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Homosexual, Gay, and Lesbian: Defining the Words and Sampling the Populations

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Homosexual, Gay, and Lesbian: Defining the Words and Sampling the Populations

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SUMMARY. The lack of both specificity and consensus about definitions for homosexual, homosexuality, gay, and lesbian are first shown to confound comparative research and cumulative understanding because criteria for inclusion within the subject populations are often not consistent. The Description section examines sociolinguistic variables which determine patterns of preferred choice of terminology, and considers how these might impact gay and lesbian studies. Attitudes and style are found to influence word choice. These results are used in the second section to devise recommended definitional limits which would satisfy both communication needs and methodological purposes, especially those of sampling.

To study gays and lesbians is to study whom? The response to this question will determine both the success and the value of “gay and lesbian studies.” Inconsistent responses, however, make it unsurprising for workers to reach contradictory conclusions if, upon examination, they are dealing with different populations albeit labeled by the same terms (cf. Gorsky, 1981, p. 269).

Just what are the defining attributes which sort out the focal

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phenomena for gay and lesbian studies? Is the group glossed by the morpheme *homosexual*, or those by *gay* and *lesbian*, sufficiently homogeneous between researchers to be treated as representatives of a single universe (cf. Stoller, 1980)? The issue is pivotal because it determines who is a suitable subject for which study.

Random sampling is the ideal method to choose subjects when the goal is to generalize about a larger population (Chambliss & Dunlap, 1977). Critical to the process are first to define the boundaries of the category (structuring the universe), and second to identify all members of the category (populating the universe). Students of homosexuality concede that identification is practically impossible due to the hidden nature of the homosexual population (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Instead of drawing samples randomly from the complete universe, we are obliged to take them from the most accessible sources (e.g., bars and, in the past, prisoners and patients), knowing them to be probably skewed relative to the broader homosexual population for at least some variables (Gonsiorek, 1982).

The comforting assumption has been that if members of this population could only be more exhaustively "catalogued," samples would be more random, subjects more representative, and results more generalizable. Presupposed is that the necessary first step, that of Definition, has in fact already been taken, that we know in theory who is and who is not a "homosexual" even if present social circumstances prevent us in practice from sorting real people into this and related categories.

This article argues to the contrary. Although each may himself or herself be certain about who merits inclusion within a category, the lack of consensus between workers brings into doubt the direct comparability of their results (cf. Creson, 1978; Hoffman, 1976).

Consider the following definitions of *homosexual*:

1. The English word homosexual, defined as a person who prefers the sexual company of persons of his or her own sex, corresponds to none of the Belém categories. (Fry, 1985, p. 142)
2. I do not diagnose patients as homosexual unless they have engaged in overt homosexual behavior. (I. Bieber, quoted in McIntosh, 1968, p. 182)
3. I would characterize the homosexual person . . . as one who is motivated in adult life by a definite preferential erotic attraction to members of the same sex and who usually (but not necessarily) engages in overt sexual relations with them. (Marmor, 1980, p. 5)

4. Clarification can be achieved if we conclude that there is no such thing as a homosexual. (Pattison, 1974, p. 341)

The first example requires a single criterion of psychological preference which only the actor can verify; opposing this emic standard, the second definition requires an etic, or outsider standard of observable behavior; the third definition straddles this emic/etic line. The last quote dismisses altogether the category as lacking a real world referent. Although they all report on “homosexuals,” if each of these workers adheres to his defined universe when identifying subjects, their samples, and thereby the results, will not be comparable.

Riess (1980, pp. 300-301) notes a similar breadth afflicting homosexuality. Examples for this word include these three:

1. . . . from the psychobiological point of view . . . homosexuality = sexual behavior with a member of the organism’s own sex. (Denniston, 1980, p. 26)

2. I have always been bothered by the definition of homosexuality as behavior. Scratching is a behavior. Homosexuality is a way of being, one that can completely influence a person’s life and shape its meaning and direction. (Grahn, 1984, p. xiv)

3. In its generic sense the word homosexuality includes numerous activities and social transactions between persons of the same gender. The all-male board of directors, the businessman’s club, the army, the girl’s school, the religious order, the church women’s circles are all “homosexuals” in this primary sense of the word. (Weltge, 1969, p. vii)

