

# Cultural Understandings

## Introduction: A Distinction Between Culture and “Nurture”

The reason that this report contains so little reference to “nurture” as a “cause” for GLBT orientations is not just because so few people believe that there is any identifiable “cause.” It is also because there is no reliable knowledge or information on the “nurture” front. The kind of long-term ethnographic observation and analysis required to identify causal “nurture” factors are beyond the scope of practical research and available resources. Not even whole teams of researchers could observe the care and experience of a population of infants to the extent that such a study would require, and no one could process that much data even if a few of the participants did turn out to be GLB or T.

One might as well just ask GLBT people to self-report their own experience. And when one does, there is little or nothing that GLBT people point to as having been, to their conscious knowledge, a significant factor. Regardless of when they realized it, when they first experienced it, or when they first decided to honestly act upon it, their orientation is experienced as inherent—they are simply “being” the way that they “are.” The same is true for heterosexual people.

In fact, the best argument *against* nurture as a factor is the fact that, like all youth, almost all GLB people were raised with the assumption and expectation that they would be exclusively heterosexual. Transgender people were, of course, raised with the assumption that they would be “gender identified” in line with their reproductive anatomy. Yet all that “nurturing” apparently had no effect; how powerful can it really be?

Therefore, this section does not focus on culture defined as “nurture” or as a potential “cause” of GLBT orientations, but instead on culture as the way and means by which a society *incorporates* GLBT people into itself, constructs negative or positive roles for them, puts these persons into some kind of “place,” and treats them accordingly.

Sometime inhumane, sometimes indifferent, sometimes honorable, and in all cases “useful” in some way, the cultural constructions of homosexuality and gender identity differ greatly throughout the world and continue to change and develop over time. This section will touch upon a few such constructions,

selected from several different eras, in order to demonstrate the important role of culture in defining the lives of those we now know as GLBT in mainstream American society.

### **Classical Greece: One Example of Cultural Construction**

It has been said that in the Classical Greek era, the “birthplace” of our democracy, homosexuality was tolerated, encouraged, accepted, and, depending upon who is reporting, practiced to varying degrees and in a variety of forms. Such conceptions are, in fact, a vast oversimplification. Even the term “homosexuality” is, in this case, a projection of modern Western culture upon a social structure that concerned itself with sexual and romantic relations between people for very different reasons, and in entirely different ways.

It is impossible to accurately describe an entire worldview in a few paragraphs, but some illustrative points can be made in this particular case, drawn from the work of Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*. He tells us that the Greeks differed from us in many ways: they accepted certain sexual behaviors more readily than subsequent Western societies, they found “misconduct” less scandalous, they maintained no medical or religious institutions that claimed the right to determine what was right or wrong—or normal or abnormal—in sex, and they were less concerned than we are today with such distinctions. Yet, despite these differences, they nevertheless were very much concerned with the manner in which a free man who cared about himself should self-regulate his own sexual conduct (36).

The term “free man” is telling. The “birthplace of democracy” was in reality only slightly democratic. There was a clear demarcation between free adult men and those who they owned and “husbanded”: their women, slaves, and children. The activity manifested by “attractive pleasure” between any two people, regardless of gender, was similarly divided between the person who took an active role and the passive person upon whom such actions were performed (45-47). What mattered, really, was the nature and kind of self-control a free male exercised and the kinds of social and power relations that he constructed in the process. Thus when questions of sexual conduct arose, they were not concerned with the particular “form” or “nature” of the conduct but rather the *dynamics* of it, the way in which the free man was conducting and “governing” himself. Foucault states, “The ethical question that was raised was not: which desires? which acts? which pleasures? but rather: with what force is one transported “by the pleasures and desires?” (43).

Foucault is describing a system of thought entirely different from our Judeo-Christian and scientific/legalistic schematics, which delineate various types and forms of sexual acts and ascribe, by means of institutionalized authorities, their proper place, their meaning, and their moral/ethical/legal status. For the Greeks, no particular sexual act or attractive pleasure was *inherently* right or wrong: what mattered, ethically, was *the way* in which one conducted oneself in the entire process and the *particular circumstances* in which one did so.

