

**The Power of Culture: Notes on Some Aspects of Gay and Lesbian Kinship
in America Today**



David M. Schneider

Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May, 1997), 270-274.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0886-7356%28199705%2912%3A2%3C270%3ATPOCNO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>

Cultural Anthropology is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/anthro.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Power of Culture: Notes on Some Aspects of Gay and Lesbian Kinship in America Today

David M. Schneider

In Euro-American culture, homosexuality has been more or less devalued for a long time. Sometimes very forcefully, sometimes not so severely or so extremely. At the moment—1995—less so than 50 years ago. And of course, differently by different parts of the population in this country and in different parts of the world.

At this time, antidiscrimination laws are not uncommon, fringe benefits are available for domestic partners in some places, gay and lesbian rights are often asserted, and gay and lesbian pride days and parades are not uncommon. Gay and lesbian adoption and parenting are well known and have been studied (Hayden 1992, 1995; Lerner 1995; Lewin 1993; Weston 1991) along with the rise in gay and lesbian “marriage” (Lewin 1996).

It is especially with gay and lesbian family formations, stable couple relations, parenting, and marriage that I am particularly concerned here.

It would be very easy, I think, to view these as simply moves whose aim is to legitimate homosexuality. The aim of legitimating homosexuality in the face of more or less intense homophobia cannot be excluded as a relevant consideration. At the same time, to view these as simply “assimilationist” in aim would be, if not entirely wrong, considerably less than the whole truth.

Neither is it possible to view gay and lesbian family formations as simply parodic or mimetic. Parody implies ridicule, which is simply not present. Mimicry need not necessarily involve ridicule, but merely value-free copying. Gay and lesbian family formations do NOT involve ridicule—quite the opposite, I think. And if mimicry or imitation entail envy, or admiration, then perhaps mimicry or imitation are indeed involved.

How then should gay and lesbian family formation, marriages, and parenting be understood in today’s culture?

At the simplest level, they strongly suggest that homosexuality is not very different from straight (hetero)sexuality insofar as kinship and family are concerned. Gay and lesbian couples are formed by people in love. They create a domestic unit. They may or may not “get married” in a formal ceremony of some kind. They may want children or they may not, and they may find ways to have them—by adoption, artificial insemination, and so on (Hayden 1995; Lerner 1995; Lewin 1993; Weston 1991, 1995), thus putting the lie to the claim that homosexuality is inherently sterile (a claim which has had different implications for lesbians and gay men). In sum, all of the above demonstrates that lesbians and gay men are not antifamily.

Yet to see all of this as a crass maneuver to get domestic partner benefits or escape the barbs and arrows of homophobes would be to impose a utilitarian cal-

culus on what is manifestly a richer and far more complex situation. It is crucial that this is not a cynically held, rationally directed means toward a self-interested end, but a sincere action undertaken out of deeply held and deeply felt beliefs and feelings. Whatever legitimating functions such actions may have are at best incidental and for many, the assimilationist connotations are explicitly repudiated. These are not ways of saying, "We're just ordinary normal human beings like everyone else," but they are ways of saying, "We're just ordinary human beings whose sexual orientation is different from others and there's nothing wrong with that." And it is not trivial, like "potato-potaato," or wearing funny hats. It is much more than a lifestyle. In fact, it has got special qualities and distinctive features all its own. So why do gays and lesbians fall in love, which they expect and hope will be lasting if not eternal; sometimes confirm their love with ceremonies they and others call "marriage"; form couples and domestic units; get very upset when and if these relationships break up; and want and have children however they can?

They do these things because they live in this society and are steeped in this culture, as everyone is. And like everyone else who is human, they want to do what they are supposed to do, they want to feel what they are supposed to feel, they want to believe what they are supposed to believe, and have the rewarding and fulfilling life that they were explicitly and implicitly promised as they grew up. And if they can be happy at the same time, so much the better.

But there is one difference that they have been told, in no uncertain terms, makes all the difference. They are not straight; they are gay and lesbian—cause for strong, even fatal sanctions sometimes.

