THE HOMOSEXUAL COMMUNITY *

MAURICE LEZNOFF AND WILLIAM A. WESTLEY

Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, and
Department of Sociology, McGill University

The significance of homosexuality in our society has been minimized and
obscured by the force of social taboo. Yet there is evidence that homo-
sexuals are distributed throughout all geographical areas and socio-economic
strata.** Furthermore, the subjection of homosexuals to legal punishments and
social condemnation has produced a complex structure of concealed so-
cial relations which merit sociological investigation. The psychological iso-
lation of the homosexual from society, his dependence upon other deviants for
the satisfaction of sexual needs and self-expression, the crystallization of social roles and behavior patterns
within the deviant group, the reciprocal obligations and demands within
the homosexual community, and their significance for the larger society in

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dian Social Science Research Council and
to the McGill University Research Fund
for grants in support of this study.

** Kinsey reports that 37 per cent of the
total male population have at least some
overt homosexual experience to the point
of orgasm between adolescence and old
age; 50 per cent of all males have at least
incidental homosexual experience or reac-
tions over at least a three year period be-
tween the ages of 16 and 35; 25 per cent
of the male population have more than in-
cidental homosexual experience or reactions
for at least three years between the ages of
16 and 35; 18 per cent of the males have
at least as much of the homosexual as the
heterosexual in their histories for at least
three years between the ages of 16 and 35;
4 per cent of the white males are exclu-
sively homosexual throughout their lives,
after the onset of adolescence. Homosexual
practices are reported among all occupa-
tional groups with the percentage for pro-
fessionals approximately 50 per cent lower
than those of other groups. Further con-
firmation of the distribution of homosex-
uals among all social strata was obtained
from police files and the testimony of homosexu-
als which they occur, are but a few of
the areas of theoretical interest to the
sociologist.

In this paper we shall confine our
discussion to the social organization of one homosexual community and
its constituent social groups: their function, etiology, and interrela-
tionships.

The report is based upon an inten-
sive study of 60 homosexuals in a
large Canadian city. The data con-
sist of four-hour interviews with 40
homosexuals and briefer interviews
with 20 others.* In addition, the
data include information based on
the observation of many homosexual
parties and gatherings in bars and
restaurants, and a series of 30 letters
written by one homosexual to another.

FUNCTIONS OF HOMOSEXUAL
GROUPS

The primary function of the homo-
sexual group is psychological in that
it provides a social context within
which the homosexual can find ac-
cceptance as a homosexual and collec-
tive support for his deviant tendencies.
Most homosexuals fear detection and
are often insecure and anxious because of
this. The following statement illus-
trates this:

The thought that you are "gay" is al-
ways with you and you know it's there
even when other people don't. You also
think to yourself that certain of your
mannerisms and your ways of expres-
sion are liable to give you away. That
means that there is always a certain
amount of strain. I don't say that it's
a relief to get away from normal peo-
ple, but there isn't the liberty that you

* Access to this homosexual community
was obtained through a client at a social
welfare agency.
feel in a gay crowd. When I associate with normal people I prefer very small groups of them. I don't like large groups and I think I try to avoid them when I can. You know, the only time when I really forget I'm gay is when I'm in a gay crowd.

To relieve this anxiety the deviant seeks collective support and social acceptance. Since the homosexual group provides the only social context in which homosexuality is normal, deviant practices moral, and homosexual responses redefined, the homosexual develops a deep emotional involvement with his group, tending toward a ready acceptance of its norms and dictates, and subjection to its behavior patterns. The regularity with which he seeks the company of his group is a clear expression of this dependency.

A prohibition against sexual relationships within the group, in a manner suggestive of the incest taboo, indicates the extent to which the group culture is oriented to this function. The quotation which follows is indicative of this taboo:

As far as I know, people who hang around with each other don't have affairs. The people who are friends don't sleep with each other. I can't tell you why that is, but they just don't. Unless you are married* you have sex with strangers mostly. I think if you have sex with a friend it will destroy the friendship. I think that in the inner mind we all respect high moral standards, and none of us want to feel low in the eyes of anybody else. It's always easier to get along with your gay friends if there has been no sex. Mind you, you might have sex with somebody you just met and then he might become your friend. But you won't have sex with him any more as soon as he joins the same gang you hang around with.