Again, the variance is striking. The first definition suggests a fairly strict behavioral criterion which is rejected by the second; the third so broadens the referent of the word as to render it conceptually useless.
This third definition introduces yet another difficulty. What is the relationship between \textit{homosexual} and \textit{homosexuality}? The ease with which Weltge shifts from one to the other suggests a synonymy, the words differing on syntactic rather than semantic properties. Counterexamples to such an equation, however, do exist. Whitam and Mathy (1986), for instance, after defining \textit{homosexual} in emic terms of attraction (p. 2), later define \textit{homosexuality} in etic terms of behavior (p. 32).

Another assumed synonym is \textit{gay} (Ashley, 1979; Cory, 1965; Farrell, 1972; Niemoeller, 1965). If this relationship formerly held, it may no longer. Murray (1982, p. 7) reports the following from one of his informants:

\ldots there are others who have a lot of homosexual, um, \textit{\ldots release} shall we say?-like they make it every day in some sordid teearoom, for instance, but would never admit to being \textit{gay}. [What are they? What would you call them?] Closet cases. They're homosexual, but they aren't gay.

Divergence between \textit{gay} and \textit{homosexual} has been argued to be based on a preference for a chosen moniker over a medical label (Hodges & Hutter, [1974]). Allan Young (quoted by Hayes, 1976, p. 262) takes this separation one step further:

\ldots saying \textit{\ldots I am gay} has the important element of self-definition to it. It is not the negative definition of others (homosexual, lezzy, queer, pansy, fruit) but a positive term we can call our own. \ldots The term homosexual does not comply with the need of self-definition, because the term was given to us by doctors and other \textit{\ldots scientists} who have not generally been our friends.

Through such associations, choice of words can be taken to indicate sociopolitical ideology (Stanley, 1974).

\textit{Lesbian} has not been spared similar confusion, its range in many ways paralleling what we saw for \textit{homosexuality}:

In defining lesbianism we can offer four possible positions, in order of increasing breadth. First, lesbianism could be defined
in a strict way as genital sexuality between two people with female genitals. Secondly, we could define as lesbian any strong relationship between women with at least a possibility for such genital sex. . . . Thirdly, we could call lesbian any intense relationship or primary commitment between women that they subjectively experience as “love” . . . , even if genital sexuality is not even a possibility. Finally, any affectional interaction between women . . . might be considered lesbian—one feminist has argued that since every daughter loves her mother, all women are lesbian. (Feinbloom, Fleming, Kijewski, & Schulte, 1976, p. 69)

If this quote builds from the narrow to the broad, it might also illustrate the progression from the useful to the meaningless. Similarly, without any guidelines or standards, Lockard’s (1985, p. 84) statement that “a lesbian is anyone who says she is” cannot help but do more methodological harm than good.

A sociolinguistic description of how homosexuality, homosexual, and gay are used in “real life” follows, and focuses on issues of time, attitude, and style. Each presents its own problems for gay and lesbian studies. An attempt is made to use these results to establish definitional boundaries for each of these three critical terms. Linking the two projects is the philosophy that a purely theory-generated definition is in this case inferior to one based on the way the word is used by those most directly concerned, the men and women who live with these terms as labels (cf. Myrdal, 1962, p. lxxiv). For reasons explained below, no comparable quantitative data were gathered regarding lesbian; however, broad qualitative patterns are presented.

DESCRIPTION

Method

Issues of selected periodicals were examined, noting instances of the tokens gay, homosexual, and homosexuality. Each occurrence was placed into one of six use-type categories: Person-NOUN,
Activity-NOUN, and ADJectives modifying either Persons, Social Institutions, Behaviors, or Things. Newsweek and Christianity Today were selected to provide a contrast between attitudes toward homosexuality; while many of Christianity Today's editorials may be characterized as negative (e.g., Kantzer, 1983), Newsweek provides indirect evidence of a comparatively more positive stance by its prominent featuring of gay individuals (e.g., Harvey Fierstein: Kroll, 1983), and in the extensive cover article devoted to the gay lifestyle (Reese & Abramson, 1986), attention unequalled by Christianity Today.

