
Homosexuality, “Homosexuality,” And The Aims Of Therapy

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Back in 1940, Erich Fromm wrote: “The term homosexual . . . has come to be a kind of wastebasket into which are dumped all forms of relationships with one’s own sex.” (“Changing Concepts of Homosexuality,” posthumous paper published in 1997 collection of Fromm’s articles: *Love, Sexuality, and Matriarchy: About Gender*.)

I came across Fromm’s statement after I had written my 2003 book on homosexuality, *The Puzzle*. As if I had been inspired by Fromm’s statement, in *The Puzzle*, I devote 77 pages (377 to 453) to describe 31 varieties of homosexuality. Here, I would like to distinguish between just *two* motivational patterns that may underlie identical same-sex activity.

You will find the concept *faute de mieux* in unabridged dictionaries, but it does not appear in college or desk dictionaries. That’s too bad because this phrase (pronounced *foht-duh-m’yoo*) says in just three syllables: “for lack of something better.” For example, a man is driving along a highway and feels ravenously hungry because he had overslept and ran out of the house without breakfast. He spots an eatery and stops there for a bite. To his disappointment, he discovers that their menu is limited to hot dogs, hamburgers, french fries, and soft drinks.

If he orders a hot dog, it is not because he *likes* hot dogs but because that will quiet his growling stomach, and they don’t serve anything he really likes. (But if he’s a vegetarian, or follows the Jewish dietary laws, he might deny himself this chance to relieve his hunger right away, and just put up with those pangs for another few hours. (This digression acknowledges that the pursuit of a *faute de mieux* choice may be inhibited by *moral principles* or a social taboo.) If he does decide to order the hot dog, he makes a *faute de mieux* choice, guided not by his free preference but by what happens to be available at the moment.

Young adolescent boys, male prisoners, and others, often engage in same-sex activity *faute de mieux*. Superficially, what they do may not *look* different from what homosexuals do, but motivationally these are two altogether different categories of behavior. “*Faute de mieux* same-sex activity” is a nine-syllable phrase. Suppose we simplify matters by making a distinction between homosexuality and “homosexuality.” *Faute de mieux* same-sex activity is *not* homosexuality, but “homosexuality.”

According to this logic, a “homosexual” is a boy (or a prisoner, a sailor, or a male who is otherwise trapped in circumstances that bar him from access to a desirable and receptive female sex partner) who engages in “homosexuality.” A homosexual, by contrast, is a male who is disgusted by, fearful of, or who does not

feel sexually attracted to females. He, therefore, avoids female intimacy but instead actively pursues and enjoys sexual relations with another male.

Many teenagers resist “homosexual” activity because they have been taught that it is wrong, because they fear it may expose them to ridicule (“Hey, guys: Dennis sucks!”), bodily harm, or social ostracism, and because it conflicts with their image of the person they want to become. What makes some teenagers more willing than others to engage in “homosexual” activity? Social deprivation is probably important: *loneliness* of some sort. On the positive side: an adventurous, daring, risk-taking, nonconformist, even radical tendency probably permits some teenagers to experiment with an activity that their more conservative peers avoid.

In matters of human behavior, nothing is simple, alas, and “homosexuality” may shade into homosexuality. For example, a teenage boy may yield to the temptation to engage in same-sex activity (“homosexuality”) with a homosexual who takes the boy to restaurants, plays, and parties; who offers him gifts, affection, friendly conversation, guidance, adventure, status, comfort, security, and a taste for finer things. This experience builds a bond of affection between the pair, and “homosexuality” gradually metamorphoses into something that resembles homosexuality.

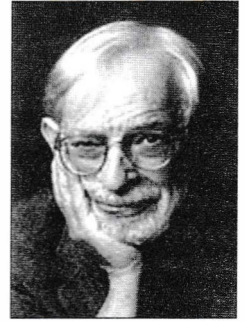
Reorientation therapy fits into this discussion in several ways.

1) Perhaps the boy (or man) feels guilty, unhappy, or confused about his “homosexual” activity. Perhaps he has lost too much of his sense of self-esteem, and feels regretful that “homosexuality” has estranged him from old friends, family, and the mainstream of society. He can profit from his therapist’s reassurance that he is neither evil, worthless, nor perverse, but is capable of leading a more normal life.

2) Perhaps he can also profit from some insight into why he was attracted to “homosexual” activity to begin with.

3) Perhaps the “homosexual” patient is emotionally conflicted about abandoning his homosexual sponsor or friends, and needs emotional support and guidance to help him reorient himself both socially and sexually.

Loneliness was assuaged by the patient’s entrance into the world of “homosexuality,” and now the patient needs social support to



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separate himself from that world. In psychoanalytic theory, much is made of "the absent father" as an etiological factor in homosexuality. If this is true to an extent, perhaps this loneliness is what led to the patient's "homosexual" activity, and the therapist is now called upon to replace "the absent father" with the caring, insightful, tolerant, and supportive father figure he can be, and help the patient re-enter the social mainstream.

Aha! says a skeptical bystander. So the function of reorientation therapy, as you call it, is to *mainstream* the patient, to make him into a *conformist*, who can now go along with the heterosexual majority. This sort of challenge deserves a reply. Most patients

are not fully immersed in the gay community. That said, it may be noted that a gay man conforms more rigorously to *his* subculture than members of the majority do to theirs. When he estranges himself from the majority, a homosexual turns to the gay community for moral support. Where he lives, where he works, how he dresses, what papers he reads, what movies he sees—in so many details of his life—he willingly conforms, to make friends, to keep his standing in the gay community. *Man is a social animal*. Reorientation therapy, if it succeeds, frees the patient from this need to keep in step with a gay subculture, and enables him to lead a more satisfying life, which is also healthier and *freer* of social pressures.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

The following text is a reproduction of the original text, which is a chapter from a book. It discusses the psychoanalytic theory of homosexuality, focusing on the role of the father and the concept of the "absent father".

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