And what difference does that make? Well, they cannot reproduce in the heterosexual way, which seems to be the way upon which the formal cultural scheme is founded (Schneider 1980[1968]). But that should make no real difference, especially since they *can* reproduce, foster, adopt, or benefit from various forms of the new reproductive technologies. Or does it make a difference that they are reproducing in these "new" ways? And what difference does it make that lesbians may be reproducing in ways that are different from those of gay men? Or, in some cases, with gay men, to form coparenting relationships that are biologically reproductive but not also sexual or conjugal.

It is these differences, however, that make all the difference to homophobia. But why homophobia?

There are a number of prohibitions that we just do not understand at this time. Why is incest prohibited and why did the Victorians get so worked up about it? Is it in any way related to the almost equally abhorred notion of sodomy that justified killing and enslaving so many in the 15th and 16th centuries? And where does the prohibition on masturbation fit in, if it fits in? Christianity is full of efforts to regulate sex, in any form, even straight heterosexuality, within the bonds of marriage. The reasons for all these restrictions are all very unclear. But given American culture as it is today—with all its homophobia, Christianity, and culture of kinship as it is—gay and lesbian love and marriage, domesticity,

and parenting seem comprehensible largely in terms of the fact that gays and lesbians are children of American culture, just as straights are.

But gays and lesbians are not straight. Are they no different, in any way except that one?

Hayden (1995) makes a case that gays and lesbians use all the old straight symbols but that they have different and new meanings and are knit together in different configurations. In this sense, gays and lesbians are not just mimicking "straight" culture or straight cultural forms, as they could be interpreted as doing if they were merely assimilating into straight, mainline culture. The alternative view, suggested by Hayden, is that lesbians and gays are instead exploiting the ambiguity of dominant cultural symbols by inhabiting their interstices. This point would be confirmed by Hayden's suggestion that "biology" is not quite the same for straights and gays (a view that is also suggested by Ragone [1994] for straights in the context of surrogacy, and by Franklin [1993] and Strathern [1992] in the context of assisted conception).

Consider for a moment the possibility that gays and lesbians are fundamentally different from straights and that assimilating into straight culture by falling in love, marrying, founding families, and parenting is simply (for some good reason) not possible. What sort of organization might they produce? Might they erect a scheme of localized patrilineal lineages and systematically engage in generalized exchange through matrilineal cross-cousin marriage? Even invent an Omaha-type kinship terminology to confuse the visiting anthropologist? No, American gays and lesbians will use the term *cousin* for the children of their mothers' and fathers' brothers, and the terms *nephew* and *niece* for their siblings' children.

Indeed, it is a very interesting theoretical question: what kinds of institutionalized arrangements *might* be possible and likely for gays and lesbians to develop that would both celebrate their difference (or differences?) within straight and Euro-American culture, yet permit them to live and function without the curse of homophobia? Or, if that is impossible, why is it impossible? (I am back to the question, Why homophobia? And the answer to many of these problems might or might not be much easier if we knew why.)

Another way to approach this is to ask precisely in what ways gays and lesbians are different other than in object-choice (to use that old phrase again) and the requirements that are imposed by that difference. From the evidence at hand, it would seem that gays and lesbians could live very well within the well-established forms of Euro-American kinship if they were allowed to and were not the objects of homophobic prejudice. That is, the difference in object-choice does not in itself necessarily engender or make more likely other differences.

Much has been written and said about "what causes homosexuality," and these "answers" have been located almost everywhere from genes to accidents of socialization. I do not address that problem here, nor would I venture to anywhere. Neither would I venture to address the question of what "causes" heterosexuality.

What I have argued is this. Given homosexuality, in this Euro-American population in this Euro-American culture, it is not surprising that lesbians and gays fall in love just as the rest of the population does, that they often form more or less lasting couple relations, not polygamous or polyandrous relations, and that they often, but not always, want to have kids and form families. It is a very rare goldfish that does not think living in a fish bowl full of water is a Good Thing.

