of the sample, the results revealed a decided difference in the socialization experience of the two groups in the direction hypothesized. Thus, the hypothesis and, consequently, the theoretical assumption gained a tentative measure of support.

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³ During the course of the research project literally hundreds of persons, sex deviants and otherwise, were interviewed and many talked candidly of their gender role orientation and their socialization background. The subjective assessment of this information supports the questionnaire response results.

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