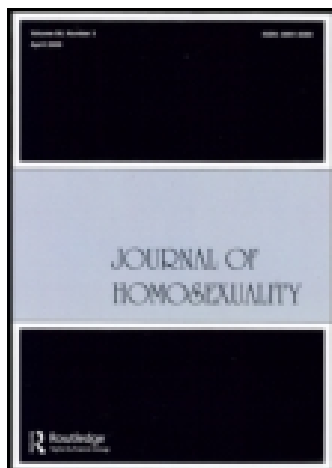


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Breaking the Mirror: The Construction of Lesbianism and the Anthropological Discourse on Homosexuality

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ABSTRACT. This essay reviews the anthropological discourse on homosexuality by examining the assumptions that have been used by anthropologists to explain homosexual behavior, and by identifying current theoretical approaches. The essay questions the emphasis on male homosexual behavior as the basis for theoretical analysis, and points to the importance of including female homosexual behavior in the study of homosexuality. Cross-cultural data on lesbian behavior are presented and the influence of gender divisions and social stratification on the development of patterns of lesbian behavior are broadly explored. The article outlines suggestions for examining the cultural context of lesbian behavior as well as the constraints exerted on women's sexual behavior in various cultures.

Recent years have seen a burgeoning of studies on homosexuality in the social sciences, much of it inspired by the feminist and Gay Rights movements of the 1970s. The focus of this new literature, particularly in sociology and history, concerns the historical and cultural influences on homosexual behavior. Plummer suggests that "specific ways of experiencing sexual attraction and gender behavior are bound up with specific historical and cultural milieux" (1981, p. 12). In a similar vein, historians looking at eroticism suggest that it is "subject to the forces of culture" (D'Emilio, 1983, p. 3), and thus accessible to historical analysis. The anthropological data on cross-cultural sexual variation provide much of the groundwork for such analyses; yet it has been one of the

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failings of anthropology that the field itself has developed no adequate theory regarding the cultural construction of homosexual behavior.

To remedy this situation, the focus in this volume will be on homosexual behavior as it is organized both historically and culturally, with emphasis on the particular contexts in the cultures discussed that influence or shape homosexual behavior. The following essays show not only the wide variation in forms of female and male homosexuality, but also investigate the complex interaction of cultural and social factors affecting the expression of such behavior. The emphasis is on the cultural patterns or institutions rather than the individual who engages in same-sex behavior. In particular the articles diverge from the concept of homosexuality as a single cross-cultural institution. Instead they analyze homosexual behavior in terms of sexual patterns that are understandable only within the larger context of the culture that shapes it. Thus, it is hoped that this volume, by providing ethnographic and theoretical analyses of cross-cultural homosexual behavior, will advance the anthropological study of homosexuality and improve our understanding of the cultural construction of homosexual behavior.

This essay intends to place the following articles within the anthropological discourse on homosexuality by examining assumptions that have been used by anthropologists to explain homosexual behavior, and by identifying the current theoretical approaches. It also questions the continued emphasis on male homosexual behavior as a general model for theoretical analysis. It will bring women's sexual behavior within the purview of the current discussion on homosexuality by separating it from the historical construction of male homosexuality and by examining the particular cultural contexts of lesbian behavior. The terms *homosexuality* and *lesbianism*, as used in this essay, refer to sexual behavior between individuals of the same sex. Their use should not be construed as imposing the structure of western sexual ideology on cross-cultural practices; in western sexual systems, individuals who are identified by their sexual behavior form isolated subcultures. This pattern bears little resemblance to the integral nature of homosexual practices in many tribal societies.