Within these groups the narration of sexual experiences and gossip about the sexual exploits of others is a major form of recreation. The narration of sexual experiences functions to allocate prestige among the members because of the high evaluation placed upon physical attraction and sexual prowess. Yet it creates hostility and sexual rivalry. The intense involvement of homosexuals in the results of this sexual competition is illustrated in the following statement which was overheard in a restaurant:

Who wouldn't blow up. That bitch is trying to get her * clutches into Richard. She can't leave anybody alone. I wouldn't be surprised if she ended up with a knife in her back. I don't mean to say I'm threatening her. But she's not going to get away with that stuff forever . . . playing kneessies under the table all night long. I had to get her away from Richard. That lousy bitch. From now on she better keep away from me.

An additional function is the provision of a social situation in which the members can dramatize their adherence to homosexual values. Thus, the gossip about sex, the adoption and exaggeration of feminine behavior, and the affectation of speech, represent a way of affirming that homosexuality is frankly accepted and has the collective support of the group. The extreme but not uncommon instance of this is the homosexual institution of the "drag" in which the members of the group dress and make themselves up as women. A good description of a drag is contained in the following letter:

Well, doll, last night was one to remember. Raymond of B. (city) gave me a letter of introduction to one of the local belles. He phoned yesterday and we arranged to go out in the evening. Met at my room and proceeded to the Frederick Hotel where I was introduced to my new acquaintances. It was decided to hold a party afterwards, Chex Norman, my new acquaintance. He told me they were supposed to be discontinued but we were going ahead in my honor. And in drag. One queen about 45-50 who is a window dresser brought some materials of fine nylon net, 2 yards wide and changing color across the width from yellow to flaming orange. There must have been about 25 yds. Well, he made his entrance

* A stable social and sexual relationship between two homosexuals is frequently referred to as "marriage."

* The substitution of the female for the male pronoun is a common practice within homosexual groups.
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wearing nothing but his shorts and this stuff wound around him and proceeded to do an exotic dance. Included in the costume was a blond wig from one of the store mannequins and artificial tropical fruits. It was something to see. It was very ludicrous to begin with and much more so when you realize that he is by no means graceful and has so much hair on him that I am smooth by comparison. Throughout the evening he kept on making variations of the costume—each becoming briefer until he was down to nothing. Really!

Another one, very slim, put on a pair of falsies, a turban hat to hide short hair, and a dress with a wide flair skirt. Other than hair on the chest which showed, the effect of femininity was so convincing (even his heels) that I promptly lost interest. Actually produced a beautiful effect—the kind of woman I would like if I could. Beautiful dancer, and performed all evening. Later borrowed some of the nylon net of the old queen and did a dance with flowing material and wearing nothing, but nothing else.

There were only three of us not in drag, including us. Truly. But when it came time to leave (not alone, I might add) I couldn’t resist flinging about my coat a fox fur which happened to be lying around. Really, my dear, it was quite an affair.

These functions reflect the common needs and problems which homosexuals face in hostile society.

Etiology: The Evasion Of Social Controls

In our society, homosexuality is defined both legally and socially as a criminal and depraved practice and the homosexual is threatened by powerful legal and social sanctions such as imprisonment, physical violence (1), social and occupational ostracism, and ridicule. Therefore, all homosexuals face the problem of evading social controls. They do this in two predominant ways.

Some pass for heterosexuals on the job and in most of their social relationships. They mix regularly with heterosexuals for business, entertainment, and other social activities. They avoid situations and persons publicly recognized as homosexual for they fear that discovery will threaten their career and expose them to sanctions. This is illustrated in the following statement of a lawyer:

I know a few people who don’t care. They are really pitiful. They are either people who are in very insignificant positions or they are in good positions but are independent. I know of one who is in the retail business. He doesn’t care. A lot of the artists don’t care. For that reason I have never cultivated the friendship of artists. I just don’t get along with anybody who doesn’t care. That’s why I really can’t give you information about those who don’t. It’s just that I can’t afford to get to know them very well, and I try to avoid them. Sometimes personal friends become this way. Then there is a mutual rejection of the friendship. From my point of view I am just no longer interested when they adopt that kind of attitude. From their point of view it means completely living outside of society and they are no longer interested in people who they consider hypocrites.

