

Adoption and Ascription: Three Theories of Gay Identity

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ABSTRACT

Researchers and theorists have long questioned whether sexual identity is innate, socially constructed, or psychologically constructed. Essentialists argue that one's sexual desires are genetically pre-determined and only behaviors can be controlled. Constructionists see sexual orientations (particularly homosexuality) as artificially discrete labels that do not accurately depict human sexuality. Psychoanalysts perceive sexual orientation largely as a psychological response to self and society.

All three perspectives have strengths and flaws, but the constructionist school has deep inconsistencies that make most of its arguments difficult to believe. In the end, it is important to develop a new way of looking at sexual identity, one that embraces the strengths of all three previous schools of thought but discards their weakest claims.

A study on fruit flies recently made news (Christina 2008) when scientists discovered that in at least one species, sexual orientation is biologically determined and caused by neurological mechanisms. ("Sexual orientation," as used in this essay, represents a person's erotic and romantic behaviors and desires; this essay looks at sexual orientation specifically in relation to the gender(s) of a person's erotic and romantic targets.)

For years, social science research and theory, as well as research in psychology and other disciplines, has tried to determine the nature of gay identity. Some believe that it is innate and has always existed (essentialism), others believe it is a relatively new concept that reflects little more than a social role (constructionism), and still others believe it is built as a result of psychological responses to society (social psychology or psychoanalysis).

The scholar and literary critic Wilfrid Koponen identifies essentialism's claims that homosexuality "appears to have existed in all cultures" and that "a distinct gay identity . . . has existed throughout history" (Koponen:138). One example of an essentialist thinker is Alan Downs. In his book *The Velvet Rage*, Downs indeed claims that homosexuality is innate, its culture is necessarily separate from "straight" culture, and both of those statements have always been true in every society in varying forms.

According to Koponen, constructionism is the view that “gay identity is a social construction, and a recent one, [thus] it does not make sense to refer to ‘gay people’ apart from particular social, economic, and historical conditions” (Koponen:138). A prominent constructionist thinker is William H. DuBay, whose book *Gay Identity* argues that few, if any, humans are innately driven toward certain sexual desires or behaviors, and the concept of homosexuality is recent, overly binary, and reductionist.

The third perspective on gay identity, social psychology, contends that gay identity culminates as a psychological and social reaction to isolation and derision from heterosexual peers and family members. Like essentialists, the social psychologist believes that homoerotic feelings are a static part of a person’s identity; but social psychologists also claim, like constructionists, that homosexuality in some ways reflects a role adopted to manage deviant desires and society’s reactions to them. Downs, the essentialist, perhaps offers the most concise platform of a social psychologist: Gay children and adolescents “needed love and we feared that there was something about us that made us unlovable. It was an experience that became an integral part of our psychology” (Downs:12).

Essentialism

Alan Downs begins his book by describing the course of events that most gay men experience, including Downs himself, during childhood and

adolescence (Downs focuses primarily on gay men, as does this essay; lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people are not directly addressed in these works on gay identity). His approach assumes, first of all, that homosexuality is innate: “We couldn’t change ourselves,” he writes of boys and adolescents like himself who ultimately identified as gay, “but we could change the way we acted” (Downs:11).

The progression toward acceptance of gay identity, according to Downs’ model, begins with parents recognizing at an early age that their children are “definitely not quite like the other children they had known” (Downs:10). As these “different” boys move into adolescence, they begin to feel the same sense of difference internally and begin to identify the traits that make them different. Briefly echoing the social psychological approach, Downs documents the experience that he and other gay adolescents shared, making “ourselves more acceptable to others in many ways. . . . Maybe you learned that you could win approval by displaying a creativity that the other boys refused to show, or . . . by excelling at everything you did” (Downs:12). Eventually, this process culminates in the acceptance of an innate homosexuality.