CROSS-CULTURAL THEORIES AND STUDIES

The anthropological study of homosexuality has been limited by serious methodological and theoretical problems. As Langness has aptly stated, "it is fair to say that we have no anthropological *theory* of homosexuality . . ." (Foreword to Read, 1980, p. vii). The reasons for this absence are numerous and have been discussed in detail by several anthropologists (Carrier, 1980; Fitzgerald, 1977; Read, 1980; Sonenschein, 1966). In particular, most anthropologists have been affected by

or accepted the prejudices of Western society toward homosexual behavior, and consequently have not considered the study of homosexuality to be a legitimate pursuit. The data they have gathered are limited to brief reports of homosexual practices. According to Carrier, these reports "(are) . . . complicated by the prejudice of many observers who consider the behavior unnatural, dysfunctional, or associated with mental illness. . ." (1980, p. 101). Discussion of the topic has, in general, been restricted to statements regarding the presence or absence of certain types of sexual acts. Such cataloguing has resulted in a considerable amount of information about sexual variation, but has provided little understanding of the cultural contexts within which these behaviors occur.¹

Certain basic assumptions have colored the brief discussion of homosexuality in the anthropological literature. The theoretical models used in the past to analyze homosexual data derived directly from western psychological concepts of sexuality. Most anthropologists based their evaluation of homosexual practices in other cultures on the deviance model of psychology and sociology, assuming that heterosexuality represented the norm for sexual behavior, and, therefore, homosexuality was abnormal or deviant behavior. Such evaluations were often in direct contrast to the meaning or value attached to homosexual behavior in the culture studied, since many groups accepted homosexual practices within their social system. For example, Berndt labelled the male homosexual practices of Australian aborigines as "sexual abnormalities" and "perversions" (1963). Other anthropologists, however, have shown that the aboriginal practices were acceptable and institutionalized in the form of "brother-in-law" exchange among aborigines (Layard, 1959; Roheim, 1950; Spencer & Gillen, 1927). Hill (1935) described the Navajo *nadle* (hermaphrodites) as unhappy and maladjusted individuals despite the fact that the *nadle* were (or had been) highly revered and respected by the Navajo (see Greenberg, this issue, on ridiculing berdache). In a classic example of the contrast between emic and etic categories, Metraux declared that "*abnormal* sexual relationships between women (were) tolerated and *accepted*" on Easter Island (1940, p. 108, emphasis mine).

Implicit in this approach has been the belief that sexual behavior belonged to the domain of the individual (see Padgug, 1979). As a private act, it has not been considered relevant to the larger functioning of the social group. For psychological anthropologists who studied sexual behavior, such behavior served as an indicator of the individual's adjustment to society. These anthropologists considered the homosexual individual to be a person unable to adjust to the prescribed gender role. As evidence, they cited the males among the Plains Indians who were thought to lack the temperament for a warrior, and so turned to the berdache role (see Benedict, 1939; Mead, 1935).

Another assumption in the anthropological discourse on homosexuality

has been the belief in a "homosexual nature" underlying all expressions of homosexuality. This assumption was the basis of Kroeber's "homosexual niche" theory, which he used to explain the Native American berdache. He maintained that American Indian culture *accommodated* individuals who were homosexual by creating the berdache institution (Kroeber, 1925, 1940). He believed that individuals took on the berdache role as the result of psychological or congenital problems, and that these individuals were found in most tribes. His ideas reflected what is currently being called "essentialism," the argument for a common trans-historical substrate of behavior or desire in all cultures.² In the study of homosexual behavior, this view is expressed in the perception that a certain percentage of homosexual individuals will take on the role in their culture which allows the expression of a homosexual nature, such as the Native American berdache, the Tahitian mahu, or Chukchee shaman role (see Callender & Kochems, this issue, for other male roles).

Although their views were to some extent within this essentialist framework, certain anthropologists foreshadowed a later historical-cultural construction of sexuality through application of a learning theory model. Both Mead (1935) and Benedict (1934) referred to the great arc of human potential from which cultures chose particular traits. Yet they found that this "essential" core was less and less relevant to the social design of human behavior. Benedict proposed that human behavior takes the forms that societal institutions prescribe, while Mead also argued for the malleability of humans in learning cultural forms. In considering "the homosexual," the emphasis in both their works, as noted above, was on the failure of the individual to adjust; nevertheless, it was argued that cultural factors shaped the homosexual response. Mead (1961) later pointed out that various individual personality cues combine with the cultural interpretation of sexuality to shape an individual's sex role. In contrast to the majority of anthropologists, both Mead and Benedict suggested that homosexual roles had certain valid cultural functions and were acceptable in some societies. Their suggestions opened the way for fuller analysis of the cultural context of homosexual behavior.

HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Largely as a result of the feminist and gay movements of the late '60s and '70s, anthropologists began a new analysis of homosexual behavior. The feminist declaration that "the personal is political" underscored the realization, as Ross and Rapp point out, that "the seemingly most intimate details of private existence are actually structured by larger social relations" (1981, p. 51). Further prompted by the gay movement's rejection of the Western definition of homosexuality, anthropologists realized

the need to understand sexuality from a perspective which took into account the importance of both the historical period and the cultural context. They joined other social scientists in the historical constructionist approach, or more appropriately for anthropology, the historical-cultural construction of sexuality.

Recent work on the historical-cultural construction of sexuality brings definition to the cultural factors which shape sexual behavior, and, in a sense, chips away at the essentialist core by establishing the importance of external, social factors. Ross and Rapp state that:

Sexuality's biological base is always experienced culturally, through a translation. The bare biological facts of sexuality do not speak for themselves; they must be expressed socially. Sex feels individual, or at least private, but those feelings always incorporate the roles, definitions, symbols and meanings of the worlds in which they are constructed. (1981, p. 51)

Padgug has suggested the importance of the economic context in the construction of sexuality because "sexuality, class, and politics cannot easily be disengaged from one another" (1979, p. 5). Other areas that "condition, constrain and socially define" sexuality, as suggested by Ross and Rapp are: (1) kinship and family systems; (2) sexual regulations and definitions of communities; and (3) national and "world" systems (1981, p. 54). Patterns of homosexual behavior reflect the value system and social structure of the different societies in which they are found. The ideology regarding male and female roles, kinship and marriage regulations, and the sexual division of labor are all important in the construction of homosexual behavior. Thus, the historical-cultural factors affect and shape the expression of homosexuality.

Several recent works reflect this perspective to a greater or lesser degree. Levy (1971) suggested that the *mahu* of Tahiti, a traditional transvestite role for males (of which there was usually one in each village), functioned as a message to males regarding the non-male role which they should avoid. Others include Wolf's *The Lesbian Community* (1979), on the lesbian-feminist community in San Francisco, Read's *Other Voices* (1980), on the lifestyle in a male homosexual tavern in the U.S., Herdt's *Guardians of the Flutes* (1981) and *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia* (1984), and Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972). Carrier's (1980) cross-cultural survey established some basic correlations between socio-cultural context and the expression of homosexuality. He suggested that homosexual behavior correlated with the particular cultural ideology regarding sexuality and cross-gender behavior, as well as with the availability of sexual partners. Further, the articles in this volume examine the various cultural factors that shape the

nature of homosexual behavior and, particularly for non-Western tribal societies, show how they are integrated within the social system.

Male vs. Female Homosexuality

Until now the historical-cultural construction of homosexuality has been based predominantly on the theories of male homosexuality which have been applied to both male and female homosexual behavior or, even more abstractly, to a "trans-gender" homosexuality. In looking back at her classic article on the homosexual role, Mary McIntosh stated that "the assumption always is that we can use the same theories and concepts for female homosexuality and that, for simplicity, we can just talk about men and assume that it applies to women" (1981, p. 45). Because men's and women's roles are structured differently in all cultures, however, the structure of female homosexuality must be examined as well. A one-sided discourse on homosexuality does not adequately comprehend the complex interplay of factors which shape homosexual behavior, male or female. Frequently, the construction of homosexual behavior occurs at the level of gender systems, for example, in the context of gender redefinition (cross-gender or gender mixing roles) or gender antagonism (ritualized male homosexuality). Because of the importance of gender roles in homosexual behavior, no analysis can be complete without adequately evaluating both female and male gender roles. As Lindenbaum states, "gender is the mutual production of men and women acting in concert, whether it be in the form of cooperation or of opposition" (1984, p. 338).

