

the psychological and sociological theorists. Apparently, despite the "developmental handicaps" of growing up alienated and alone within a heterosexual home and an alien society, most gay men and lesbians manage to evolve a healthy and positive self-image in the process of coming out.

*Research Perspectives.* It is not particularly profitable to focus on group differences in self-esteem level between gay and straight subjects. More important are investigations that explore the developmental experiences of those gay and lesbian individuals who maintain a negative self-image in contrast with those who view the self as a positive entity, thus apparently insulating themselves against societal messages to the contrary. If this focus becomes primary, then there is hope that the social sciences will be in a better position to address the fundamental issues of self-esteem among gay men and lesbians. As a result, policies and programs that attempt to assist those gay and lesbian individuals who experience negative self-feelings and self-images will be better informed and thus more effective.

Equally critical is the need to expand the self-esteem literature beyond the evaluative aspect to embrace perceptual and cognitive dimensions of the self. Especially needed are in-depth longitudinal studies that trace the evolving sense of self as a gay or lesbian person from the first moments of cognition in infancy and childhood to full recognition—and acceptance—during maturity.

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## SEMIOTICS, GAY

In general usage semiotics denotes a scholarly discipline concerned with the interpretation of signs. Although the roots of the field go back at least to the time of John Locke (1632-1704), semiotics first drew notice from a larger public with the spread of the structuralist vogue in the 1960s and 1970s.

The expression *gay semiotics* has been proposed with the more limited sense of the repertoire of symbols and artifacts displayed on the person to signal one's membership in the homosexual community or some sector of it—in short, tokens of sexual preference or allegiance. Typically, these attributes of nonverbal communication have been chosen so that the meaning is evident to initiates but obscure to outsiders. In this respect *gay semiotics* recalls the symbolism of *freemasonry*, with the important difference that it is not decreed or regulated from above by some central authority, but disseminated by piecemeal invention from below. Absolute secrecy is not a necessity: in the case of the *lambda pendant* and the *pink triangle button*, the wearer may seek to elicit questions from the curious, which then give the gay person a cue to present his or her explanatory "rap."

Among *sadomasochists*, or those flirting with the idea, keys are worn externally on the right or left to indicate the S or M respectively (though in some circles the laterality may be reversed). A similar function is served by the red handkerchief protruding from the right or left back pocket. Urban *folklore*—assisted by commercially produced cards—maintains that there is a whole range of different hanky colors identifying different preferences, but the suggested guidelines do not seem to be followed very closely. As the key and handkerchief codes have spread to outsiders—a common feature of the diffusion of mass culture—the meaning has become blurred.

In the early 1980s some gay men took to carrying a small teddy bear in their

back pocket to indicate their fondness for gentle personalized sex as distinct from what they perceived as the mechanical, unloving, sometimes brutal encounters of the time.

In the late 1980s the immense quilt sponsored by the Names Project and carried out by scores of local projects, all commemorating thousands who died of AIDS, produced a fascinating array of visual iconography. The images of the individual panels were chosen and sewn by surviving friends and relatives. Some panels show emblems of favorite places where the person memorialized had lived; another shows an image—of Moscow—that the deceased had wished to visit; still others carry the insignia of the schools from which the deceased had received degrees. Passionate avocations, such as music and dance, are represented by appropriate symbols, such as a clef, a piano keyboard, or the outline of a tapdancer. The use of sequins and bright, glittering colors reflects characteristic aspects of the gay image. Some have quotations alluding to the interests or the character of the individual commemorated. In terms of the world history of funerary iconography, the symbols are usually "retrospective"—referring to joys and accomplishments during life—rather than "prospective"—directed toward a future life.

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### SENSIBILITY

In eighteenth-century English, under the stimulus of the proto-Romantic trend, the word "sensibility" acquired the meaning of "sensitive or ready capacity for emotional response, as distinct from intellect or will; acuteness of feeling," overlaying the earlier sense of "physical response

to stimuli." More recently, the word has served to designate dimensions of feeling that are conceived as flourishing in certain groups, such as "feminine sensibility," "artistic sensibility." Although the possibility has often been canvassed, it seems unlikely that there is any single homosexual or lesbian sensibility, or mode of expressing the group's way of looking at the world (which is scarcely unitary among the members of these groups). What may exist, however, are more restricted sensibilities cultivated by certain groups or schools of homosexual writers and artists, as in *Bloomsbury* or lesbian *Paris* in the 1920s.

This problem is related to the question of whether homosexual individuals are endowed with a greater creative potential than other people. It might be thought that over the centuries the very stigmatizing of homosexuals and lesbians has fostered the development of inventive ways of dealing with the world. Thus far, however, such a phenomenon seems to have been shown only for certain types of wit, and then for limited periods of time (as in *camp*). It has not been possible to glean any empirical data supporting the folk belief in special homosexual creativity.

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### SEPARATISM, LESBIAN

In its strongest form, lesbian separatism means social, cultural, and physical separation from all who are not lesbians. As society is now constituted this option is possible only for a very few. Many lesbians who regard themselves as separatists seek to live and work in circumstances that are as far as possible "women's space," without insisting on the absolute exclusion of men. The term "lesbian separatist" is also sometimes used within the gay/lesbian movement for those who do not wish to work with gay men.