BEING DISCOVERED: A STUDY OF HOMOSEXUALS IN THE MILITARY

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Current conceptions of deviance have placed less emphasis on the role played by the deviant himself in being assigned a deviant label. To examine the role of the deviant, a sample of male homosexuals who had received less than honorable discharges from the military for homosexual conduct (LHD group) were compared with a sample who had received honorable discharges (HD). It was found that, compared to the HD group, the LHD group was more likely (a) to have been engaging in homosexual sex more frequently before induction, (b) to have experienced more frequent homosexual sex while in the service, and (c) to have had predominately other servicemen as homosexual partners. Further examination of the data showed how these factors specified the manner in which members of the LHD group were discovered.

Current among sociological conceptions of deviance is an approach that concerns itself less with the attributes of the person or persons said to have violated a social rule than with the character of the reactions of other persons to these attributes and events. This approach, sometimes called the "labelling" approach to deviance, sees the deviant as a social product, the outcome of interaction sequences between labellers and labelled (cf. Becker, 1964a). The questions that are raised by this approach thus concern the behaviors that are labelled as deviant, what the processes are by which the labels are successfully applied or avoided, and what the consequences of such processes are for both labellers and labelled. However, despite the emphasis laid on deviance as a product of interaction, in practice most attention has been paid to the labeller's role in this process. Social control agencies have been especially focused on; most of the findings have documented the discrepancies between formal statements of procedures and actual operating procedures and the immense power of control agencies in the social production of deviants (cf. Scheff, 1964; Sudnow, 1965; Chambliss and Liell, 1966).

The emphasis on labelling, rather than the attributes of deviants, has been rich in its contribution to a better understanding of deviance as a social
fact. However, a case can and has been made that the reaction to older conceptions of deviance has been an overreaction and that valuable truths in these earlier perspectives have been ignored. Bordua (1967) makes the following comment about labelling theory's conception of the deviant:

...it assumes an essentially empty organism or at least one with little or no autonomous capacity to determine conduct. The process of developing deviance seems all societal response and no deviant stimulus.¹

This is perhaps an overreaction to an overreaction. Becker, for example, does spell out a theory of why some people break rules and some do not in terms of what he calls "commitment," and for other labelling theorists, attributes of the deviant himself are not entirely irrelevant. The point is well taken, however; for example, in some of Goffman's writings (1961) on mental patients his use of the concept "career contingencies" appears to treat the mental patient as a pawn, subject to the vagaries of all kinds of situational exigencies.²

As a consequence of the above, labelling theory also has been viewed as taking the side of the "underdog"—that the deviant is seen as a victim of the somewhat arbitrary procedures of control agencies. He is more "sinned against than sinning," as it is a matter of chance, or racial or socioeconomic factors, rather than any behavior on his part, that decides whether he is cast as deviant (cf. Gouldner's criticism 1968).

This paper examines in one particular situation, what the effects of the deviant's behavior are on the application of the deviant label. Our focus is the contribution made by the deviant himself to his discovery; to what extent is he an active participant in the process?; are there any factors in his behavior which place him more or less "at risk" as regards the scanning operations of control agencies?

The particular situation in question concerns irregular discharge from the military for reasons of homosexual conduct. We shall examine the role played by the individual serviceman in having his sexual status called into question by military authorities. We are aware that the type and extent of surveillance and differential sanctioning activities on the part of these authorities are an important factor in this process.³ For this study, however, this subject is bracketed; we propose that it is still possible to get some notion of the deviant's role in the labelling process.

It is important to note that the great majority of homosexuals in the armed forces do complete their service without incident and leave with an honorable discharge. Over 90 percent of all servicemen receive honorable discharges and many homosexuals are included in the majority. In a study done by the Institute for Sex Research in 1967, of some 458 male homosexuals, 214 had served in the military of whom 77 percent had received honorable discharges.

¹ A similar point is raised by Gibbs and Lorber. In Gibbs's (1966) words: "Why do some persons commit a given act while others do not? . . . the new perspective does not generate an answer to this question." And Lorber (1967) says: "The theoretical bias of the labelling approach has helped form a more purely sociological analysis of deviance and social control. Neglect of the deviant, however, while possibly justified operationally, creates large gaps in the study of deviance."