Further, the different constraints placed on women and men demand a separate analysis of lesbian behavior in order to identify the contexts of women's roles that uniquely shape its expression. Past research on homosexuality reflects the implicit assumption that lesbian behavior is the mirror-image of male homosexuality. Yet, the act of having sex with a member of one's own sex may be culturally defined in rather divergent ways for women and men. The basic difference derives from the gender division which is imposed in all cultures and based on the physical differences between the two sexes. As Mead stated,

all known human societies recognize the anatomic and functional differences between males and females in intricate and complex ways; through insistence on small nuances of behavior in posture, stance, gait, through language, ornamentation and dress, division of labor, legal social status . . . (1961, p. 1451)

The different constraints imposed on men and women affect the construction of homosexual roles, behaviors, and meanings. Therefore, the factors that are significant in male homosexuality may not be significant to

the construction of female homosexuality. For example, the ritual homosexuality of New Guinea men was a result of the need to separate boys from the contaminating power of their mothers and of the belief that boys did not develop strength or masculinity naturally. Adult men helped them grow through ritual insemination (see Gray, this issue; also Herdt, 1981, 1984). Girls, on the other hand, were believed to have an inherent femininity and reproductive competence, possessing the female essence from birth (Herdt, 1981). Since it was not necessary for women to ritually implant femaleness in young girls, no ritual homosexuality analogous to male behavior existed for women. On the other hand, patterns of homosexual behavior may be similar for men and women, such as the cross-gender role among Native Americans, although still differentially affected by their separate roles and statuses. Consequently, the discourse on homosexuality must be informed by an analysis of the construction of lesbianism, which this next section will attempt to provide.

APPROACHES TO LESBIANISM

Despite the fact that no anthropological study other than Wolf's (1979) has focused on lesbianism, anthropologists and other social scientists have attempted to compare female and male homosexuality. Although their conclusions are questionable because of the lack of attention to the subject, they suggest that female homosexuality is less institutionalized, less well-developed, less important or less visible than male homosexuality (Carrier, 1980; Ford & Beach, 1951). The reasons given for the lack of female homosexual patterns frequently rely on the notion of biological constraints. Mead, for example, despite the prevalence of a learning theory model in most of her work, reverts to an essentialist position in her analysis of female homosexuality. She suggested that "female anatomy dictates no choices as to activity, passivity, asymmetry, or complementarity and seems to lend itself much less to institutionalization as a counter-mores activity" (1961, p. 1471). Whitehead (1981), in considering the Native American female cross-gender role, is also inclined to place the onus on the greater constraints of female biology as compared to male biology. Such arguments do not sufficiently take into account the cultural constraints and influences on women's roles, but rather fall back on the notion of biological determinism to explain women's activities and roles. Carrier is more to the point when he suggests that the "higher status accorded men than women in most societies" may account for the lower incidence on female homosexuality (1980, p. 103). Rather than explaining the data of lesbianism in terms of the prerequisites of physiology, patterns of lesbian behavior can be more accurately explained by the type of gender system and the autonomy of women in particular cultures.

Anthropological Study of Women

In looking at the anthropological data on women and lesbianism, a majority of ethnographies contain little or no data on lesbian behavior. There are several factors, other than the absence of lesbianism, that have contributed to this lack of information. Traditional anthropologists were concerned with the normative female role, studying women in activities that reflected the western ideology of womanhood as supportive and nurturing of male concerns. Ethnographers focused on the role of women in domestic activities such as gathering, weaving, childrearing, and preparing food for their families, often to the exclusion of women's activities outside this domestic sphere. They typically assumed that within the normative female role women engaged exclusively in heterosexual behavior. Consequently, they were unable to identify non-heterosexual behavior, or if they did, they failed to understand that in many instances it was acceptable, desirable, or easily accessible to a large number of women in non-western cultures. For example, Firth concluded that Tikopia women did not engage in lesbianism because so many male partners were available to them (1936, p. 495). He was assuming a natural preference for heterosexuality over homosexuality.

