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STIGMA TRANSFORMATION AND RELEXIFICATION: "GAY" IN LATIN AMERICA

by Stephen O. Murray and Manuel Arboleda G.¹

In the past few years the term "gay" has diffused rapidly in urban Latin America, raising the question whether use of the term reflects changes from a "gender" to a "gay" organization of homosexuality. The latter was characterized by Adam (1979: 18) as one in which "people meet and form enduring social networks only because of mutual homosexual interest , (2) there is a sense of peoplehood and emerging culture (Murray 1979a; Levine 1979), and (3) there is the possibility of exclusive (non-bisexual) and egalitarian (not role-bound) same-sex relations." In North American cities a shift -- albeit one that is not complete even now -- has occurred. Formerly, the man who took only the insertor role in homosexual coitus (termed "trade" in the homosexual subculture which preceded "gay community") was not identified and did not identify himself as homosexual. Only (some of) those regularly taking an insertee role ("queens") did (Reiss 1961; Humphreys 1975; Murray 1979b; Murray and Poolman 1981). Under the aegis of "gay", an aggressively stigma-challenging label (Goffman 1963) without the negative connotations of "queer" or

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"queen", a shift from what might be considered an exogamous system of sexual exchange in which those identifying themselves or fantasized by their partners as "straight" ("trade") were sought to an endogamous system in which both partners identify themselves as "gay" has occurred in Anglo North America. This change has brought ideal norms closer to behavior patterns (Humphreys 1971, 1979; Murray and Poolman 1981; Weinberg 1983; Wolf 1983) and ontogney has recapitulated phylogeny in this transformation to mutual definition by both partners (Miller 1978; Humphreys and Miller 1981).

When the word "gay" was unknown in Latin America, which was as recently as the mid-1970s, homosexual identification was analogous to the pre-gay pattern in Anglo North America: those whose homosexual behavior was confined to the *activo* (insertor) role did not consider themselves defined, nor even implicated by such behavior. Neither did their *pasivo* partners. *Activos* were simply *hombres* (men - - unmarked), quite regardless of the sex of the persons who received their phallic thrusts. Even those persons who switched roles tended to identify themselves by one role designation or the other and to attempt to constrain any publicity about the other, although there were terms -- *moderno* in Peru and *internacional* in Mesoamerica -- for such dichotomy-transcending conduct.

In Lima in 1976 the term "gay" was not used, and was known only to a very few Peruvians who had traveled to Europe or North America. By 1980, however, the term was widely-known and was

preferred above the previously standard term *entendido* (in the know) by most informants, both self-identified *pasivos* and *activos*. Although outside homosexual networks "gay" was an unfamiliar locution, in October 1980 the popular magazine *Gente* ran a cover story entitled "Los Gays Peruanos Son Libres" (Peruvian Gays are Free). The article itself oscillated between linking "gay" with effeminacy and using it in the stigma-challenging sense common in North America, that it was used at all to refer to a group usually invisible in respectable publications and completely stereotyped in tabloids in Latin America (see Taylor 1978; Murray 1980a) was remarkable. By 1982 "gay" had entirely replaced *entendido* as a self-designation, but in some cases the spelling pronunciation (gai) was used rather than the phonetic realization borrowed from French or English (i.e., ge(y)).²

In Guatemala in 1978 two of five *pasivos* offered "gay" as a term for men who chose other men as sexual partners. The three *pasivo* informants who reported not having friends with similar preferences nor any involvement in settings where such persons congregated were not familiar with the term. Both those who identified themselves as *internacional* (and were much-traveled) used "gay" and remarked that the term was achieving ever wider currency in their country. Of the three *activos* from who lexical data were elicited, one did not know the word, one knew it

² Wooden (1982) reports the other solution to the problem of borrowing a word that is spelled in a way other than the one pronounced, i.e., changing the spelling, in Colombia and Venezuela.