² For example (Goffman 1961:133), 

"... mental patients distinctively suffer not from mental illness, but from contingencies."

³ For an indication of some of the variability across time and the influence of other factors, cf. West and Glass (1963).
Military Homosexuals

Earlier data reported by Simon and Gagnon (1967) indicate that only one-fifth of 550 homosexual males reported any difficulties in the military. Finally, in the present study, of 136 male homosexuals who had served in the military, 76 percent received honorable discharges.\(^4\)

These should not be considered remarkable findings; to define them as such suggests a stereotyped view of the homosexual as a person having uncontrollable sex drives that demand constant and indiscriminate satisfaction (a view implicitly held by military authorities). Most homosexuals, not unlike most heterosexuals, pursue sex according to rules which reduce visibility and potential risk. The homosexual realizes the consequences of homosexual behavior in the military; as the consequences have similarities to discovery in civilian settings, he is likely to apply the same type of operative rules that he had learned before.

What of those who are discovered? It is our contention that such eventualities are mainly determined by transgressions from those rules, either to their not being learned in the first place or to situational conditions making them difficult to follow.

We considered the following to be possible contributing factors as to whether a homosexual comes to the attention of military authorities.

Homosexual Frequency prior to Induction into the Military

If a person is frequently engaging in homosexual behavior before he enters the military, then it is reasonable to expect that he is likely to perceive and evaluate the military situation in terms of the opportunities open to a homosexual to a greater degree than do those persons whose homosexual behavior is less frequent prior to their induction. For this reason we expected discovery to be positively related to frequency of homosexual sex before induction.

The Nature of Homosexual Conduct while in the Military

The way in which the homosexual manages his sex in the military was also expected to be related to discovery. We anticipated a positive relationship between discovery and (a) frequency of homosexual sex while in service and (b) the degree to which such sex is engaged in with other military personnel. Those homosexuals who frequently engage in sex while in the military place themselves more at risk than those who have little sex. Having other servicemen as partners also increases the risk of discovery. (For example, in prosecuting cases, military authorities endeavor to find out the names of all
partners of the accused who are also servicemen; this is often done by threats and promises to the accused, or through the inspection of personal effects—letters, diaries, and the like. Also, homosexuals who want to get out of the service and so admit their homosexuality often agree to provide the names of other homosexual servicemen. Cf. Williams and Weinberg 1970)

The manner in which a homosexual is discovered is also of interest. It is our contention, which we examine later, that manner of discovery is closely associated with the variables that determine discovery in the first place.

**Method**

The research design employed to answer the above questions was quite simple; it involved comparing male homosexuals who had been less than honorably discharged from the military with homosexuals who received honorable discharges.

Two sample sources were utilized: the Mattachine Society of New York and the Society for Individual Rights in San Francisco. Both are homophile organizations with large memberships. Using their mailing lists those persons who lived in the New York or San Francisco metropolitan areas were respectively selected out. The number of such persons totalled 1,372 (New York N = 872, San Francisco N = 500).

A short questionnaire was sent to each of these persons. This questionnaire was designed to assist in the selection of the sample. In addition to a number of demographic items it included the following three questions:

Whether the respondent had served in the military.

If so, what type of discharge he had received (honorable or less than honorable).

If less than honorable, whether this had anything to do with his homosexuality.

A set of questions was also asked to determine the stage of homosexual career at the time of induction into the military. Finally, permission for an interview was requested. If the respondent was willing to be interviewed he was asked to put his name, address, and telephone number on the questionnaire.

From the responses to this questionnaire it was possible to separate out those who received a less than honorable discharge due to homosexuality (hereinafter referred to as the LHD group) and a comparison group of homosexuals who had served in the military but who had received honorable discharges (the HD group). It was also possible to estimate the equivalence of both groups as to the stage of their homosexual careers at the time of their induction into the military.

The response to the questionnaire was as follows. Of 1,372 questionnaires sent out, 428 (31.2 percent) were returned completed. Of these 428, 292 (68.2 percent) were unable to be used due to the fact either that the person had not served in the military or that he did not give permission to be interviewed. The former reason was the more prevalent—of the 428 replies, 268 (62.6 percent) gave names and addresses.

