

University of Kentucky

From the Selected Works of James M. Donovan

October 1, 1987

**Review: Male Homosexuality in Four Societies:
Brazil, Guatemala, the Philippines, and the United
States (Frederick L. Whitam and Robin M. Mathy,
Praeger, 1986)**

James M Donovan



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/james_donovan/40/

Anthropology Research Group on Homosexuality, ~~Reviews~~
9(3): 15-17 October 1987

passage, Bolin unfortunately accommodates her data to her theoretical models, rather than searching out an interplay between the two. Despite these reservations, In Search of Eve adds new and interesting material to the small but growing anthropological literature on transsexualism.

Male Homosexuality in Four Societies: Brazil, Guatemala, the Philippines, and the United States by Frederick L. Whitam and Robin M. Mathy. (New York: Praeger Pub., 1986, 208 pp.).

Reviewed by James M. Donovan, Tulane University

Research monographs make two independent contributions to their fields: first, the body of new data bearing on the question posed, and, second, the new theoretical insights these data support. To fail in the former is necessarily to fail in the latter, but success in the first contribution does not guarantee success in the second. To accomplish both is, of course, ideal.

Within a 10-year span, Whitam conducted interviews with homosexuals in a variety of cultural settings -- the countries specified in the title. The personal interviews were guided by a standardized interview schedule of questions primarily concerned with informants' retrospective analyses of their pasts. Even in light of recent criticisms of the retrospective methodology, there are benefits in Whitam's research. Cross-cultural comparisons are now warranted for at least these questions, where before one could only speculate or try to reconcile different methodologies from different researchers. With his approach, Whitam has solidly accomplished the first goal of a research monograph, the presentation of unique and valuable data. This alone makes the book worth reading.

The second goal of theoretical insights based on these data proves to be more elusive. As the authors state in the preface, the theoretical intent is to demonstrate not simply that "homosexuals are a permanent manifestation of human sexuality found at about the same rate in all societies" (p. xii), but also that "certain forms of nonsexual behavior seem to be intrinsically linked to sexual orientation" (p. xiii). Without question, Whitam's data does allow him to posit cross-cultural continuities at some level. That he has chosen the appropriate level for his thesis, however, is unclear. The questions to be raised are whether his societies are representative of all societies, and whether his sample is representative of all homosexuals.

Although stating that "homosexuals appear in every society" (p.4, emphasis added), Whitam documents this claim primarily from an analysis of listings in the Spartacus International Gay Guide. Immediately the meaning of "every society" is limited to "modern, urban," and indeed at one point society becomes the equivalent of nation-state (p.16). Further, the fact that he aims to extract the percentage of homosexuals in a given city's population from the number of gay bars that that city supports is specious: having defined homosexual persons in emic terms of sexual attraction (as opposed to etic terms of sexual behavior), he makes a questionable leap in suggesting that cross-culturally all persons so attracted frequent bars at a uniform rate.

When Whitam does address traditional societies, he takes ethnographic reports far too literally. Yet Whitam's efforts to calculate percentages to the first decimal place from such material is the foundation of his claim for

a uniform rate of occurrence of homosexual persons across both time and space. In sum, the most that can be said for this section (Chapter 1) is that it argues for the universality of homosexual behavior despite the claim to be demonstrating the universality of homosexual orientation and/or identity.

Whitam is most interested in the case of the effeminate male homosexual, and while he recognizes the existence of "masculine [male] homosexuals," he has little to say about them. Such concentration is entirely legitimate save that the results of such specialized study are later presented as being valid findings for the generic homosexual. According to Whitam, not only is "drag ... an intrinsic aspect of homosexuality" (p.82), it also includes the following list of pervasive occupational themes in the "homosexual world": house and home, embellishment, language, helping professions, grooming, entertainment and the arts (p.88). Further, "male homosexual communities do not manifest a substantial interest in athletics" (p.108). Whitam argues that these conclusions hold true for each of his four societies, although he leaves unaddressed the apparent anomaly of the Gay Games.

On the face of it, Whitam is certainly perpetuating stereotypes. But this is not inherently bad: it would be useful to know, empirically, just how valid such common knowledge really is. But Whitam's methodology is not sufficient to support the breadth of his claims. For while these seem valid conclusions about his informants, his desire is to make fundamental claims about all homosexuals. That Whitam's data offers profound insight into some questions should be apparent; that the questions to which Whitam chooses to apply them are inappropriate should be equally apparent.