Others openly admit and practice homosexuality. They usually work in occupations where the homosexual is tolerated, withdraw from uncompromising heterosexual groups, and confine most of their social life to homosexual circles. This attitude is expressed in the following statement by a hairdresser:

Rosenstein can go to hell as far as I care. She works you to the bone if she can get away with it. She told me I run around the place like a regular pansy. So I told her I am a pansy and if she doesn’t like it she can get somebody else to do her dirty work for her. I knew she wouldn’t fire me. All the ladies ask for me and I don’t have to pretend to nobody.

While the problem of evasion is common to all homosexuals, the mechanisms of evasion present various alternatives. Most homosexuals find themselves compelled to conform outwardly to societal demands. They are conscious of their social position within society and seek such satisfactions as occupational mobility and prestige.
They endeavor to retain intimate associations within the heterosexual community, and fear recognition as a status threat. Such homosexuals rely upon secrecy and the concealment of their deviant practices. They will therefore be referred to as "secret" homosexuals. A minority retreats from the demands of society and renounces societal goals. Such individuals will be referred to as "overt" homosexuals.

The mode of adaption is largely dependent upon the extent to which identification as a homosexual is a status threat. While economic status cannot be equated with social status, the individual’s position within the work world represents the most significant single factor in the prestige scale. Therefore, the extent to which homosexuality is tolerated in various occupations determines to a great extent the mode of evasion chosen by the homosexual. Thus, there are many occupations, of which the professions are an obvious example, where homosexuals are not tolerated. In other areas, the particular occupation may have traditionally accepted homosexual linkages in the popular image or be of such low rank as to permit homosexuals to function on the job. The artist, the interior decorator, and the hardcover exemplify the former type; such positions as counter man or bell-hopper, the latter. Thus we find a rough relationship between form of evasion and occupation. The overt homosexual tends to fit into an occupation of low status rank; the secret homosexual into an occupation with a relatively high status rank. The relationship is shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation*</th>
<th>Secret**</th>
<th>Overt</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional &amp; Managerial</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical &amp; Sales</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftsmen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Except for artists the categories and ranking are those established by the National Opinion Research Center. (2) Artists have been listed as a separate category because they often represent a group which is apart from the status structure of the community. ** The secret homosexuals gave the following reasons for concealment: (a) desire to avoid social ridicule — 22 cases; (b) fear of dismissal from the job, or where self-employed, inability to get clients — 20 cases; (c) a desire to protect others such as family or friends — 18 cases.

The distinctions between these groups are maintained by the secret homosexuals who fear identification and refuse to associate with overt homosexuals. This statement by a secret homosexual is illustrative:

*If someone who is gay wanted to be spiteful they could say something in the wrong quarter. Nobody who cared about himself would say anything. The trouble is that some don’t care. I make it a rule to avoid anybody who is perfectly open about himself. It’s easy not to become friendly with those people but it’s hard to avoid them entirely. You certainly don’t want to snub them because that might make them antagonistic. You just don’t call them or see them at social gatherings. But you do meet them at bars and that’s where you can be introduced to them. If they remember you and continue to say hello to you on the street, you have to acknowledge them or they might feel that you are trying to snub them.*

As a result of this social distance a certain amount of reciprocal hostility has developed between the members of secret and overt groups. This hostility helps maintain the social distance and distinctions between these
groups. This is demonstrated in the following statements by an overt and a secret homosexual respectively:

I know some of them because sometimes they stoop down and have an affair with somebody from our gang. They even come to a party over at Robert’s once in a while but they never hang around for very long and then you don’t see them again. They go over to the Red Room sometimes but we don’t have much to say to each other and the same thing happens when we go over to the Burning Flame.* We just might say hello. But sometimes they will cruise us and try to take someone home to bed. I think you could say we mix sexually but not socially.