More important, perhaps, is Downs’ view that gay identity and culture exist separately from the broader culture, and have always done so. “There are some lessons in life that are unique to gay men,” Downs writes. “These lessons

come out of our experience of growing up in a straight man's world; an experience that most of our parents didn't have [and] couldn't teach you" about (Downs:167). In late adolescence and early adulthood, those lessons are learned on one's own, through "trial and error" (Downs:167). But as gay adolescents become independent, gay adults, role models in the gay community—a community that is distinct in every culture, although its expression and content varies by time and place—"teach [gay men] that certain ways of behaving inevitably lead to discontent" (Downs:167).

Downs is laying his case for a gay identity, as well as gay cultures, that permeate across geographic and temporal borders. According to Downs, gay men have the unique experience of having intrinsic sexual desires and being treated as perverts or deviants in nearly all of history's societies because of them.

Constructionism

Contrasting sharply with Downs' essentialist approach to gay identity is William H. DuBay's brand of constructionism (which he refers to as "interactionism"). DuBay insists that gay identity is nothing more than the "result of adopting the homosexual role" (DuBay:2). In DuBay's view, most people experience some erotic desires and intimate emotional attachments to people of their own gender; terms like gay and homosexual—as well as straight

and heterosexual—are recent creations, completely meaningless, and unable to discretely categorize the broad range of human sexuality and emotion.

DuBay argues that gay identity—what he refers to as the “gay myth” (DuBay:2)—is what distinguishes them [gay people] from others” (DuBay:3). He believes that this gay identity reflects, “their consciousness of being a people set apart. And what sets them apart is their joint commitment to a role created by society solely for the purposes of controlling and isolating [homoerotic] behaviors” (DuBay:3).

Psychoanalytical

Richard Isay, a gay psychologist, has developed a psychological model for explaining gay identity. Like the essentialist Downs, Isay views homosexuality as an intrinsic characteristic: “Almost all the gay men whom I have seen in psychoanalysis . . . report that, starting from about age four, they felt that they were ‘different’ from their peers” (Isay:23).

Where Isay diverges from the essentialist perspective is by drawing homosexuality into the realm of psychology. The development of homosexuality, to Isay, is “analogous to the Oedipal stage in heterosexual boys, except that the primary sexual object of homosexual boys is their fathers” (Isay:29).

As this homosexual drive becomes more apparent to the gay youth, the “process normally leads in late adolescence to self-labeling, or ‘coming out’ to

oneself" (Isay:48). The culmination of this self-labeling process "feels like the pieces of an old puzzle falling into place" (Isay:50).

While Isay's approach is nominally essentialist in the sense that he accepts homosexuality as inborn, it is also nominally constructionist in that he views gay identity as a role defined by society. Isay suggests that those roles are learned especially in late adolescence and early adulthood, as gay youth begin to socialize with other gay youth, adults, and social networks (a stage Isay calls homosocialization). He lends credence to essentialism again when he says that homosocialization is a "necessary aspect of the integration of one's sexual orientation. It is a way of discovering the positive role models that are denied gay youth in our society and of countering . . . social stigmatization and isolation" (Isay:62).

Criticism of Essentialism

A large body of biological research supports essentialism—most animal species, including fruit flies (Christina 2008), vultures (Kessel 1999), giraffes, goats, birds, bonobos, and dolphins (Kluger 1999), have members who engage in lifelong, persistent homoerotic partnerships.

Still, every piece of research that shows an inborn, genetic sexual orientation comes with a caveat: "Even if some animals do engage in homosexual activity . . ., their behaviour still serves as an incomplete model—and an

incomplete explanation—for human behaviour” (Kluger). The point is stated more directly by Christina: “[W]e shouldn’t jump to conclusions about what this might mean for human sexuality. . . . Human beings are rather more complex than fruit flies. And our sexuality is, to put it mildly, a lot more complex” (Christina).

That means, in other words, that there is no conclusive quantitative evidence to support a genetic component of human homosexuality. In fact, the most prominent studies on human sexuality—such as Kinsey’s (1948)—have produced results closer to constructionist thought. We would be right, then, to question essentialism’s claims of completely innate sexual orientation (although it does appear that genetic composition does at least affect sexual orientation).