So, were the Greeks bisexual? “Yes,” Foucault answers, but only if we consider the fact that they could “be simultaneously, or in turn be enamored” of a male or female. But not in *our* sense of the word bisexual. He says, “We need to take note of the fact that they did not recognize two kinds of ‘desire,’ two different or competing ‘drives,’ each claiming a share of men’s hearts or appetites...To their way of thinking, what made it possible to desire a man or a woman was simply the appetite that nature had implanted in man’s heart for ‘beautiful’ human beings, whatever their sex might be” (188).

So, were some Greek men either homosexual or heterosexual? Again Foucault says “no,” for while one might be known to have certain preferences, such a “matter of taste” was not believed to be indicative of “the individual’s very nature, the truth of his desire, or the natural legitimacy of his predilection” (190). One might be known for a greater degree of attraction toward one gender or the other, but same-sex relations meant nothing beyond that, perhaps no more than a preference of apples over pears. Again, what mattered to the Greeks was *how one conducted oneself when satisfying such desires*. One was expected, no matter what, to still fulfill certain roles and not neglect the responsibilities of proper husbandry and governance of home, family, and slaves.

And, finally, were the Greeks wildly and rampantly into pederasty, as has been claimed by some? No. In fact, given that only two roles, active and passive, were available in romantic and sexual dynamics, such relations were easy to conduct with females and slaves: unquestionably they would be passive. But in the case of boys who were themselves maturing into adult free men, such relations were highly problematic and complicated. And while they did occur, they took place within a vast “discourse,” a body of instruction that educated young free men about their special social positions and ensured that they would know how to maintain their autonomy and active roles in all that they did, including romance and sexual relations. These young men were not to be abused (nor was it acceptable to abuse women or slaves, but the consequences of doing so were more likely to be seen as “bad husbandry” than anything specifically threatening to the social order). Instead, young men had to be wooed, to demonstrate resistance, to practice self control, and to give in

to such passions only when they became irresistible, and even then with moderation and a high regard and care for their “self.”

Again, what has been described here is a *cultural* conception of sexuality entirely different from anything assumed or understood in contemporary American life. The views we now have of sexuality, and those that can be gleaned from the records of that particular long-gone era, are so different as to be entirely “other” to one another. Though the above discussion did little more than skim the surface, it demonstrates that sexual understandings are inextricably interwoven with other aspects of a culture—not just with religion but also with power relations, government structures, economic activities, recognized authorities, education, and any number of other features that shape how people live, behave, and understand their world.

Furthermore, the case of Classical Greek society is by no means isolated. In his anthology on Native American sexual diversity, Walter Williams devotes a chapter to anthropological work concerning the treatment of GLBT-like people over the entire world. Although his survey includes research regarding Siberia, Polynesia, India, Africa, Japan, and the Middle East, it is just a sample of what is out there. This anthropological research demonstrates the wide diversity of ways in which GLBT-like people, and homosexuality and transgenerness in general, are incorporated into everyday cultural life—to varying degrees and, often, with high levels of “acceptability” and “affirmation.”

### **Western Cultural Constructions: Continual Change**

In societies that become more modern, developed, and democratic, cultural constructions of GLBT-like individuals tend to change, sometimes by direct advocacy and sometimes in response to other social and political changes. Certainly this is true for the European/American scene in the last 150 years or more.

But not necessarily for the better—at least in the short run.

As noted in the last section on psychology, the discovery of sexual orientation took place in the mid- to late-1800s, when various intellectuals realized that same-gender bonding behaviors were a function of an inherent romantic interest, something generally stable enough to be considered an “identity.” While this understanding was immediately employed by some to affirm the natural condition of GLBT orientations, and it also laid the groundwork for the highly productive political action of the second half of the twentieth

century, it also fed into Western cultural constructions in very problematic ways, several of which are described here.

While it is true that homosexual behaviors were condemned and illegal before, during, and for a long time after the discovery of sexual orientation, there is evidence that everyday life was actually less restrictive. Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson argue that there had been a long period of time in which women had rather freely expressed their love to one another, without undue care for what others might think. But “by the early twentieth century, ‘romantic friendship,’ un-self-conscious love between women, was no longer possible. Once a female left young girlhood she must either transfer all her affections to males or face the fact that she was a ‘lesbian’ and join an outcast society” (x).