All articles from these periodicals listed on Infotrac under “Homosexuality” as of June 1986 are included, and constitute the NEW data set: Newsweek = 28 articles, Christianity Today = 18. The OLD set is an exhaustive listing of all entries in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature for the years 1965-1970: Newsweek = 8, Christianity Today = 8.

The Advocate and the Journal of Homosexuality were selected to examine the contrast between formal and informal writing styles. Two issues of each were selected haphazardly: Advocate issues 445 and 450, and Journal issues 12(2) and 13(1). Endnotes and bibliographies were excluded from Journal data; advertisements from Advocate data.

Results from this study are presented in Table 1. Scores are the percentage of homosexual tokens accrued in each use-type. Differences of ten percentage points or less are interpreted as being insignificant.

A second source of data is a questionnaire distributed during the 11th Annual Southeastern Conference for Lesbians and Gay Men held in New Orleans in June 1986. Respondents were asked to select, for each of 16 sentences, whether gay or homosexual seemed more appropriate to them. These sentences varied by style (informal/formal), attitude (positive/negative), and part-of-speech (noun/adjective). Respondents also wrote answers to several open questions. Only those respondents who rated themselves 5 or 6 (on a 0-6 scale) in terms of their “degree of homosexual orientation” are included. Omitting seventeen 1-4s, 99 questionnaires remained for statistical analyses.

Scoring was dichotomous, where “Gay" = 0 and “Homosex-
ual” = 1. Deviation from the mean of possible scores for each variable indicates the degree of response preference. No sex differences were found.

Results

Changes due to time. This part considers whether vocabulary differences emerged between the pre- and post-Stonewall eras (cf. Schwanberg, 1985). Those changes which can be attributed to the passing of time—and, implicitly, to associated social changes—are minimally those which occur in both Christianity Today and Newsweek. Significant for us is that for no use-type in either title did homosexual see a meaningful increase from OLD to NEW. Any change was inevitably a decline, and can be accounted for by a rise in the popularity of alternative terms. Activity-NOUN is notable for its stable preference for homosexual.

Both periodicals in the NEW set significantly increased the frequency with which they refer to persons as “gays” rather than as “homosexuals.” This change may be accounted for by the reasonableness that “a group should be able to determine its own name” (Dynes, 1985, p. vi), and that since Stonewall gay has become the appellation of choice.

Likewise, both now modify the majority of inanimate objects with gay, a change more difficult to explain. One possibility is that as gay subculture attained higher visibility, nouns not previously associated with the lifestyle appeared in this context: beer, magazine, and curriculum, for instance. Such nouns lacked a precedent of homosexual modification, and consequently may have been automatically modified by the new word referring by that time to the possessors of the artifact.

Since use of these terms has altered significantly over time, literature from opposite ends of a temporal span may not be directly comparable. Should gay and homosexual be determined not to be interchangeable, then older reports written when homosexual was the only word for subjects may need to be reexamined to ascertain which group was actually sampled.

Attitudinal differences. The similarities between two editorials separated by fifteen years (“The Bible and the Homosexual,” 1968;
Table 1
Percent of homosexual tokens in six use-types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CHRISTIANITY TODAY</th>
<th>NEWSWEEK</th>
<th>ADVOCATE</th>
<th>JOURNAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OLD</td>
<td>NEW</td>
<td>OLD</td>
<td>NEW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-NN</td>
<td>95%(60/3)</td>
<td>75%(95/122)</td>
<td>100%(69/0)</td>
<td>31%(55/178)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity-NN</td>
<td>99%(70/1)</td>
<td>99%(89/1)</td>
<td>90%(20/0)</td>
<td>89%(48/6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-ADJ</td>
<td>56%(5/4)</td>
<td>55%(36/29)</td>
<td>75%(12/4)</td>
<td>15%(29/164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution-ADJ</td>
<td>67%(24/12)</td>
<td>57%(39/29)</td>
<td>60%(15/10)</td>
<td>11%(14/115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior-ADJ</td>
<td>91%(21/2)</td>
<td>95%(81/4)</td>
<td>94%(16/1)</td>
<td>49%(11/12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thing-ADJ</td>
<td>60%(3/2)</td>
<td>33%(3/6)</td>
<td>40%(6/9)</td>
<td>6%(5/85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Token Totals</td>
<td>88%(183/24)</td>
<td>77%(343/101)</td>
<td>85%(138/24)</td>
<td>24%(162/504)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percent of homosexual tokens (\# homosexual tokens/\# gay tokens)
Kanter, 1983) establishes *Christianity Today*'s attitude toward homosexuality as both constant and negative. The data show that *Christianity Today* consistently prefers the use of *homosexual* in both OLD and NEW sets.