There remained 136 questionnaires that were “usable” (31.8 percent of those returned, 10 percent of those sent out). Of these 136 respondents, 104 had received honorable discharges and 32 less than honorable discharges due to homosexuality. From the former
group 32 respondents were randomly selected so that the final sample before interviewing involved two groups of 32 respondents. Unfortunately the LHD group was reduced by one person who at the last moment changed his mind about being interviewed. Regarding the demographic information obtained on the questionnaires, there were no significant differences between the HD and LHD groups.

Included in the personal interview were questions designed to tap the following: the stage of the respondent's homosexual career prior to induction into the military (as a check on the data gathered by the initial questionnaire); his homosexual behavior in the military (how often and with whom); and how his homosexuality was discovered (LHD group only). On both the initial questionnaire and in the interview a large number of other questions that had nothing to do with the military were also included. These were asked to gather data on other aspects of the homosexual's socio-psychological situation. These other questions concealed the fact that military experiences were the main focus of interest and thereby limited some of the bias that could appear, for example, through the creation of a "sad tale." Thus questions on the military were the last questions to be asked.

RESULTS

Manner of Discovery

The homosexuality of those respondents who were discovered came to the attention of military authorities in three main ways. Each is illustrated below.

The most common manner of discovery involved discovery through another person. Seventeen of the respondents were discovered in this way (54 percent of the LHD group). This mode of discovery is sometimes related to jealousy, a lover's tiff, or blackmail.

(R 28 year old salesman. Served in the Navy for almost three years before receiving an Undesirable Discharge. Exclusively homosexual before service.)

I was turned in by a civilian—he was a bartender. The ship came to Monterey and he fell in love with me. I couldn't stand him. ... He said if I didn't become his lover he'd turn me in. I ignored him. He called ONI (Office of Naval Intelligence) and turned me in.

There were also cases where another serviceman was discovered and persuaded to reveal his previous sexual partners or whoever else he knew in the service to be homosexual. Through threats or promises or through a search of personal effects names are discovered.

(R 45 year old policeman. Served in both the Army and the Navy for a period of about six years receiving an Undesirable Discharge from each service. Exclusively homosexual before entering service.)

I was having an affair with a serviceman on a ship, who kept a diary. He was apprehended with another fellow and through this they got the diary and I was apprehended along with several other people.

This mode of discovery is often linked to many voluntary admissions—that we consider to be the second chief mode of discovery. To get out through voluntary admission the military requires proof of homosexuality. The best proof is to provide the name of a partner who is also a serviceman. Not only can he be interrogated at length by military authorities, but there
is the further possibility that he will supply additional names. Six of the 17 cases who were discovered through another person were victims of servicemen who were onetime sexual partners and wished to get out of the service. An example of one such case is as follows:

(R 31 year old male nurse. In the Navy seven years before receiving an Undesirable Discharge. No homosexual experience prior to service.)
A drag queen asked if 'she' could stay in my apartment. I said yes, but don't hustle and don't bring tricks back. But she didn't listen to me. She brought two sailors back and we got into an orgy. They both wanted out of the service and used me as a reference. . . . I denied I was in the Navy but they went ahead and used my name.

Twenty-nine percent of the LHD group (nine cases) were voluntary admissions. The most frequent reason given for seeking discharge was dissatisfaction with military life. Generally absent from such accounts were any pressures that the homosexual might undergo such as fear of exposure or the inability to control sexual tendencies. Such reasoning seems more an influence of stereotypical views of homosexuals, held especially by the military. Also of note is that few were unduly bothered by the potential stigma of a less than honorable discharge. Note the following case:

(R 30 year old dress designer-manufacturer. Served in the Army for two and a half years before receiving an Undesirable Discharge. Exclusively homosexual before service.)
I felt I was just wasting time. . . . I wanted out because I was bored to death . . . . I had the advantage of being able to get out as a homosexual. . . . If I had been doing something of value I would have stayed.

The final manner of discovery was through the homosexual's own indiscretion. There were five cases (16 percent of the LHD group) where discovery was due to imprudent action on the part of the respondent.

(R 30 years old, hydraulic engineer. After serving two years in the Navy he was released with a General Discharge. No homosexual experience before service.)
It's not a very good story. I was turning gay and one feels he's the only one in that category. It was coming to the surface and I didn't want to control it and had sex and was caught in the locker room.