Suddenly, everything that took place between two people of the same gender was “suspect”; freedom in expression was greatly restricted, whether people were GLBT or not. In an interview with Mark Thompson, Michel Foucault ties this “hypervigilance” to the demise of “friendship” (a relationship formerly more intense than what the term means today). “Friendships” were increasingly described as “threats” to the cultural and hierarchical institutions that were being formed in the 1800s, and thus they became “suspect.” He says, “As long as friendship was something important, was socially accepted, nobody realized men had sex together—it just didn’t matter. It had no social implication, it was culturally accepted...once friendship disappeared as a culturally accepted relation, the issue arose, ‘What is going on between men?’” (Thompson 33-34).

One might consider the fact that even today, the word “friend” is a common euphemism in “polite” society for one’s homosexual partner. This is not something new: Barry Adam tells us that it was also used by Rudolf Hoss, the commandant of Sachsenhausen and later of Auschwitz, who wrote the following observation about the homosexual men in the camps who were marked with pink triangles: “Should one of these [pink triangles] lose his ‘friend’ through sickness, or perhaps death, then the end could be at once foreseen. Many would commit suicide. To such natures, in such circumstances, the ‘friend’ meant everything. There were many instances of ‘friends’ committing suicide together” (54).

Because a person “suspected” of, or discovered in, homosexual relations would be permanently “categorized” as homosexual, the potential consequences of close, private associations of any kind—much less friendship in any form or *acting upon* one’s orientation—grew considerably more grave. People were forced to make “absolute” choices, and those who were GLBT had to work harder to conceal, deny, or suppress themselves, for one could now be

“branded” for life. The need to demonstrate that one *wasn't* homosexual grew also. Everything and anything one did became potentially indicative of some inner state.

Most GLBT people today would point out that things haven't changed that much: young boys and girls are still watched closely for “signs” of homosexuality, and every “gendered” choice they make is fraught with significance for the adults around them.

Another problem with such “identities” was that they became, in a sense, labels for individuals at a time when such labels could greatly endanger them. The “progress” of history has its reversals, and Germany is a prime example, documented in numerous sources (Adam, Faderman and Eriksson, Haeberle, Lautmann, Plant). While one specific homosexual act—“sodomy”—continued to be against the law at the start of twentieth-century Germany, there was a sufficiently democratic atmosphere to permit a “mini-explosion” of gay and lesbian life in the major urban centers. It wasn't just that the sexology institutes of the time were publicly discussing and advocating for homosexual people, but that there was a growing general freedom and openness about it. According to Faderman and Eriksson, “Already by 1905 the German pioneer of homosexual emancipation, Magnus Hirschfeld, estimated in his book *Berlin's Third Sex* that there were over a million homosexuals (men and women) living in Germany, and 56,000 living in Berlin alone” (xii). Along with this population came the “restaurants, beer halls, and coffee houses” that catered to them.

There was also a conservative backlash that reached its peak with the Nazi internment of homosexuals in their concentration camps. The penal code, reflecting the psychological shift from “discrete sexual acts” to “homosexual identity,” was changed under Hitler to permit arrest for nearly *any* indication of homosexuality, be it a kiss or a glance. Following this change, men in Nazi Germany were convicted of the crime of “homosexuality” at the rate of 10,000 *per year* (Lautmann, 145). In self-defense, many homosexual men and women married one another to avoid suspicion.

Not all such “criminals” were sent to the concentration camps: estimates surprisingly hover around only 10,000 in total, in part because homosexual men who were somehow “important” or “connected” were spared. But once in a camp, a “pink triangle” was pretty much at the bottom of the pecking order. (Officially there were no lesbians, but many lesbian women were detained for being “asocial” and marked with an inverted black triangle.) Most could expect little other than physical and sexual abuse until death. While the records are not clear, it has also been said that those who were still alive upon liberation were not let free but moved into prisons, under the rationale

that they were, after all, convicted criminals. The German penal code against homosexuals was not changed until the 1960s.

