

The wrong question about the “wrong” group: considering the topic of homosexuality from a humanities perspective

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Homosexuality is a topic that is relatively new to the field of science—becoming a term only at the turn of the nineteenth century. With the speculation and research that surrounds what makes a person gay, people in the humanities are thinking that science has it wrong. Whether or not a person is gay is not grounds for psychological or biological research. Furthermore, to research the topic creates an unnecessary binary in society between heterosexual and homosexual communities.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent panel discussion at Hampden-Sydney about the realities of science fiction, Dr. Sarah Hardy, Elliott Professor of English made the statement that shows like *The X-Files* explore the human condition by creating the “monster” or the “other.” This other is created outside of the definition of what it means to be normal. To even create something that is “other,” rules of culture normalcy have to be created. Once the culture has defined what is normal, then it can define what is abnormal. When science researches something like sexuality, that research creates a binary where heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality is the other. The rigid lines of attraction to opposite sex leave little room for variation, and have caused a great deal of hardship for those who do not meet the societal criteria for normalcy. While scientists in other articles on biological and psychological causes of homosexuality are asking the question “why,” the humanities department is asking “why does it matter?” Scientific research, even in an attempt to prove that homosexuality is a biological condition creates a world that is dangerously polar. When science creates a system where sexuality is defined by scientific markers, it furthers the cultural condemnation of the “other.” What will society will do with the research, how the research will be used, and could it ever be used for a beneficial purpose are the questions that need to be explored before the science of sexuality can be accepted. Although, it is doubtful that any of these questions will have a positive answer.

What does homosexuality mean?

Scientific research devoted to what makes someone a homosexual is a frightening thought for Visiting Assistant Professor of Humanities Michael Lecker. I asked him what he thinks about the psychological research that surrounds homosexuality; and in short, is homosexuality a creation of society. His answer is yes, but only insofar as the term. “Homosexual itself is a cultural label that didn’t exist until the turn of the [nineteenth] century.” He cites

Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Volume 1* to say that “[homosexuality] was invented as a medical discourse for the interest of a nation.” In order for a nation to grow and maintain power, the population of that nation must be controlled. Lecker says that control comes from the need for a “good sexuality and a bad sexuality.” It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that homosexuals were given a stigma and a place of less than equal in society. He likens this need for a term about sexuality to the discovery of a species.

The naming of homosexuality led to the problems that still exist in sexual discrimination today, even in science. By giving homosexuality a name, and by treating it as something other than normal, science furthers the divide of equality. Even the questions proposed are discriminatory; all emphasis is placed on the study of homosexuality, but never on heterosexuality. Questions like “Is there a gay gene?” or “What makes a person gay or straight?” are frequent in the scientific research of sexuality, but no one asks the question, “What makes a person heterosexual?” The difference is huge. By creating a field of research around one but not the other, the stage for societal discrimination is set because science has passively aggressively condoned the notion that one is good and the other is bad.

Naming and inventing sexualities is a dangerous practice that can be compared to the difference in creating race. Yes, the differences are real; it would not be a hard practice to recognize difference in the tone of skin pigment, nor is it difficult to know there is a difference between sexual desires, but the problem is the fixation. Society’s ability to create a normal that should be celebrated and an otherness that is to be condemned is a haunting assertion of moral superiority that extends well beyond the need to give a word to something considered abnormal. Professor Lecker points out that culture is just not something we believe, it is something we feel. This feeling extends into the construction of an individual person. He says that culture, with terms for homosexuality, has created a system of belief that “if I love the vagina, then I must hate the penis.” An absolute that is contested by groups like the bisexuals (a group Lecker defends by

claiming that any sexuality is real and nothing should be trapped in a box). This is also contradicted by the psychological studies that find young people are sexually experimental. In *The Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, David Knox's article, "I Kissed A Girl": Heterosexual Women Who Report Same-Sex Kissing (and More)" highlights the fallacy that sexuality is a one or the other scenario. Knox found that "436 self-identified heterosexual females from two southeastern universities reveal[ed] that almost half (47.9%) reported having kissed another woman out of sexual experimentation/curiosity, almost one-third (31.3%) reported having had a sexual dream of being with another woman, and almost one-fourth (23.2%) reported having had a sexual fantasy of being with another woman." This engagement in homosexual encounters is characterized as "experimentation" or "bi-curiosity."