TABLE ONE

Frequency of Conceptions of "Un hombre que prefiera los otros hombres" by Place/Time and Sex Role

| LOCALE/ YEAR OF ELICITATION REPORTED ROLE | MODEL ONE | MODEL TWO | MODEL THREE | |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Guatemala City, 1978 | | | | |
| activo | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| pasivo | 3 | 2 | 0 | |
| internacional | 0 | 0 | 3 | |
| Lima, 1979 | | | | |
| activo | 4 | 2 | 2 | |
| pasivo | 7 | 3 | 1 | |
| Mexico City, 1981-3 | | | | |
| | 9 | 6 | 8 | |
| pasivo | 5 | 3 | 5 | |
| internacional | 0 | 0 | 10 | |
| Lima, 1982-3 | | | | |
| activo | 0 | 0 | 5 | |
| pasivo | 2 | 3 | 6 | |
| moderno | 0 | 0 | 4 | |
| <hr/> | | | | |
| PERCENT TOTALS | | | | (N) |
| activo | 36 | 23 | 41 | (39) |
| pasivo | 43 | 28 | 30 | (40) |
| moderno/internacional | 0 | 0 | 100 | (17) |
| late 70s | 50 | 27 | 23 | (30) |
| early 80s | 24 | 18 | 58 | (66) |

but did not apply it to himself, and one both knew it and applied it to himself. ³

Words that are borrowed do not necessarily retain the same meaning they had in the source language. For some of our informants "gay" seemed to be used as a fashionable (new and foreign) term that simply replaced *entendido* or *de ambiente* in an unchanged conception of homosexuality, i.e., relexification of the pre-existing conceptual order. For others, however, the new word seemed to reflect a new conception of homosexuality, paralleling the stigma-transformation involved in replacing "queer" and "homosexual" with "gay" in Anglo North America. Table One shows which of these models was held by informants varying in (self-reported) role preference.

Those who answered "No" to the ritualized cruising question, "?Eres activo o pasivo?", rather than one or the other, invariably considered those who are *activo* to be gay as well as those who are *pasivo*. For more than a third of those who identified themselves as *activo* and more than half of those who identified themselves as *pasivo* and who were familiar with the word, "gay" was a new word for the already existing conception of homosexuality. Interestingly, those who are stigmatized by this conception are less likely than those who seemingly profit in social esteem by it to embrace the wider conception of who is "gay." A number of explanations

³ See Murray (1980b) for description of the elicitation procedures and social characteristics of this sample. Subsequent waves of repression in Guatemala prevented return fieldwork as well as driving underground a previously emerging subculture.

(including false consciousness, covert prestige among the stigmatized, cognitive dissonance and/or ambivalence on the part of heavily-involved *activos*) might be proffered, if this pattern holds up for larger samples. Here we are concerned with the more certain change over time observable among both *activos* and *pasivos* than with the tenuous differences by sex role.

Although we claim to have observed change in process,⁴ it bears emphasizing that all three models in Figure One represent the conception of some men involved in homosexuality in Latin America. Some still use the old word(s), others have borrowed the word "gay" but simply replaced *entendido* with it in the same slot (relexification); but for some others, "gay" refers to a "new man" who can enact (*estar*) *pasivo* behavior without being (*ser*) *un pasivo*.

Although this change parallels the earlier Anglo North American one (which is presumably the source of prestige for the label "gay"), some caution is in order before concluding that the development of a stigma-challenging gay community in Anglo North America provides a blueprint of stages that will be copied elsewhere in the world. Although homosexuality in Latin America has been gender-

⁴Although structuralist linguistic orthodoxy held that linguistic change is too slow to observe, Labov (1972) provided refutation. Generational differences in bounding "gay community" were found in the semantic work in San Francisco of Murray and Poolman (1981). The example of not merely observing but explaining linguistic change as reflecting significant social change which has particularly influenced the work presented here is Akinnaso's (1980, 1984) work on Yoruba naming .

defined, just as it was earlier in Anglo North America, residence patterns, censorship of materials that can be interpreted by individual policemen or judges as politically subversive or incitements to vice, the absence of religious pluralism with its concomitant traditions (and freedoms) of voluntary associations, and other factors that may have been crucial to the history of gay institutional elaboration in Anglo North America but are quite different in Latin America (Taylor 1978; Murray 1980a, 1984; Lacey 1983) may shape different developments to different ends there (and elsewhere). Mexican liberation organizations eschew the term "gay" because their leadership do not consider Anglo gay culture to be what they aspire to emulate. They are also sensitive about "cultural imperialism" from the north and the elitism of expensive local replicas of Anglo gay bars. Moreover, cultures in which homosexuality is age-defined, such as Islamic, Amazonian and Melanesian ones (see Murray 1984, Herdt 1981, 1984) defy any scheme of unilinear evolution to the "gay" organization of homosexuality even more clearly than the stirrings of change in Latin America (see also Wooden 1982; Kutsche 1983).

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