On the other hand, for all other categories besides Activity-NOUN, NEW *Newsweek* differs dramatically from *Christianity Today* in its word choices despite an initial similarity, and uses *homosexual* in the minority of cases. These data suggest that *Newsweek*’s increasingly positive attitude is paralleled by a change in language, just as the lack of attitude change by *Christianity Today* corresponds to a stability of language use. Attitude toward homosexuality, then, can influence, if not determine word choice.

Results from the questionnaire support this association between attitude and token use. Statements expressing negative attitudes favored *homosexual* responses (Mean = 3.454, t = 3.069, p < .005), while positive sentences elicited *gay* (Mean = 0.899, t = 15.734, p < .0001). These strong statistical results are no doubt influenced by the respondents’ full consciousness of the relationship, as illustrated by the following comments:

I tend not to use the term *homosexual*. I see it as derogatory almost. I feel people who use *homosexual* are frequently uncomfortable with gays and gay lifestyle. [26 year old male]

I never like to use the word *homosexual*, because it raises feelings related to antigay oppression; I use it when I need those overtones. [21 year old male]

*Homosexual* has totally negative connotations for me because I first heard the label used by “moral” heterosexuals. [35 year old male]

Since negative attitudes demonstrably lead to the predominance of *homosexual*, these respondents display a tendency to infer from *homosexual* tokens a negative attitude. Excessive use of *homosexual*, then, may connote to others an archaic and perhaps negative attitude. Given this pattern of emotional reaction from members of the subject population, prudence suggests using *homosexual* sparingly in their presence. Otherwise the researcher risks inadvertently communicating a negative attitude toward the subject’s lifestyle.
Stylistic differences. By examining word choice in The Advocate and the Journal of Homosexuality, this part considers whether formal (scholarly) publications will favor different vocabulary than do informal (mass) media.

Only in the Activity-NOUN use-type is homosexual the preferred word for the Advocate. In no other use-type does the percentage of homosexual tokens rise above 15%. The Journal, on the other hand, never falls below 40%, and the NOUN classes are especially high. Clearly, the Journal favors homosexual to the point of offering no alternatives for nouns.

The link between preference of homosexual and formal style is most likely historical. Homosexual was introduced earlier than gay (1869 as opposed to 1933: Herzer, 1985; Dynes, 1985; homosexuality was not introduced into the English language until 1897: Bardis, 1980). Moreover, homosexual was introduced in a scientific tract, while gay is attested in a dictionary of slang. From these facts alone one could predict the scientific, and hence the formal literature to favor homosexual.

Questionnaires yielded significant results only for informal style's preference for gay tokens (Mean = 1.8980; t = 10.805; p < .0001). Failure to validate a homosexual/formal relationship may have one of two explanations. First, the sentences may not have been sufficiently formal to elicit the expected reaction (#9: Gay/Homosexual leaders have been quick to endorse higher levels of funding for AIDS research). More likely is that judgments of formality are tied as much to the setting as to the statement. Contextless sentences may not signal the requisite formality levels. Conversely, the informal sentences are clearly just that (#14: He blames every bad thing that's ever happened to him on his being gay/homosexuality), allowing a significant relationship between this style and language to emerge.