To complicate the matter, anthropological fieldwork was done predominantly by males, talking to male informants about male activities. According to Reiter, the details of women's lives "[come] from questions asked of men about their wives, daughters, and sisters, rather than the women themselves . . ." (1975, p. 12). Male informants were frequently unqualified or unwilling to discuss women's business and their hesitance or lack of knowledge was particularly critical to the process of obtaining data on lesbian behavior. Evans-Pritchard (1970) reported that Azande women kept their lesbian relations as secret as possible even from their husbands. The data he gathered from his male informants on women's homosexual relations necessarily reflected male assumptions and feelings rather than the female experience.

On the other hand, though many ethnographies contain no reports of lesbian behavior, some anthropologists have had notable success eliciting such information from female informants. For instance Shostak's (1981) life-history of Nisa, a !Kung woman, reveals that homosexual relations among girls was an accepted adolescent phenomenon. Prior studies made no reference to lesbian behavior among the !Kung. Other data are muddled both by anthropologists' and informants' reticence on the subject. Mueller, who studied Lesotho "mummy-baby" relationships, did not obtain explicit information on the women's sexual activity because, as she admits, "I was not able to ask such personal questions, largely because of my own embarrassment" (1977, p. 167). Gay found that mummy-baby relationships are "regarded as very personal and are only discussed reti-

cently with a stranger whose disapproval they fear" (this issue). In light of these discrepancies, references to the absence of homosexual behavior, whether female or male, may prove to be a poor basis for cross-cultural analysis.

Another problem with the anthropological data is that they have largely reflected the prevailing Western conception of lesbianism. From the late 1800s sexologists and social scientists identified masculine behavior in women as lesbianism; not surprisingly, women in "masculine" or cross-gender roles comprise nearly half of all the anthropological data on lesbianism (see Blackwood, 1984a). The remainder of the data simply reports the occurrence of sexual activity among adolescent girls or adult women. Anthropologists have ignored or overlooked other types of lesbian relations. Gay (this issue) candidly admitted that she was unaware of Lesotho girls' "mummy-baby" relationships, intimate girlfriend relationships, until a year after she had lived in her study area. She only then observed the relationship because her research assistant pointed it out. Thus, the anthropologist's knowledge or stereotype of Western lesbianism inhibits the collection of accurate data where relationships do not resemble the expected form.

The numerous problems with the data on lesbianism stem predominantly from the male biases and prejudices regarding lesbian behavior and women's roles. Although it is impossible to determine the universal prevalence of lesbianism, the small number of anthropological reports on the subject are more likely due to the limitation of the observers than to the condition of women's lives. Yet, even the perception that the amount of data is very small may be inaccurate. In Ford and Beach's (1951) cross-cultural survey of homosexual and lesbian behavior (the source most used in discussions of cross-cultural variation in homosexuality), 17 out of 76 cultures surveyed in the Human Relations Area File reported female homosexuality. By comparison, a recent survey of lesbian behavior (Blackwood, 1984a) found 95 cultures where lesbian and female cross-gender behavior occurred (plus several more that hinted at a possible lesbian role). Although one-third of these were Native North American tribes, the amount of data nevertheless indicates the limitations of previous studies as well as the misconceptions they have fostered regarding the prevalence of female homosexuality.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF LESBIANISM

Systems of gender, kinship and economy (as suggested by Adam, in this issue) affect the construction of both female and male homosexuality. Yet, the differential experiences of gender provide the basis for divergent lesbian and male homosexual patterns. In order to understand the cultural

factors significant to the construction of lesbian behavior, the focus in this section will be on the female role and the contexts within which lesbian behavior appears. In particular it will outline the influence of differing gender systems and different levels of social stratification on the development of patterns of lesbian behavior.³

Putting aside cross-gender behavior for the moment, the construction of lesbianism, where it occurs, takes place within the sphere of female activities and networks. Women in all cultures are expected to marry and bear children; in many they are betrothed and wed before or soon after puberty. Consequently, for the most part lesbian behavior locates within the structure of marriage relations, but within that system a variety of sexual relations are possible.