The basic point here is that “culture” is indeed the “hegemonic discourse.” It envelops the individual and imposes its forms not simply by punitive sanctions, but not entirely without them either. It is the “morally” right way, the practically right way, the easiest way; it is what you should do, and what most people do do. But it is not airtight. For whatever reason, often without reason, some people just do not buy into the hegemonic discourse. But they do not just go off on a toot in any which direction. They go off on a toot that is always (!) oriented toward or away from the hegemonic cultural discourse, very often in an opposite direction. But hardly anybody toots off by founding a society for sex with Canada geese. If “heterosexual” is the cultural requirement, “homosexual” is its opposite and the way to go. As we should have learned from Durkheim, deviance is always with reference to *the* (not any old, but THE) norm.

Consider any form of contestation: even if it is not simply opposite, it is always with reference to the norm. For the norm always implies its opposite, sometimes as “norm” is to “not norm,” sometime as “up” is to “down.” But it is hard to contest something without having something better in mind, at least in the sense of “Not that.”

Notes

I am grateful for the comment and criticism of readers of early drafts of this paper, especially those of Sylvia Yanagisako and Sarah Franklin. They cannot be held responsible for nonsense that they did not perpetrate.

Editor's note: I would like to thank Sarah Franklin, who worked with David in responding to editorial queries and in preparing a final version of this manuscript for publication. Since David's death, his two sons, Michael and Jonathan, along with Richard Handler, have graciously helped to see this piece into print. I thank all four of them for their cooperation and support.

References Cited

Franklin, Sarah

1993 Making Representations: Parliamentary Debate of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. *In* Technologies of Procreation: Kinship in the Age of Assisted Conception. Jeanette Edwards, Sarah Franklin, Eric Hirsch, Frances Price, and Marilyn Strathern, eds. Pp. 96–132. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.

Hayden, Corinne P.

1992 Making Kinship Trouble: Lesbian Motherhood and the Dynamics of Choice in “the American Family.” Distinguished majors thesis, Departments of Anthropology and Women's Studies, University of Virginia.

- 1995 Gender, Genetics and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship. *Cultural Anthropology* 10:41–61.
- Lerner, Michelle
 1995 Of Children, Challenge and Choice: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Parents Transforming the Symbols of American Kinship. B.A. thesis, Department of Anthropology, Princeton University.
- Lewin, Ellen, ed.
 1993 *Lesbian Mothers*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
 1996 “Why in the World Would You Want To Do That?” Claiming Community in Lesbian Commitment Communities. *In* *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*. Pp. 105–130. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ragone, Helena
 1994 *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception in the Heart*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Schneider, David M.
 1980 *American Kinship*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn
 1992 *Reproducing the Future: Anthropology, Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Weston, Kath
 1991 *Families We Choose*. New York: Columbia University Press.
 1995 Gay Kinship as the Genuine Article. *In* *Naturalizing Power*. S. Yanigasako and C. Delaney, eds. Pp. 87–110. New York: Routledge.

Response to Schneider’s “The Power of Culture”

Richard K. Herrell
School of Public Health
University of Illinois at Chicago

At the 1994 nominating convention for the Republican Party in Virginia, a campaign manager introduced his candidate to the delegates as “a solid family man, and active in his church and his community.”¹ Alexis de Tocqueville would surely smile with recognition at this neat litany of valued characteristics Americans attribute to the public-spirited citizen, succinctly drawing together the realms of life in which Americans evidence their rightness with the collective moral purpose, still resonant after more than 150 years.² The campaign manager, if he were a social scientist, might say that social action in the family, in religion, and in community involvements garners for candidates the very qualities the voter should want in elected representatives to governmental bodies: the qualities, in short, of the exemplary citizen.

Like his great predecessor Tocqueville, David Schneider asked us to examine American culture globally (albeit in a much changed language), as related but differentiated parts of one system. In his writings and classes, he consistently argued against thinking of pieces of culture as segmentally attached to particular arrangements of the social system. As Tocqueville considered the role of many kinds of associational life in the void left by extreme individualism, Schneider similarly identified the contours of a person’s characteristics in many