Respondents themselves acknowledge that gay and homosexual vary stylistically:

I have problems with the term gay for scientific writing. In every other context I prefer gay. [37 year old female]

Homosexual is a good word to use in technical/legal instanc-
es, whereas, gay tends to be more appropriate under social circumstances. [29 year old male]

A conundrum for researchers is that the linguistic style of their professional medium converges with that of the gay community's antagonists (note the discussion on attitudinal differences). The academic preference for homosexual runs the risk that subjects will categorize the scientist in among their other opponents based on his or her pattern of language use, and react accordingly. Social scientists particularly may want to consider a more flexible style that accurately reflects the linguistic habits of their subjects. As June Reinsch of the Kinsey Institute comments, "If the research is not done in the vernacular,—in the words of the group—then it doesn't do any good" (Weiss, 1989). Further, when subjects report themselves to be gay and otherwise speak of things "gay," the researcher should report it as such, and not translate this term into the scientific homosexual.

**DEFINITION**

Having described how homosexual, homosexuality, and gay are used, we will now attempt to construct scientifically useful definitions. It is important to keep in mind what should and should not be expected of a definition. Its utility is to bring "together for our attention a number of phenomena which are in reality, and not merely in appearance, closely related to one another" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 117). Its purpose is not to explain the phenomena represented therein. Criteria identifying individuals for inclusion within a category should never be confounded with post facto, statistical descriptions of the group, since such conclusions are generated by studying groups previously constructed by the definition.

The definition must also be as independent of theory as possible, since theory can change. Our perspective on the group will change, but our identification of the core phenomena should be as stable as possible; our understanding of the research focus can become more detailed, but that focus should not shift.
Identification is accomplished by enumerating criteria which distinguish category members. In an ideal situation, these criteria are necessary and sufficient. The "real" world, however, is better described by radial than by Aristotelian categories, and hence any proferred definition of a category prototype can fail to include easily some cases (Lakoff, 1987). In fact, Waismann (1960, p. 120) holds that this is necessarily the case for most empirical concepts, so that "it is not possible to define a concept . . . with absolute precision, i.e., in such a way that every nook and cranny is blocked against entry of doubt. That is what is meant by the open texture of a concept."

For instance, Murray (1984) argues that not all gays are homosexual, or Marmor (1980) that one need not engage in sexual activity to be homosexual. These may be ecologically valid qualifications, but they pertain to the periphery of the population prototype. Attempts to allow for exceptional cases within the prototype are largely responsible for the excessive relativism plaguing definitions, and thereby research in gay and lesbian studies. But as Bernard (1941, p. 507) points out, "the only area of sociological science in which we can standardize definition and reduce relativity to a veritable minimum is that of the hypothetical norm or ideal definition."

This section offers definitional limits to the key gay and lesbian studies terms homosexuality, homosexual, and gay. In keeping with Bernard's advice, they are idealized to increase utility. Although these definitions are designed to maximize inclusion, some cases will inevitably fall outside their scope, no matter how they are formed, due to the open texture of empirical concepts. The implication is not that these cases are irrelevant to gay and lesbian studies, but only that they are sufficiently exceptional not to warrant inclusion in the unmodified use of the key terms.

The previous section studied variables which influence the choice between homosexual and gay. All contexts favored the use of homosexuality in the Activity-NOUN use-type, and this is the only use-type which displays a universal consensus. The conservative approach, then, directs that this word be restricted to only this use. Upon this foundation can be built our first definition:

**D1:** Homosexuality refers only to overt sexual activity between actors of the same sex, and conveys no new information about
psychological states or social meanings. Only with this stipulation can homosexuality be meaningfully applied to other animals besides humans (cf. Ford & Beach, 1951; Weinrich, 1976).

If homosexuality is strictly limited to activity (thus rejecting as an oxymoron "latent homosexuality"), the second definition follows uncontroversially:

D2: Homosexual as an adjective should be restricted to overt acts and behaviors, particularly those either overtly sexual or intended to result in such (homosexual cruising, homosexual rape). It should be applied only to those psychological and social dimensions which pertain immediately to or otherwise motivate sexual behaviors (homosexual orientation, homosexual interest). Words which imply more than sexual activity (community, lifestyle, church) should not be modified by homosexual.

More difficult is specifying the referent for the noun homosexual. Almost everyone rejects that those who do homosexual acts are homosexual. Still, some individuals are meaningfully referred to as homosexuals, leaving to us the task of identifying the "indexical particulars" (Weinberg, 1978) which distinguish between a person performing homosexual acts and a homosexual.