Additionally, human sexual behavior is more fluid than essentialists would like to acknowledge. There is a broad range of possible sexual behaviors among humans—even within a single person. Essentialists usually reduce human sexual behaviors to a ternary set of sexual orientations, when, in fact, human sexuality is a continuum rather than a discrete set of options.

However, the essentialist school of thought also claims that some form of gay identity or gay culture—to varying levels of sophistication, using various terminologies, and including different groups of people—have existed throughout most, or all, societies and times. This seems more believable.

Even the constructionist DuBay contradicts most of his other assertions by acknowledging an objective gay identity or culture: “The individual roles we choose and modify become . . . a common heritage that will continue to have a rippling effect down through history” (p. 28). He contradicts his own assertion that gay people have identified as a social group only recently by specifically acknowledging that “[t]oday’s gay community . . . can probably be traced back in a straight line to those institutions, baths, and brothels in ancient Rome, where transvestites, eunuchs, male prostitutes, and catamites gathered for business and sociability” (43). While earlier societies did not have terminology like gay or homosexual, and the boundaries of “perverted” or “sodomite” social groups varied by time and society, it is clear to see that most societies have had at least one deviant social group that primarily included those who regularly engage in homoerotic behaviors as adults. This is the “common heritage” that is “rippling down through history”: symbols, knowledge, and roles that have been cultivated in various societies for centuries—a culture where gay people can belong. Regardless of the terminology used and the exact grouping, it is a society of “others” organizing themselves together for the purposes of sociability, erotic behavior, and perhaps protection.

From ancient Roman baths patronized by gays and transvestites, to molly houses of 18th Century England, to the “Tearoom” subculture of the United States

most prominent in the 20th Century, it is clear that identities and subcultures have always existed for people who do not conform to sexual and erotic norms, especially gay men. As Downs wrote, "There are some lessons in life that are unique to gay men. These lessons come out of our experience of growing up in a straight man's world; an experience that most of our parents didn't have" (Downs:167). These lessons, on "how to be an authentic gay men" (Downs:167), are learned first through trial and error and later from older gay men and lesbians who serve as role models and cultural tutors. In this sense, a gay subculture is indeed a reality, one that has been recorded (in one form or another) in many cultures throughout human history. For some it is nothing more than a framework for managing a deviant sexual identity; for others it is a full subculture with symbols and shared meanings, the kind of culture that is reproduced as gay identity in most societies. There is no need, when considering this kind of unique and persistent gay subculture, to know whether homosexuality is inborn. Culture is the constant.

Criticisms of Psychoanalysis

Social psychology creates an unduly medical image of sexual orientation. In the view of social psychologists, sexual orientation is fixed, but it is not a biological or neurological mechanism. Rather, sexual orientation is a psychological response. Early in a boy's life, the Freudian Oedipal complex goes

awry and makes the child effectively wish to be his mother, which ultimately leads to his sexual desire for men. As the child grows older, society condemns his sexual desires, which in turn causes him to form (or adopt) a gay identity as a defense against social pressures.

It is important to note that Isay's psychoanalytical research was conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when homosexuality in the United States was still popularly considered a mental disorder. In fact, only in the early 1970s did psychological professional associations remove homosexuality from their lists of diseases. Isay's perspective is tainted by his belief that homosexuality is a psychiatric malfunction.

Criticisms of Constructionism

The problem with DuBay's argument is that in our society (and most every other in the world's history) a man who is known or believed to have sex with other men—except perhaps as juvenile experimentation—is treated as deviant, as substandard, as separate. The “gay” label, like “homosexual” before it, is relatively new, but the stigma against repeated homoerotic experiences in adulthood has existed in most societies since civilization began. The gay status is not exclusively chosen, as in DuBay's utopian view, but also ascribed by peers and institutions in many overt and covert ways. The gay identity, or gay role as DuBay frames it, emerged in part to form solidarity and a “safe harbor” in

societies that ascribe normative and dominating status to those who fit gender and erotic expectations and deviant and subjected status to those who do not fit normative expectations.