There are some people who I don’t like and I wish these people didn’t know about me. Then there are people I don’t know too well: people who are obvious or what I uncharitably call the riff-raff. I have always attempted to avoid them and I avoid them now. It is inevitable that you bump into a lot of people you would rather not know. Homosexuals are very democratic people. To achieve their own ends they overlook a lot they wouldn’t overlook in other fields. People are bound to each other like a link of a chain. You try to avoid being a link in this chain by carefully choosing.

This poses serious problems for the homosexual who is socially mobile. He is forced to change his primary group affiliations within the homosexual community.

The following statement by the manager of an appliance shop shows how the homosexual tends to change his orientation from “overt” to “secret” as he becomes upwardly mobile.

My promotions have made me more conscious of the gang I hang around with. You see, for the first time in my life I have a job that I would really like to keep and where I can have a pretty secure future. I realize that if word were to get around that I am gay I would probably lose my job. I don’t see why that should be, because I know that I’m the same person gay or not. But still that’s the way it works. I don’t want to hang around with Robert* any more or any of the people who are like Robert. I don’t mind seeing them once in a while at somebody’s house, but I won’t be seen with them on the street any more.

Both types of groups were identified and observed in the course of this research. Each group consisted of fourteen members. The descriptions which follow are based on the study of these groups.

Secret Groups
The secret homosexuals form groups which consist of a loose amalgamation of small cliques. Interaction within the cliques is frequent, with members meeting at each other’s homes and in bars and restaurants. The clique’s structure is a product of the diverse interests and occupations and of the desire to limit homosexual contacts which characterize secret homosexuals. The clique unites its several members in common specialized interests apart from the larger group.

The following chart shows the clique structure and occupational composition of a secret homosexual group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clique A</th>
<th>Clique B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Clerk-bookkeeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel Manager</td>
<td>Auditing clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University student</td>
<td>Assistant Office Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economist</td>
<td>University student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clique C</td>
<td>Clique D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographer</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store Manager</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager of Statistical Dept.</td>
<td>Interior Decorator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*The Burning Flame refers to a bar which tended to draw its clientele from secret homosexuals; the Red Room was the acknowledged gathering place of overt homosexuals.

* Robert is the leader of an overt group of which the respondent was a member at the time he was contacted.
than complete involvement in the homosexual world.

**Overt Groups**

Overt homosexuals gather in cohesive social groups which become the dominant focus of their lives. These groups are openly homosexual in character. The members make little effort to conceal their deviation, spend almost all their free time with the group, and tend to regard their other activities as peripheral.

These groups generally draw their members from persons of low socioeconomic status who have jobs where concealment is not a prerequisite. Table 2 presents the occupational composition of the overt group identified in this study.

**TABLE 2**

**Occupational Composition of an Overt Homosexual Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager of appliance shop</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital attendant</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales clerk</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundry worker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesman</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashier</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This individual had just been promoted and was beginning to leave the group. Both he and the school teacher retained for a time their affiliation with an overt group while at the same time concealing their homosexuality at work.

The members of the group met daily either at a bar, a restaurant, or at the house of the acknowledged leader or "queen." * They spent their time in endless gossip about the sexual affairs of the members or other homosexuals known to them. Often they would go to bars and restaurants in the attempt to make a "pick-up," or spend the evening "cruising" individually or in groups of two's and three's.

The queen seems to characterize only "overt" groups. Functionally, the role of the queen is very important in the life of these groups. He provides a place where the group may gather and where its individual members may have their "affairs." He helps finance members in distress, functions as an intermediary in making sexual contacts, partially controls the entrance of new members, and warns the members of hoodlums who would prey upon them. Generally the queen is an older homosexual who has had wide experience in the homosexual world.

The following statement about the queen by a member of the overt group provides insight into the functioning of the queen and tells something of the way in which the individuals relate to him.