Proponents of role theory point us in a useful direction when they argue that homosexual behavior and homosexual identity are not necessarily coincidental, and that "the homosexual should be seen as playing a social role rather than as having a condition" (McIntosh, 1968, p. 184). Membership within the category becomes contingent less upon the acts performed than upon the context in which these acts occur. Societies which lack homosexual roles are thereby said to also lack homosexuals, although not necessarily persons engaging in homosexuality.

The thrust of this theory is to attempt to explain the etiology of homosexuality, to argue against an essentialist interpretation and to offer in its stead a constructionist one (Richardson, 1983-84). As such we cannot use it directly in an atheoretical definition. Yet the notion of roles may still be taken up, indicative as it is of special-
ized knowledge and skills required to successfully accomplish the goal of the activity that is homosexuality:

D3: Homosexual as a noun refers to persons practicing homosexuality who are also knowledgeable and proficient in the cultural or subcultural expectations of appropriate behaviors associated with homosexual activities. Examples of these might include cruising in styles acceptable and effective for various settings, and knowing where cruise spots are located. This word does not imply any etiological theory or psychological states (e.g., that the person has a particular kind of self-concept or identity); these extra meanings should be ascribed through adjectives (preferential homosexual, compulsive homosexual).

Excerpts from questionnaire respondents both ratify these definitions of homosexual and point the way toward distinguishing between it and gay:

Homosexual defines a behavior; gay on the other hand defines an acceptance of the behavior, a mindset, by an individual. [23 year old male]

I don’t believe gay or homosexual are really related words. Gay describes a way of life. Homosexual may have nothing to do with gay. For example, many non-gay men (and women) do homosexual things, i.e., participate in homosexual acts. But there is nothing gay about those incidents. [24 year old male]

Representatives of the academic community echo these sentiments. For instance, Williams (1986, p. 223) observes that

elderly Indians generally preferred to use the word “gay” rather than “homosexual.” They see the latter as focusing on sexual behavior, whereas their focus is on a person’s character. “Gay,” with its connotation of life-style beyond sexual behavior seems to fit in more closely with an Indian understanding.

Gay, then, identifies the person who not only engages in homosexuality, and is homosexual, but also has a particular attitude or
mindset about this activity. This attitude is typically described as positive and integrating, expanding into broader social concerns and relationships beyond the merely sexual. We thereby arrive at two last definitions:

**D4:** Gay as a noun refers to homosexuals who share social and psychological attributes such as positive self-identity (as far as their sexual orientation is concerned); studies to more fully explicate these attributes are needed; and

**D5:** Gay as an adjective should modify only such nouns as are consistent with the future explicated psychological and socially-oriented qualities. Predominant use is expected with social institutions and objects which imply the existence of such institutions.

**CONCLUSIONS**

A review of the literature demonstrated a fundamental inconsistency in the way workers define key gay and lesbian studies terms. Individual students construct their own definitions based on either general theory or particular research needs. The contribution of this study is to offer a set of five definitions which both conform to the nature of definitions per se and derive from empirical data about actual language use.

Changes over time, the speaker’s attitude, and the style of the communication medium all were shown to influence word choice. Each carries its own set of problems regarding the practice of a maturing and collaborative gay and lesbian studies. These data also support a persistent identification of homosexuality as an activity, suggesting that the word be restricted to this meaning. The offered definitions for homosexual and gay as noun and adjective are largely the logical consequences of this initial equation.

It is our belief that these definitions will prove to be of maximum utility to gay and lesbian studies because they are (1) ecologically valid, and ensure that researchers and the researched are not talking past one another; (2) theoretically noncommittal, and can serve to identify the phenomena of interest regardless of the intel-
lectual posture from which they are to be scrutinized; and (3) methodologically helpful, in that they provide few but clear criteria for subject selection.

As suggested throughout, the problem of definition is not a theoretical nicety, but rather has the most profound impact on a science because it is used to identify subjects for research. This paper concludes, then, with some suggestions about how these definitions would influence this phase of methodology.

Workers will continue to draw their subjects from the same sources. What should change, though, is the assumption that gays and homosexuals identify the same population, when in fact the first is but a subset of the second. More research is needed to articulate exactly how they are differentiated, but the definitions here may indicate some likely dimensions. In any event, the subject's own language should serve as a cue as to which group he or she belongs.