The enormous leap from Whitam's data to his conclusions probably results from his prior commitment to a biological theory of homosexual etiology. Behaviors deemed to be the result of biological causes must be universal save to the extent that culture can be demonstrated to be exerting sufficient counter-influence; this requirement leads Whitam to press his data too far. This prior commitment leads him not to test the hypothesis so much as to illustrate it.

In most ways I am in sympathy with Whitam's impressionistic conclusions about homosexuality: many nonsexual aspects of homosexual individuals and subcultures display less variability cross-culturally than the contrasts between the larger societies in which they are nested. Whitam would ascribe this relative homogeneity to underlying biological causes, as would I, but such a leap is not supported either by his own data, or, for that matter, by anyone else's that he presents. We part company on two issues: the alleged mechanism which mediates observed behavior and biological potential, and the social philosophy which motivates the enterprise.

Of the currently competing biological theories for orientation etiology, Whitam supports a hormonal version. As I understand his discussion (pp. 126-28), although hormones do not directly cause homosexuality, they do influence aggression, which, in turn, is highly correlated with eventual sex-object-choice. Although Whitam leaves unclear whether he intends the hormonal influence to be effected at the prenatal, developmental state or as a circulating, tonic state, he seems to indicate the latter. He suggests, then, that all universal characteristics of homosexuals are based upon these tonic states regulating, among other things, levels of aggression. This approach, however, leaves unexplained the failure of supplemental testosterone to alter sex-object-choice while in fact increasing aggressive behaviors. If Whitam's informants were typically nonaggressive -- and he does not limit ag-

gression to violent acts, but also to involvement in contact sports -- I do find it difficult to characterize thus, for example, Dave Kopay. Clearly his equation does not apply to all homosexuals, and Whitam's thesis should have reflected the limitations of his data.

One cannot help but wonder if Whitam's support of a biological interpretation of homosexuality is motivated less by a knowledge of biology than from a marriage of scholarship and politics. Whitam concludes with a lament over the social plight of the modern homosexual in America. Having stated throughout the work that homosexuals of the Anglo-Saxon erotic tradition (as compared with the Latin and Southeast Asian traditions) have a bad time of it, he implies that much of this social heavy-handedness would be alleviated if biological interpretation of homosexuality were adopted. Although relations can and do exist between theory and social policy, the former should shape the latter, and not vice versa.

While rich in its data and interesting at the ethnographic level, this book falls short of its potential theoretically because the data are not applied to appropriately limited questions. Whitam has set for himself a challenging task, but his commendable enthusiasm for his subject coupled with an eagerness to reach a helpful conclusion results in the omission of necessary logical links between his data and his theory.

%% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% NEW PUBLICATIONS %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %% %%

Journal of Homosexuality, vol. 13, no.2/3, 1986/87, entitled "Interdisciplinary Research on Homosexuality in the Netherlands," A.X. van Naerssen, guest editor. This new issue of the Journal is international in scope, presenting current gay and lesbian research from the Netherlands. This issue represents a significant move to connect the international gay and lesbian studies communities and is a welcome addition to the work of the Journal.

The Cultural Construction of Sexuality edited by Pat Caplan. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987). Included among a number of interesting articles on the construction of sexuality is one of particular interest to anthropologists by Gill Shepherd entitled "Rank, gender, and homosexuality: Mombasa as a key to understanding sexual options." This is an excellent article on lesbian and gay male behavior among Swahili Muslims in Mombasa, Kenya.

The Sambia: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea by Gilbert Herdt. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987).

Male Homosexuality in Central and South America edited by Stephen Murray. (New York: GAU, 1987). This volume offers the first synthesis of male homosexual behavior in Latin America. Attention is given to the historical origins of homosexual organization as well as the current meaning and complexity of homosexuality in urban, rural and tribal settings. Order from Institute Obregon, 1360 De Haro St., San Francisco, CA 94107. [from SLGC Newsletter]

Gay Identity: The Self Under Ban by William H. DuBay. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1987). The book first examines the manner in which modern concepts of identity, sex, gender, and family have combined with social oppres-