It is obvious from these cases that the serviceman runs a risk in engaging in homosexual behavior. Not only may he be directly discovered but there is even more of a chance of indirect discovery due to being the "fall guy" in connection with another serviceman or through his name arising in connection with the other's case.

Having discussed the manner in which the homosexual serviceman is discovered, we turn to the factors associated with the probability of discovery and whether these factors are related to the particular manner of discovery.

Two sets of variables were conceptualized as related to discovery. These were: how "homosexual" in behavior the respondent was at the time of his induction and the nature of his homosexual behavior while in the military.

Prior Homosexual Frequency and Discharge Status

In an attempt to reconstruct the comparability of the HD and LHD groups when they entered the service the respondents were asked on the initial questionnaire how often they had been engaging in homosexual sex at the time of their induction. The results are shown in Table 1. The table shows that of those who before induction were having homosexual sex once a week or
more, 69 percent received less than honorable discharges. Of those who were having homosexual sex less than once a week, 43 percent received less than honorable discharges. This 26 percent difference is significant at the .066 level \((\gamma = .50)\).\(^6\)

Other data regarding the stage of the respondent’s homosexual career at the time of induction supports the conclusion that those who eventually received less than honorable discharges were more likely to be further advanced than were those who eventually received honorable discharges. The supportive data include the following: the gamma between nature of discharge and the exclusiveness of homosexuality (as measured by the Kinsey Scale) was .22; the gamma between nature of discharge and associating with other homosexuals was .34; and the gamma between nature of discharge and extent of social activity with other homosexuals was .34.

**Sexual Behavior in the Military and Discharge Status**

Thus we concluded that there was a difference in sexual status between the LHD and HD groups at induction. We now consider whether there was a difference as regards homosexual behavior while in the military.

**Frequency of sex.** Table 2 shows that of those engaging in homosexual sex more frequently, 61 percent received less than honorable discharges. Of those engaging in homosexual sex less frequently, 38 percent received less than honorable discharges. This 23 percent difference is significant at the .052 level \((\gamma = .45)\).

**Type of partner.** With regard to sexual partners, respondents were asked whether they had sex predominantly with military personnel while they were in the forces. The results are shown in Table 3.

Of those who engaged in homosexual sex predominantly with other servicemen, 82 percent received less than honorable discharges. Of those who did not have predominantly military partners, 35 percent received less than honorable discharges.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Discharge</th>
<th>Frequency of Homosexual Sex at Induction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHD ((N = 16))</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HD</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(\gamma = .50\)

\(z = 1.509\), one-tailed \(p = .066\)

* Once a week or more.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Discharge</th>
<th>Frequency of Homosexual Sex in Military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHD ((N = 31))</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HD</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(\gamma = .45\)

\(z = 1.624\), one-tailed \(p = .052\)

* Once a month or more. Since this was in response to an open-end interview question the nature of the replies precluded more precise categories than "at least once a month" or "less."
TABLE 3
Discharge Status by Usual Type of Sex Partner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Discharge</th>
<th>Usual Partner</th>
<th>Not Military</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military (N = 22)</td>
<td>Military (N = 26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHD</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HD</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\gamma = .79$
$z = 2.961$, one-tailed $p = .002$

The decreased total N is due to those cases who did not have homosexual sex while in service.

Among those who received less than honorable discharges, what is the relationship between their homosexual frequency at induction and the manner of their discovery? Table 4 shows the following: that those who had higher frequencies at induction were more likely to come to the attention of military authorities by their own wish; those who were lower in frequency at induction were more likely to come to the attention of the authorities due to being caught through their own indiscretion. Sexual frequency at induction was not related to discovery through another person and the difference between the former categories has a p of only .628.

TABLE 4
Manner of Discovery by Frequency of Homosexual Sex at Induction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manner of Discovery</th>
<th>Frequency of Homosexual Sex at Induction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High (N = 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovered through another person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarily admitted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caught through indiscretion</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between rows 2 and 3 provides a two-tailed Fisher Exact $p = .628$. 

The data support our hypotheses regarding factors involved in the probability of discovery. The relationships, which appear quite straightforward, turned out, however, to be more complex when the manner of discovery was considered.
Sexual behavior in the military and manner of discovery

Sexual frequency in the military. Table 5 relates the frequency of in-service sexual behavior to manner of discovery. The table shows that those whose in-service activity was high were more likely to be discovered through another person. Those whose sexual behavior in the military was relatively infrequent were more likely to be caught through their own indiscretion or to voluntarily admit to their homosexuality ($p = .019$).