A queen really means the leader of the group. You see how that is in a small town where there are not many people who are gay and willing to admit it. She knows who's who and what's what. She will know every gay person in town and will arrange things just the way Roberta does.* The queen is always somebody pretty old and pretty much out of the game as far as getting anything for herself is concerned. But she doesn't have anything else to do, so she spends all her time on this. I don't know of any queen as commercial as Roberta. But that's because Roberta is so goddam crude. I know the queen in Hillsburg and she was a perfect lady if I ever saw one. She knows everything. She used to make quite a bit but it was always in the form of getting invitations for dinner or a present. You feel grateful to somebody who does something for you and you pay off. It's like a debt.

* The adoption of feminine names is a widespread practice among all homosexuals interviewed.
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The diverse secret and overt homosexuals are linked together either through bonds of sex or of friendship. Within the primary group, the emphasis upon friendship rather than sex serves to eliminate excessive sexual competition and preserves group unity. However, this creates a sexual interdependency upon those outside the group with important social consequences.

In the first place, it forces the secret homosexual out into the open in an attempt to solicit sexual partners. He thus frequents the known homosexual meeting places within the city such as specific bars, hotel lobbies, street corners, and lavatories. These activities make him an increasingly familiar figure within the homosexual world.

Secondly, this solicitation leads to the interaction of secret and overt homosexuals on a sexual as opposed to a social basis. While these contacts occur in a spirit of anonymity, an approach to the other often requires an exchange of confidences.

Thirdly, this sexual interdependency increases the anxiety of secret homosexuals since it forces them to contact the overt ones whom they fear as a threat to their security.

Thus, it is the casual and promiscuous sexual contacts between the members of different categories of evasion (i.e. the secret and the overt) which weld the city’s homosexuals into a community.

Conclusion

The homosexual community thus consists of a large number of distinctive groups within which friendship binds the members together in a strong and relatively enduring bond and between which the members are linked by tenuous but repeated sexual contacts. The result is that homosexuals within the city tend to know or know of each other, to recognize a number of common interests and common moral norms, and to interact on the basis of antagonistic cooperation. This community is in turn linked with other homosexual communities in Canada and the United States, chiefly through the geographical mobility of its members. *

* The queen of the overt group studied maintained an address book containing the names of approximately 3,000 homosexuals scattered across North America.

REFERENCES

THE HOMOSEXUAL ROLE

MARY McINTOSH
University of Leicester, England

The current conceptualization of homosexuality as a condition is a false one, resulting from ethnocentric bias. Homosexuality should be seen rather as a social role. Anthropological evidence shows that the role does not exist in all societies, and where it does it is not always the same as in modern western societies. Historical evidence shows that the role did not emerge in England until towards the end of the seventeenth century. Evidence from the "Kinsey Reports" shows that, in spite of the existence of the role in our society, much homosexual behavior occurs outside the recognized role and the polarization between the heterosexual man and the homosexual man is far from complete.

Recent advances in the sociology of deviant behavior have not yet affected the study of homosexuality, which is still commonly seen as a condition characterizing certain persons in the way that birthplace or deformity might characterize them. The limitations of this view can best be understood if we examine some of its implications. In the first place, if homosexuality is a condition, then people either have it or do not have it. Many scientists and ordinary people assume that there are two kinds of people in the world: homosexuals and heterosexuals. Some of them recognize that homosexual feelings and behavior are not confined to the persons they would like to call "homosexuals" and that some of these persons do not actually engage in homosexual behavior. This should pose a crucial problem; but they evade the crux by retaining their assumption and puzzling over the question of how to tell whether someone is "really" homosexual or not. Lay people too will discuss whether a certain person is "queer" in much the same way as they might question whether a certain pain indicated cancer. And in much the same way they will often turn to scientists or to medical men for a surer diagnosis. The scientists, for their part, feel it incumbent on them to seek criteria for diagnosis.

Thus one psychiatrist, discussing the definition of homosexuality, has written:

... I do not diagnose patients as homosexual unless they have engaged in overt homosexual behavior. Those who also engage in heterosexual activity are diagnosed as bisexual. An isolated experience may not warrant the diagnosis, but repetitive (sic) homosexual behavior in adulthood, whether sporadic or continuous, designates a homosexual.1

Along with many other writers, he introduces the notion of a third type of person, the "bisexual," to handle the fact that behavior patterns cannot be conveniently dichotomized into hetero-