The range of lesbian behavior that appears cross-culturally varies from formal to informal relations. These patterns may be described as follows. Informal relations among women are those which do not extend beyond the immediate social context. Examples of such would be adolescent sex play and affairs among women in harems or polygynous households. Formal lesbian relations are part of a network or social structure extending beyond the pair or immediate love relationship, and occur within such social relationships as bond friendship, sisterhoods, initiation schools, the cross-gender role, or woman-marriage. An examination of social stratification suggests that, in societies where women have control over their productive activities and status, both formal and informal relations may occur. Where women lack power, particularly in class societies, they maintain only informal lesbian ties or build institutions outside the dominant culture.

Non-Class Societies

In non-class societies, depending on the degree of economic autonomy of women, several patterns of formal and informal lesbian relations occur. These patterns can be found in both highly stratified states, such as those of the Azande and Dahomey in Africa, and the more egalitarian !Kung of southern Africa and the Australian aborigines. The patterns in each group result from cultural factors such as kinship regulations, the marriage system, trade rights, and sexual customs. Among the Azande the husband's kin arranged marriage by paying a brideprice to the wife's kin. The brideprice gave them the right to claim the offspring of the wife for their lineage. Wealthier men married several wives and built a dwelling in the compound for each wife. Wives were given a plot of land to cultivate, and they controlled the profits made from the produce through trade. Women married shortly after puberty, but as they fulfilled their duties as a wife, certain rights accrued to them. Consequently, despite the demands of the marriage system, some Azande women established formal lesbian relationships, often with their co-wives. According to Evans-

Pritchard (1970, p. 1429), "All Azande I have known well enough to discuss this matter have asserted . . . that female homosexuality . . . was practiced in polygamous homes in the past and still [1930] is sometimes."

Azande women usually kept the sexual nature of their friendships secret from their husbands, who felt threatened by such activities, yet could not forbid them. Such relationships may have been fairly common for adult women in certain other African groups where marriage was polygynous, as among the Nupe (Nadel, 1942), the Hausa (Karsch-Haack, 1975), and the Nyakyusa (Wilson, 1963). A relationship between two Azande women could be formalized through a ritual that created a permanent bond (Evans-Pritchard, 1970). This bond secured the emotional and economic support of the partner, and may have served to widen the trade network of the woman and possibly enhance her position in the community.⁴ Thus, both formal and informal relationships occurred within the context of marriage among women who were in daily contact through their domestic and trade activities. It indicated that male control of female activities did not extend to interactions and concerns between females.

In other non-class societies lesbian relations occurred in sex-segregated childhood and adolescent groups. Among the highly stratified Dahomeyans, adolescent girls prepared for marriage responsibilities by attending initiation schools, where, among other activities, they performed exercises in each other's presence to thicken their genitalia. It has been noted that they engaged in sexual activities on these occasions (Herskovits, 1967). Such activity was congruent with their school training and served to heighten awareness of their erotic responses. Among the egalitarian !Kung, girls engaged in sexual play with other girls before they did so with boys (Shostak, 1981). In another egalitarian group, the Australian aborigines, adolescent sex play was an acknowledged and integral part of the social system. It conformed to the kinship regulations for marriage partners (Roheim, 1933), occurring among girls who were cross-cousins. Thus, an Australian girl formed lesbian relations with her female cross-cousin, whose family would later give her their son to marry, the girlfriends thereby becoming sisters-in-law.

In comparing the highly stratified social structure of Dahomey or the Azande to the more egalitarian Australian aborigines, the different constraints on lesbian behavior stand out. Herskovits (1932) stated that the adolescent period for Dahomeyan women was an acceptable time for lesbian activity. Some adult women also engaged in it, probably in the context of polygynous marriages, but this was secretly done. Azande women also maintained clandestine relationships. Roheim (1933) reported that married Australian women engaged in lesbian activities, one form of which was called *kityili-kityili*, tickling the clitoris with the finger. Although a woman's first marriage was controlled by her kin, she had the

choice, following the death of her first husband, to engage in various marital and extramarital relations (Bell, 1980, 1981). While Dahomeyan women were forced to conceal their lesbian activities, the lesbian relationships of the Australian women were an acknowledged part of their sexual behavior and were included in ritual activities (Kaberry, 1939). Thus, different levels of social stratification and marriage systems shape different patterns of lesbian behavior in non-class societies.