Usual type of sex partner while in the military. Table 6 relates the usual type of sex partner to manner of discovery. The table shows that those whose sexual partners were predominantly other servicemen were more likely to have been discovered through their own indiscretion, whereas those whose sexual partners were not predominantly other servicemen were more likely to have been discovered through another person ($p = .062$).

It is evident that of all variables considered, sexual frequency while in the military shows the strongest relationship to manner of discovery. If we look at sexual frequency in the military as specified by these other variables in its relationship to manner of discovery, we obtain findings which lead us to conclude that there are three main patterns that lead to the discovery of homosexuals by military authorities.

Two groups of LHD respondents had low frequency of sex while in the military. The first of these are those homosexuals caught through their own indiscretion. Their low frequency of sex while in the military is at variance with a frequency-probability model of risk, which would suggest that those discovered this way would be engaging most in the behavior. All such cases did, however, report that their frequency was greater than it had been prior to induction. As these respondents were all engaging in sex primarily with other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manner of Discovery</th>
<th>Frequency of Homosexual Sex in Military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N = 19)</td>
<td>(N = 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovered through another person</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarily admitted</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caught through indiscretion</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When frequencies are combined in rows 2 and 3, the difference between extent of homosexual activity and whether or not respondents were discovered through others provides a two-tailed Fisher Exact $p = .019$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manner of Discovery</th>
<th>Usual Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N = 18)</td>
<td>(N = 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovered through another person</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarily admitted</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caught through indiscretion</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between rows 1 and 3 provides a two-tailed Fisher Exact $p = .062$. 

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military personnel, and were not high in sexual frequency prior to induction, it seems reasonable to say that their discovery was mainly due to inexperience in a deviant role; i.e., their indiscretion was not due to the extensity of their behavior but to ignorance of, or disregard for, the safest ways in which to engage in the behavior.

The second group of respondents who had low frequency of sex while in the military provide us with another pattern of discovery. These were those respondents who voluntarily admitted their homosexuality. Contrary to the above group, they tended to score high on sex frequency prior to induction,7 and were more catholic in their choice of partners while in the military. From the interviews it was apparent that their disclosure was motivated by a desire to leave the service, the stigma of the discharge not being the major concern. Being further advanced in their homosexual career at induction seems to have made them less afraid to use their homosexuality to get out of the service.

The final pattern of discovery involves those respondents who differ from the above by having high frequencies of sex while in the military. This group was primarily discovered through another person. Nothing was specified by sexual frequency prior to induction and, as regards type of sex partner, they were represented somewhat less among those having sex primarily with other servicemen. This pattern of discovery was most common to our respondents and represents those who put themselves more at risk regarding involuntary discovery by military authorities.

7 Also, all but one of the voluntary admissions had labelled themselves as homosexual before induction into the military.

CONCLUSION

The data reveal the deviant's role in his discovery. On the part of those who voluntarily admit their deviance, this influence is directly seen; in this case the homosexual uses a self label to gain a social label which can serve him. For those whose discovery is not voluntary, discovery involves placing one's self more at risk due to the frequency of the behavior and imprudent choice of sexual partners. With our respondents there were no cases of a "bum rap." All had engaged in a form of behavior proscribed by the organization in which they were involved.8 With regard to our original hypotheses about the relationships between nature of discharge and frequency of homosexual sex within and prior to military service, it can be seen that the data become meaningful only after manner of discovery is taken into account.

In this study, official labelling was found to be related to the "quality and quantity" of the deviant's acts. As such, labelling theorists should perhaps make more precise the character of their "unconventional sentimentality."9 Such a stance does not preclude a recognition of the deviant's role in his own plight; on the other hand, this need not imply the sociologist's endorsement of the policies or processes of control agencies.10

8 This is not to say that "bum raps" do not occur. For a description of such cases cf. West and Glass (1963).
9 This is Becker's (1964b:3) phrase, used to describe those who assume, "...that the underdog is always right and those in authority always wrong."
10 Conversely, it should be mentioned that attributing a recognition of the role of control agencies in the labelling process by no means implies their moral condemnation.
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