I asked Professor Lecker if he felt that the idea of "experimenting" with sexuality—essentially refusing to be part of the homosexual culture while still participating in homosexual sex acts—was as damaging as the scientific studies that call attention to it being something to be considered different. Ultimately, does experimentation further the divide of straight and gay culture? His answer was no. Lecker said, "Adolescence is a time to figure out adult roles. Experimenting does not lock a person into the identity. But if a person does this in his or her fifties, then that person is part of the culture." The identity of homosexuality is only created when people submit themselves to that identity, which means that people can engage in homosexual acts without being a homosexual because at the end of the day, it is only a word, not something tangible. Lecker cites "men who have sex with men" as an example. Heterosexual men will discretely participate in sex acts with other men, but then return home to their wives or girlfriends. Lecker finds this to also be a legitimate sexuality because sexuality is all about creating a personal identity—not finding an identity constructed by culture with which to conform. Also, cultures have different views of what it means to be homosexual. "In some Latin American cultures," says Lecker, "a man can penetrate a man without being gay, but if the man is penetrated, then he is considered gay." Humanities' answer to the question of psychological dispositions of homosexuals is, ironically, centered on psychology. While young adults are figuring out their roles in the world, they use this time as a "free pass" to engage in behavior outside of their normal comfort zones and what culture would condone.

Lecker elaborated by talking about "liminal stages," which is a term used by anthropologists to define a time in life when "the rules aren't as clear." The way to think about this liminal sexual stage is like college drinking. "If you're 18 and you get caught

drinking on campus, it's a notion of 'oh well, he's a kid, but if you're 30 and you show up to work drunk, you will get fired,'" which is essentially highlighting the free pass nature of college—to learn boundaries and roles in adulthood. These liminal stages are also recognized in psychology, but by a different name. In psychology, developmental stages are the milestones to maturity and what defines the transition from child to adult. This recognition by the psychological community about stages and experimentation in all forms (drugs, alcohol, and sex) make it all the more baffling that psychology is searching for what causes sexuality. The implication from the psychological community would be that stages are fine, but to remain part of the "other" is a bad choice. A choice so bad that it requires special research and clinical studies all on its own. Lecker says, "A large part of me is scared of the psychological research, because that says to me, 'we can fix it. Something went terribly wrong with this person but we can correct it.'" In other words, psychology is trying to create a cause for something for which there may be no psychological cause. Because no one will ever be able to prove a definitive "nurture effect" of homosexuality, science also looks to the "nature" side by biologically examining homosexuality.

The homosexual community, even from its inception, has bucked medical terminology associated with it. In the 1950s, the homosexual community shed the term "homosexual" for "homophile" which means same love. The homophile movement accepted the binaries of straight and gay, and tried to assimilate homosexual men into "normal heterosexual roles and dress." In the 1960s, the homophile movement was debunked because the gay community as a whole "realized that being gay means you don't have to be straight, and you can break these little boxes that have been created," says Lecker. Gay and lesbian became the cultural movement while homosexual remained the terminology the scientific culture. More recently, there has been a movement called the "queer culture." And in that culture, all terms for sexuality are considered wrong. The thought in the queer culture movement is that wanting to be labeled as "gay" or "lesbian" still creates a label, which still contributes to the notion that something is the "other." Lecker says that the queer movement is interested in eliminating binaries. "It's like black or white," he says, "black is bad white is good, so black gets the short end of the stick. The same thing happens with gay. Homosexual is bad heterosexual is good, so homosexual gets the short end of the stick." He even takes the binary of culture good and bad to the school's newly implemented (and tragically misnamed) motto "Man up." The idea is that men are good, and women are less, so be a man and be good in the world. Once again, there are obvious differences between men and women on a

genetic level, but using those differences as a way to justify discriminatory behavior would be an irresponsible lapse in scientific judgment (and one that has happened before). Genetically charting the difference between gay and straight is no different. The terminology already creates the binary, trying to find a genetic cause for an action reinforces the discrimination, and then society becomes more divided while searching for answers that may or may not have a medical explanation.