Class Societies

The contrast in patterns of lesbian behavior is sharper between non-class and class societies. In those with rigid hierarchical gender systems women's sexual activities are strictly confined. Formal lesbian patterns do not exist unless they maintain a status marginal to the dominant culture. In such societies, with control of women's productive and reproductive rights vested in male kin, not only were women confined to heterosexual marriage, but also their sexual activities were restricted by law or custom to their marital partner. Islamic law called for imprisonment for homosexuality and death or divorce for a wife caught in adultery (Minai, 1981). In this context, lesbian behavior, if it occurred at all, was informal and private. Clandestine relationships developed among Near Eastern women in harems and within the Muslim institution of *purdah*. Wives of ruling class men rarely saw their husbands and therefore sought alternative sources of relationships. Some wealthy, educated Near Eastern women could choose to remain unmarried and found great satisfaction in lesbian relationships (Abbott, 1946; Bullough, 1976; Walther, 1981). Ultimately, the strict segregation of the sexes provided the only context for lesbian relations.

Conditions were similarly restrictive for Chinese women. The sisterhoods of Kwangtung province provide the only available evidence of lesbian relationships in China (Sankar, this issue). This institution of bond friendship necessarily arose outside the traditional marriage and kin structure. Although still guided by the cultural values of the dominant society, these women rejected the traditional gender role to form sisterhoods based on the traditions of girls' houses and celibacy vows. The availability of silk work in Kwangtung province gave them the economic independence to refuse marriage. Some women did not engage in heterosexual relationships because of cultural sanctions imposed on those who took non-marriage vows. Others formed lover relationships with a "sister" (Sankar, 1978). Thus, in the class societies of the Near East and China the construction of lesbian relations showed two opposing trends: First, an informal pattern resulting from the restrictions of male-dominant institutions and, second, a sisterhood existing outside the social relations of the dominant culture and dependent on the success of female

bonding and the tolerance of the larger society. This second type applies as well to the lesbian subculture of western society in the last 80 years.

A formal pattern of age-graded lesbian relations appears in cultures with a dual economic system, such as black South Africa and Carriacou in the Caribbean. In both areas males participate in a capitalist wage-labor system through migration to industrial areas, while women work the land and direct the affairs of the household. On Carriacou husbands are separated from their wives for most of the year and at home are unable to command the exclusive attention of their wives. Older married women secure the affections and assistance of younger, often single women whom they support with income from the absentee husband (Smith, 1962). This relationship provides both economic and emotional support and is a viable alternative to the domestic isolation of the women. A similar pattern exists in South Africa, the mummy-baby game. It maintains the same functions of emotional and economic support as in Carriacou but the age range between women is smaller (Blacking, 1978; Gay, this issue; Mueller, 1977). Despite the imposition of a capitalist wage-labor system on these groups, its effects are mitigated through female bonding in mutually beneficial relationships. In South Africa these relationships may have derived from a traditional pattern of affective relations between older and younger women (Gay, this issue).

Cross-Gender Role

The cross-gender role for women constitutes another formal pattern of lesbian relations, which appears in certain classless societies and, in particular, in egalitarian societies. This role was institutionalized mainly among western Native American tribes and integrated into the social structure of the larger society. Five western tribes in which the cross-gender role has been observed at some length include the Mohave, Maricopa, Cocopa, Kaska, and Klamath (Blackwood, 1984b). Depending on their interest and ability, some women in these tribes took on the male gender role, usually at puberty, and performed the duties associated with men, such as hunting, trapping, and, for Cocopa *warrhameh*, fighting in battle. These women were not denied the right to marry and frequently took wives with whom they established a household and raised children. The significance of the female cross-gender role lay in the ability of women to take on a male role regardless of their biology. Further, it was possible for them to cross roles without threatening the definition of the male role because men and women had equal status and occupied complementary rather than antagonistic gender roles (Blackwood, 1984b).