Self-reports regarding acts of homosexuality, or the role proficiency requirements of the homosexual are not necessarily true, and sometimes caution may need to be exercised about accepting such claims on their face. Less caution need be exercised in applying the label to persons who are known to meet the proficiency requirements but who do not consider themselves to be homosexual; homosexual describes an informed pattern of activity—as opposed to homosexuality, which references the sexual activity alone—and not an identity. Gay, on the other hand, is an identity shared by a subset of (perhaps mostly Western) homosexuals, without describing any additional sexual behaviors. Thus, no one can be meaningfully called "gay" if the subject rejects the label.

If gay identifies one subset of the homosexual universe, then other terms or phrases will be needed to refer to other, non-gay subsets. Again, more work will be needed to specify the relevant differentiating dimensions. For instance, if a major motivation for gays to engage in homosexuality is the emic quality of attraction toward the same sex, another subset of the homosexual population might usefully be defined by its motivating quality of "fear" of the opposite sex (cf. Marmor, 1988). Still another example of a non-gay homosexual might be a practitioner of "ritualized homosexuality"
as discussed by Herdt (1984). As these distinctions are made, the use of words like gay and homosexual must become self-conscious rather than an ill-considered reflex.

Just as gay is argued to be but one segment of the homosexual universe, at the time of project design lesbian was assumed to be semantically subordinate to gay, being the female equivalent to gay man. This project was not intended to delve into vocabulary embedded so far as this, and hence there are no data regarding lesbian comparable to those offered in Table 1.

Yet one of the open questions did probe into the issue of the meaning of lesbian for all respondents and, for women, the more general issue of self-referral. Responses indicate that the aforementioned assumption may have been unfounded. It certainly is representative of the “male” attitude towards lesbian:

[I use lesbian] when referring to a gay woman. To me gay refers to all people (male & female) with same-sex preferences. [29 year old male]

Significantly, most males in this sample seem to use lesbian out of conscious acquiescence to women’s choice, not because they themselves agree with the word use:

I use lesbian only when women friends insist that I do—we are all “gay” people. [32 year old male]

I use the word lesbian out of deference to my gay sisters. . . . [46 year old male]

More important here, though, is how women view the term. Surprisingly, at the time the data were gathered, lesbian was not universally favored:

I hate the word lesbian, & avoid using it to refer to myself or to other women. I use gay. [28 year old female]
[I use lesbian] only when it seems “politically correct”
around other lesbians. I really rarely use lesbian to describe myself. I usually say I'm gay. [29 year old female]

Impressionistically, lesbian does seem to have gained in overall popularity since 1986. And while males seemed passive on the matter ("The only reason I use [lesbian] is to respect my sisters. I wonder if they like it?"), females foreshadowed the actual path taken in the last five years:

I say that I am gay, as that was the first word I learned after queer, back in 1951. If I were speaking to a group of younger gay women, I would say "lesbian," as that is more comfortable for most of them. They relate to the word gay as meaning men. [55 year old female]

Indeed, gay does seem to have acquired a gender marking of + male. This has produced significant language changes, some of which are being played out in the pages of The Advocate. Beginning in October, 1990, the banner was changed to advertise the periodical as the "national gay and lesbian newsmagazine" (Roulard, 1990). This explicit inclusion by the community's flagship periodical perhaps marks the demise of gay as a nongender-marked term.

The vocal reaction from some--uniformly male--quarters has been unfavorable. Wrote one reader:

It has been my feeling for some time that lesbians should be charged with separatism. They insist that they be called lesbian. I have yet to figure out why they can't be included in a sexually nonspecific label. Are they so insecure that they can't share the umbrella of gay or homosexual? (Abernathy, 1990)

In fact, a new word has emerged to fulfill the function once performed by gay, that of including both males and females: queer. This word can be attested as having precisely this meaning by design (Heller, 1990) and by inference (Elton, 1990). Use of this word has also met with mixed reactions, largely due to its past negative connotations, and present politically radical ones. Still, it may eventually fill the void left by the semantic drift of gay.
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