Similarly, although DuBay claims that “coming out,” or disclosing one’s gay identity, is not a “process of acceptance or admission of a condition we call sexual orientation” but rather the result of “adopting the homosexual role” (DuBay:2), the gay identity is only to an extent “adopted.” Terms like gay, straight, and, although not mentioned even once in DuBay’s book, bisexual, are exogenous labels that inadequately attempt to fit sexuality into an artificial and discrete set of ways of behaving. They are also, however, labels that have been applied, understood, and used to define social status for many centuries in European and Eurocentric (and some other) societies—not using the same words, of course, but using words like “sodomite,” “pervert,” and so forth, to convey the same idea that homoerotic behaviors belong in the realm of “others,” people who are fundamentally different from and devalued by normative society. Homoerotic behavior in the vast majority of societies, past and present, has been a discrete example of “perverse” behavior.

DuBay claims that *identity* “refers to the subjective adoption and experience of [a] role by [an] individual” (2). But our society uses the gay label to describe any person who participates primarily in homoerotic behaviors

(compared to heteroerotic behaviors), meaning that an individual does not exclusively adopt the gay label. In fact, gay identity *cannot* both reflect the subjective experience of the gay label *and* be an exclusively internally adopted status. Part of the subjective experience of the gay label and gay identity is being placed in the gay category (which is ascribed, as mentioned earlier, to all people who are known or believed to engage in recurrent homoerotic behavior, regardless of whether a given person calls himself gay); another part is society's active condemnation of homoerotic behavior and people placed in the gay label.

DuBay points out that some countries do not have gay or straight labels (DuBay:3). That is true. But in many of those countries, in which the concept of gay identity is ostensibly absent, a single homoerotic act is punishable by death. Surely people in such environments, if they find themselves primarily attracted to people of their own gender, will develop networks and symbols—at one level of sophistication or another—to identify one another as safe to approach. Indeed, the tearoom phenomenon that thrived in the United States in the 20th Century is one example of forming a gay culture¹ to form a safe harbor (see Humphreys 1970).

¹ Culture, in a sociological sense, is defined as the “knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society” (Kendall:43). These elements are most certainly present in the gay community, although they may differ in specifics from one country or time to another.

One of DuBay's more troubling claims is that gay identity reflects a "tendency to reify a sexual feeling and make it the centerpiece of one's personality" (DuBay:7). Here his inability to comprehend nuance—or at least his indifference toward it—becomes remarkably clear. In DuBay's view of the world, there is no room for gay people whose master status is something other than their sexual identity. There is no room for the student who also happens to be Unitarian, Swedish, and gay; in DuBay's interpretation of our world, that person will always be a gay person first, and a student, Unitarian, or Swede second. He argues that a deviant status becomes a master status "that overrides all the other roles" a person may have (DuBay:102).

Of course a person's sexual and erotic desires and behaviors are one factor that contributes to how he interprets his world—sometimes. For example, a person's sexual identity plays a key role when he is in bed with a partner, when he is flirting, when a social conversation turns to sex, love, or erotic attraction. However, most people, gay or straight, are aware of the fact that different environs carry different role expectations. A gay person does not automatically adopt gay identity as his master status, contrary to DuBay's apparent assumption. The master status that a person adopts will vary based on his background, his past and ongoing interactions with others, and the community where he finds himself. Gay people living in areas that widely accept open

homosexual behavior (same-sex flirting, discussion of same-sex attraction, etc.) will feel less need to promote gay identity to master status. It becomes a background status within the person's overall identity—a matter of “second nature” rather than one of obvious difference from and opposition to neighborhood peers.

DuBay further writes, “human sexual behaviors, like all human behaviors, are the products of socially constructed meanings” (38). This is wrong—he has the cause and the effect in reverse. Human behaviors are, in fact, simply behaviors; the socially constructed meanings come from how we symbolize and interact with those behaviors. (It is also worth noting that DuBay's research was conducted before knowledge of homosexuality in other animal species was well known.)

In an effort to prove his point that “the major determinants of human sexual behavior come partly from biological and psychological limits, partly from the objective values and sanctions of culture itself, but mostly from the choices of the individual” (DuBay:39), DuBay points to two cultures: the Sambia culture of New Guinea, and the indigenous people of Tahiti.