In light of the fact that emerging cultural acceptance can so quickly turn into social genocide, there is little reason to wonder why many GLBT people fear coming out and resist having any public record establish the nature of their relationship (and thus their “identity”). But at the same time, this danger only underscores the need for GLBT people to have a comprehensive and affirmative body of law, along with entrenched and supportive social practices and an accurate, widespread understanding of their lives on the part of the heterosexual majority. These “cultural constructions” function as roadblocks, or “speed bumps,” when the tide of societal forces turns against a minority. Even in a democracy, there is little else other than an extensively positive cultural construction—preferably one that is reinforced in multiple ways—that stands between a minority group and incarceration, torture, and murder, much less the more common exploitation, slavery, and oppression.

Turning now to the other shore of the Atlantic, it is almost ironic that while the one side of WWII had completely reversed the fortunes of the newly emerging gay/lesbian orientation, the massive population movements evoked by the war in the United States was laying the groundwork for its reappearance in one of the most powerful democracies ever known.

Like Germany, pre-WWII American cities had pockets of GLB culture, but it was the war effort that really brought single men and women out of the rural areas and plopped them all together in the armed forces, industry, government, and centralized urban areas. Men and women, people who might have gone their entire lives thinking that they were the only GLB people in the world, suddenly found that they were far from alone (transgender people, again, were not much more than a unrecognized blip on the social screen at the time).

And these people, in addition to finding one another and gathering in increasingly larger groups, also gained a new, more public sense of themselves as competent, functional people. Andrea Weiss and Greta Schiller tell us that when Sergeant Johnnie Phelps was asked by her commanding officer, General Eisenhower, to ferret out the lesbians in her WAC battalion, her response was this:

Sir, I'll be happy to do this investigation for you but you'll have to know that the first name on the list will be mine...I think the General should be aware that among those women are the most highly decorated women in the war. There have been no cases of illegal pregnancies, there have been no cases of AWOL, there have been no

cases of misconduct, and as a matter of fact, every six months the General has awarded us a commendation for meritorious service (35).

Eisenhower's response is reported to have been, "Forget the order."

Having sacrificed their lives for their country, having been recognized for their achievements, having been permitted—because their contributions were so valued—to live their natural lives (albeit mostly still behind closed doors), the gay men and lesbian women who came of age in wartime were simply not going to return to what their lives had been before. Even while the American abuses of "homosexuals" reached their post-war peak during the conservative backlash of the 1950s (commonly known as the McCarthy era), there were scores of men and women who would no longer passively accept the few and overwhelmingly negative roles that American culture was willing to construct for them.

So they began to construct their own. They continued to collect, often in a ghetto-like fashion. Urban areas such as New York, L.A., Washington, D.C., and San Francisco became known for their GLB populations, and most of the early political action began in those locations. Within these enclaves, GLBT people slowly made it possible to live their lives with some openness, to support and reinforce one another, and to gradually reach out to the heterosexual majority to petition them for equality.

On a smaller scale, this pattern of "gathering strength in numbers" still continues. Even within reasonably small towns there will be clusters of GLBT people and their supporters. Not only do nearby municipalities like Saugatuck, Grand Rapids, and Kalamazoo have substantial GLBT communities, but Benton Harbor currently has two "clusterings" of GLBT residents and Fairplain has one.

Yet for many decades even after the 1950s, the only truly "viable" social position afforded to most GLBT people was simply one of denial and secrecy. The social contract stipulated that you must maintain all the trappings of a heterosexual, including spouse and children, and hide the reality of your inner life. If you are desperate for same-gender contact, visit the dark corner bar or partake of the occasional sexual outlet provided in dark seedy areas of town. And make sure you don't get caught, because then you'll be ejected into "limbo" or labeled with the only cultural constructions available: mentally ill, perverted, unworthy of family, and unemployable.

Openly GLBT people could not—and often still cannot—be fine, upstanding members of the community. They were "tolerated" in working class positions, in which nobody cared enough about them to be interested in the particulars

of their lives, and they were acknowledged to be competent in a variety of service, subservient, and artistic roles. But beyond that was the void. Even conservatives have been comfortable with GLBT *in their proper slots*. For example, it was once noted in the 1980s that it was common for First Lady Nancy Reagan and her older female friends to be accompanied to cultural events with their “walkers,” younger gay men who were equally interested in the arts and society but were also “safe” companions to send along with the wives while the husbands took care of business.