In contrast to the flexibility of gender roles in egalitarian societies, class societies that have hierarchical gender systems define gender more

rigidly. In such cultures the gender system is structured in a dichotomous fashion; neither sex participates in the behaviors nor activities of the other. In male-dominant cultures such as western Europe or the Near East, it is impossible for women to assume a cross-gender role because such behavior poses a threat to the gender system and the very definitions of maleness and femaleness. Those who did, such as the passing women of western Europe, risked grave repercussions; if discovered, they faced serious punishment or even death (Crompton, 1981; Faderman, 1981).

CONCLUSION

The construction of lesbianism shatters some basic assumptions about women which have been propounded in the discourse on homosexuality. The perception that men maintain universal hegemony over women's sexuality is contradicted by the data on alternative sexual relationships for women. Rubin (1975) theorized that women were forced, through marriage, to be heterosexual and that this condition prevailed in all cultures. Others have subscribed to the concept of "enforced heterosexuality"; for example, Adrienne Rich has suggested that lesbianism "comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life . . . a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women" (1980, p. 649). In contrast to this analysis, the history of sexual relations is not one of total heterosexual dominance. The construction of sexuality in many non-class societies validated variant sexual behavior for women. Women's lives were not wholly constrained by the dictates of marriage and child-bearing, nor did they live in total submission to men. Other types of sexual relations existed both before and after marriage. As the Azande example shows, various formal and informal lesbian relations co-existed with marriage, giving women several options and avenues for control of their lives and sexual activities. In many tribal societies lesbian relations were not considered deviant nor were the women "breaking taboos"; on the contrary, lesbian bonds were institutionalized and integrated into kinship and other social structures.

Social stratification and gender ideology may place serious restrictions on women's sexuality. The constraints of marriage and lack of property rights imposed on women in many societies apparently limits the development of non-marital homosexual behavior and institutions. These constraints, however, should not be construed to be the result of the "limitations" of the female's biological sex. Enforced heterosexuality is tied to women's lack of economic power and the restriction of female activity to the domestic sphere. Further, the embeddedness of sexuality with gender roles in western societies proscribes homosexual activity and defines women as male sex objects.

The barriers to female power and sexuality in modern society reside in the male-dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, as the Chinese sisterhoods exemplify, even within strongly patriarchal societies women are capable of forming alternative institutions that circumvent male control. Similarly, lesbians in the United States are now building their own institutions and kin structures as well as creating sexual ideologies in opposition to the dominant society (Lockard, this issue).

Patterns of lesbian behavior develop from the particular conditions of the female gender role and the types of constraints which arise from the subordinate status women occupy in many societies. These constraints establish patterns which in many cases diverge from those for male homosexual behavior and yet are not less critical to a general understanding of homosexuality. Hopefully, future research will provide a more balanced approach to the study of the construction of both female and male homosexual behavior.

NOTES

1. Major works by non-anthropologists which make use of cross-cultural data are: Bullough, 1976; Burton, 1956; Ellis & Symonds, 1897/1975; Ford & Beach, 1951; Karsch-Haack, 1975; West, 1977; Westermarck, 1956; also Katz's (1976) chapter on Native Americans. The first anthropological cross-cultural survey by Opler (1965) strongly reflected western biases on homosexuality.
2. For further discussion of this theory see Weeks, 1981, pp. 2-3; Whitehead, 1984; Rubin, 1984; De Cecco & Shively, 1983/1984; and Richardson, 1983/1984.
3. Gender systems can be drawn to roughly parallel levels of social stratification, i.e., increased stratification, increased inequality of the sexes, though any particular society will need much greater analysis than can be provided here. The analysis here is suggestive rather than definitive.
4. Similar to men's blood-brotherhood, as described by Evans-Pritchard (1933).

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