In traditional Sambia culture, DuBay writes (DuBay:55), boys from the age of seven are expected to perform fellatio older boys on a daily basis while not engaging in heteroerotic behaviors until marriage to a woman at around age

twenty. DuBay views this role as an example of homoerotic behavior as “an expression of manliness, not femininity, the royal road to manhood itself” (DuBay:55). But he conveniently overlooks the fact that a boy who continues exclusively or primarily homoerotic behavior as an adult will be outcast from society. The traditional Sambian method of child development surely looks bizarre through our cultural lens, but a variation of our gay role follows adult gay men even there.

In Tahiti, according to DuBay, “each village has one—and only one—*mahu*, a man who dresses as a woman. . . . The status of a *mahu* is considerable [and m]en in the villages engage in casual homosexual relations with the *mahu*” (DuBay:56). Again, DuBay’s example does not quite work. First, the role of the *mahu* is an exercise in *gender* variation, not *sexual orientation* variation. Further, as in the Sambia tradition, a man who engages in homoerotic experiences with any man *other* than the *mahu* is treated as a pervert. Another equivalent role to our gay role is seen, then, in Tahiti.

DuBay quotes research finding that feelings of alienation are more common among gay men and women than their straight peers (DuBay:57), but then he offers an odd interpretation of that research: Social isolation “is more likely to reflect the differences between homosexual and heterosexual males than to contribute to such differences” (DuBay:58). Ironically, there is an

unacknowledged inference in his observation: if alienation reflects the differences between homosexual and heterosexual males, as DuBay claims, then homosexual and heterosexual males *must* be constitutionally different from one another, to one extent or another—another contradiction of DuBay's other claims.

Implications

The central question that divides essentialists and social psychologists from constructionists is this: Are homoerotic desires a choice? A constructionist would say that homoerotic desires are merely an example of preference based on trial and error: a homoerotic experience here was pleasant, a few heteroerotic experiences there were unpleasant, and subsequent homoerotic experiences have been pleasant, therefore one prefers homoerotic behavior because it is what has proved more probably pleasant in the past. An essentialist or social psychologist would argue that there is a constitutional and essential element of the *person* that causes homoerotic desire. Although one may have homoerotic desires without being gay (one might be bisexual, or even predominantly heterosexual with occasional, isolated homosexual desires), but, regardless of what your sexual desires are, they are fixed and static from an early age (the age of four, according to Isay (p. 23)).

The most significant consequence of this discussion is its direct relevance to the efficacy of “reparation” therapy—religious programs that claim to convert homosexuals into heterosexuals. An essentialist perspective (in which homosexuality is partly or entirely inborn) implies that reparation therapy is pointless because biology cannot be changed. Even a social psychological perspective suggests that, even if not inborn, homosexuality is a constitutional element that results from one’s background and is not amenable to change. But a constructionist perspective suggests that homoerotic behaviors and desires are a matter of preference and learning. In theory, then, a reparative program could “cure” homoerotic behavior from the perspective of a constructionist—by retraining a gay-identified person to prefer the opposite sex.

A Third Way

Perhaps the most logically consistent way to view sexual orientation, at least for the time being, should not address the cause of sexual orientation. Although research on other animal species shows a strong genetic influence on sexual orientation, only a handful of studies on humans have shown such a clear genetic influence. Most previous studies on human sexual behavior show a great deal of fluidity that suggests that genetics influence humans less than other species (or, perhaps, that most humans are interested to some degree in both

sexes). While it is entirely possible that science will one day conclusively prove the origin of human sexual orientation, we do not yet understand it adequately.

What the essentialists, social psychologists, and constructionists share is a disdain for restrictive roles. A utopian constructionist like DuBay would presumably like to see sexual labels and roles eliminated. However, we must accept where we *are* as a society before we can make progress. We are not in a place where elimination of labels is realistically possible. However, it is entirely possible—and necessary—to accept more fluidity in our labels of human sexuality. Whether sexual orientation is innate and internal or a preference, it is important to recognize that most people, to one extent or another, have sexual or erotic feelings toward members of both sexes at some point in their lives.

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