Always useful in some way, GLBT people could be anything they wanted except openly honest about their orientation and domestic life. The trade-off was clear: accept one of the approved roles or trade honesty and integrity for the trappings of a conventional life of supposed heterosexuality. Or, if lucky, be independently wealthy and do and say whatever you want, at least to the extent that you can afford to buy the respect that you need from others.

Thus, as is true for African-Americans and other minorities, it is not so much that American GLBT people are suddenly “new” in society, but that they have gotten tired of “their place” as determined by the majority. When a majority constructs a “proper place” for minorities (or when any “authority” does) you can surely bet that it will be a cultural position less desirable, less economically viable, less valued, less free, and in various ways “less human” than that to which the majority population generally feels entitled.

It cannot be denied, even in America, that it is in the practice of everyday life and its fundamental activities—like marriage, family, employment, and government—that a society constructs the life experience of its GLBT people. And yes, some changes have happened, but in the eyes of GLBT people these fall far short of what is possible and what they need. Thus, the final part of this section returns to Native American culture, to illustrate some practices that many GLBT people would consider ideal and worth modeling: opportunities for children to freely indicate their own orientations, community recognition of the value and contributions of their GLBT-like members, and the capacity for them to openly live their adult lives and relationships with respect.

### **Positive and Productive: Cultural Frameworks for Two-Spirited People**

In some cultures, be they Islamic theocracies or the often highly democratic and diverse structures of Native American communities, it might seem nearly impossible to examine cultural constructions separate from religion and spirituality. Religious beliefs so permeate the social structures that there is little room for any other cultural “forces” to act independently of them,

whether such factors be economic activities, education, family structures, governance, or otherwise.

While this is true of traditional Native American communities, it is also valuable to see just how those other forces of cultural life come together to support and reinforce the religious belief that two-spirited people are valuable. After all, for spiritual beliefs to be maintained, the practices of everyday life must likewise construct a social environment in which those beliefs are considered natural, useful, and appropriate.

To begin with, Terry Tafoya says that while Western/European concepts generally tend to be discrete polar opposites and dichotomies—as has certainly been true for gender and sexuality—Native American concepts tend to be circular rather than linear. On a circle, there are an infinite number of points with equal status in relation to one another; thus, if the Western dichotomies of “fixed” male/female genders or “fixed” homo/hetero sexualities are placed at any two opposing points on a circle, we would find, in either direction between them, “an infinite number of points of gender and sexual identity for an individual” (91). This means that there are always more than two “pure” options in the world; in fact, there are an infinite number of “pure” options, and few people are likely to occupy the particular positions that, in dichotomous terms, would be considered the only two possibilities.

Therefore, it makes sense that Native American adults would be interested in learning where a child might actually “be,” in regard to orientation or other aspects of life, rather than in trying to “affix” him or her to a specific, prearranged point. Although the processes by which two-spirited people are identified differ greatly from one tribe to the next, they are also very much in keeping with how Indian tribes tended to raise their children in the first place. Of the prevailing attitude toward parenting, Williams says, “Indian children generally have a wide latitude to live where they are comfortable, and in a manner that is compatible with their inclinations. I have observed instances, in several tribes, where a child decides to live in a different household. Their wishes are respected, and no one tries to coerce them. Children are allowed to live where and how they wish” (46).

It is not surprising to find that while families and friends may think that certain children, often at very young ages, are likely to be two-spirited, they are generally reluctant to make that decision *for* them. Instead, they employ rituals in which the child is free to indicate his or her self-understanding and willingness to be recognized as such. They may also rely upon the dreams and visions of the child for such guidance. Even in tribes where it *appears* that a family has “chosen” a child to be two-spirited, such a decision is likely

due to the fact that they have clearly sensed it in the child in the first place (Williams, 23-30, 49-54).