Medical explanations bring opposition to heterosexual and homosexual communities because, as Lecker says, “they are being to be treated like different species. It becomes a thing where heterosexuals and homosexuals are seen as so different.” Queer theory seeks to do the opposite. To make gender and sexuality more flexible and give new arrangements to behavior without a desire to give it a name. Queer theory is the humanistic side to the rigid scientific approach and can best be summed up with the phrase, “people are people.” To combat the gender stereotypes adopted by society and favored in medicine, queer theorists are using the pronoun “they” and refusing to submit to a masculine of feminine identity. Queer theory does not obsess over defining labels, but instead focuses on living life and being happy with whomever a person chooses to love or feel attraction. The biggest drawback to the Queer movement Lecker claims is “the institutional systems that need to be overcome.” His example is a Queer Conference he attended where the conference covered the signs on the bathroom door and people just went to the bathroom. “Queer is trying to break up the box, and it’s reasonable because we all have to go to the bathroom.... It’s also seen even in your license. Your license asks for your gender, why? Why does it matter?”

Conclusion

Lecker says that the “one-hundred and twenty year history of being gay as an identity goes beyond genetics.” The culture created by the research is something more than a group that needs to be isolated, studied, and understood. Especially, because, frankly, any answer science provides only contributes to false stereotypes and the causality is wrong. Just by studying homosexuality as something other than normal, the scientific community contributes to the stereotypes that surround the differences between the heterosexual and homosexual communities.

My final question to Professor Lecker was, are we as a society asking the right question about homosexuality, and if not what should we be asking. His response was the sort of academic wisdom one would hope to hear after an hour interview of

He compares the search for a gay gene to the eugenics movement. “They were trying to figure out what was different between the races, and they found their data—it was wrong—but they believed it. And society used false scientific findings to push up racist institutions.” Because homosexuality is a culturally constructed identity, the research as to “why” is a waste of money and time. Ultimately, people are what they are and there is no need for a label or group. Even trying to study why someone desires the same sex is a waste of time because no one knows where desire comes from and “that’s not something you’re going to find in genetics. Desire is like faith—where is that? Where is faith? Where is desire? And desire changes over time.” Even in culture as a whole, desire changes. Lecker thinks about how men used to favor larger women because to be plump was a sign of health and money. But now, men favor skinny women. But that change in desire is not something that can be charted in genetics because it is a cultural movement.

Lecker cites Simon Levay’s studies of the gay brain as culture being misinterpreted for science. Levay claims that he can chart the different wavelengths in the gay brain and the straight brain. Because the brain is different, the two must be completely biologically different. Lecker says this is false because “if you tell people that they are different species and treat them differently throughout their entire life—yes—their brains are going to develop differently. Brains are very plastic, they mold.” He asserts looking at the brain waves are proof of the ending of what binaries have done to the gay community, not part of the cause. “It’s a false causality” says Lecker. But that false causality is the only way that biology can really work in terms of gay research.

discrimination. Professor Lecker replied, “we need to ask ourselves why do we care so much that someone is different and why are we putting that in a box. In essence, the question has to be reversed to reach any type of meaningful answer.”

The research that surrounds the topic of homosexuality is moot. Biology cannot definitively prove the point that homosexuals are different, and if there is a difference, what good would come from it? Psychology implies that homosexuality is a product of a mistake that happened in one’s childhood. That experimentation is fine, but a commitment to the “wrong sexuality” is something that is hopefully fixable.

While science continues to enlarge the schism between different types of people, the humanities department is seeking to bring the groups together. Ultimately the difference between the science and the

humanities view towards homosexuality is as fundamental as the question each group is asking. Science needs to know why anyone would not be "normal" and the humanities want to know why anyone would care.