Another cultural feature that supports the value placed upon the two-spirited person is that of gender equality. Williams reports that some early European explorers could not understand why such men would “degrade” themselves to the position of mere women. What they failed to understand, he explains, is that Indian men did not hold the same “superior” social position as their European counterparts, for “women also were persons of consequence...Native American women were (and still are, to a great extent) independent and self-reliant personalities, rather than subservient dependents. Traditionally, women had a high level of self-esteem for they knew that their family and band economically depended upon them as much as or more than it did on men” (66). Thus, taking on “women’s work” and other traditional female roles was not shameful or degrading for two-spirited people, because that work and those roles were not themselves unvalued. In general, Williams suggests that the status of two-spirited people in *any* society might be directly related to the particular status women hold in it (66). Certainly, parallel changes in modern cultural attitudes toward women and GLBT people would help support that notion.

In fact, it was often desirable to have two-spirited people focus their economic responsibilities on “women’s work” because their output was consistently higher: it was not interrupted by childbirth or infant care. According to Williams, their contributions were highly valued by the women of the household, and they were also prized by the men who married them (58-59, 114). He also reports that while in some tribes such two-spirited marriage relationships are subject to some degree of teasing, it is generally not in connection to the two-spirited partner but to the “male” partner who is seen as susceptible to getting lazy or dependent, or may just be an opportunist: “One of the common taunts that Plains Indians might aim at the husband of the berdache is that he wants a wife who not only keeps house but hunts for him as well” (113).

The affirmation of the two-spirited person is also linked with attitudes toward sex in general, which allow for much variation. Williams says, “First, berdaches usually participate in sex with men, but homosexual acts are not limited to berdaches. Second, sexuality in many Native American societies is not seen as solely for the purpose of reproduction, and is not restricted by the institution of marriage. It is instead conceived as a gift from the spirit world, to be enjoyed and appreciated. In a society without many cultural proscriptions repressing human sexual variations, there is an attitude of comparative casualness regarding sexuality” (88-89).

In other words, sexual acts themselves are not generally held to be of great significance in any particular way, and, unlike mainstream American society, they are not invested with a great deal of meaning one way or another. *Other* aspects of the lives of people—two-spirited or otherwise—are of much greater importance than how one goes about appreciating the gift of sex.

Finally, the men who marry and/or live with some of those two-spirited people must be noted. These husbands, who maintain more traditional male roles within the community, are nevertheless afforded such opportunities to engage in same-sex pair-bonding and domestic partnership. They may not be “two-spirited,” but in mainstream American terms they certainly wouldn’t be considered “heterosexual” either. Yet there is no special word for them, because it doesn’t fundamentally matter that they are married to another man. It doesn’t necessarily imply anything about their essential being.

By now it should be clear that even in deeply spiritual cultures like those of the Native Americans, the meaning and significance of a GLBT-like orientation are not just functions of religious beliefs but also a kind of “crossroads” of many other cultural factors. These “forces” come together into a kind of “construction,” reinforcing one another and working in conjunction to determine the status of such people. And in this particular case, the resulting status is very affirming and fully inclusive.

## **Final Note**

At least theoretically, cultures and societies have a lot of “choice” in how they construct roles for their GLBT people. And, as should now be evident, exercising that choice for the purpose of making changes also requires shifts in other aspects of the social dynamic. Nevertheless, the question always before us is not just “what *are* the roles of GLBT people?” but, more important, “what *should* those roles be, and who gets to decide?” By virtue of our everyday actions, we are constantly constructing and reproducing the positions available to GLBT people in our society. Thus, by virtue of our ability to behave differently, changes can be made.

In America, the cultural systems are constructed through increasingly democratic means, and with a fundamental understanding that questions of “what should be?” will be openly debated and consciously decided. And because the value placed upon this “marketplace of ideas” is so great, American culture is greatly affected by politics. Thus, the next section will focus specifically on GLBT political action: its history and development as people of all orientations, with increasing freedom, have been working to shape American culture in more positive and affirming ways.

## **The Bottom Line**

Every culture has ways of defining, understanding, and “dealing” with GLBT people, and thus the particular “identities” of such people are a reflection of the cultural framework that constructs them. While many societies persist in demeaning and abusing their GLBT-like people, these persons continue to try to be productive and responsible citizens, struggle to maintain their integrity, and persistently form their domestic relationships within the limits placed upon them. Some human cultures have openly incorporated such people and their relationships into powerful and productive roles, shaping and channeling their energies toward highly valued functions.