

Kinsey and the Pashtun: The Role of Culture in Measuring Sexual Orientation

By William E Burleson 2008

For fifty years Alfred Kinsey's work, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, has influenced, informed, and to a great extent defined sexuality in America. Rightly so: Kinsey's work was earthshaking, influencing the work of all who have followed, from Shere Hite to William Masters and Virginia Johnson¹ to Fritz Klein. The concept that sexuality wasn't only about heterosexuals procreating, while perhaps obvious now—and, truth be told, almost certainly then too—was at the time quite a thing to do actual research on or simply talk about out loud.

Perhaps the most indelible part of his work involved the “Kinsey Scale.” The concept that we can be described as on a continuum of sexuality from completely attracted to the opposite sex to completely attracted to the same sex² offers shades of gray where certainty once ruled. This model not only gives rise to a richer view of human sexuality, it validates those of us who are neither sheep nor goats. But this wasn't a vision of sexual anarchy, quite the opposite. While Kinsey increased our ambiguity around sexuality, his was a vision of sexuality carefully measured and quantified, fitting neatly on a number line.

It reminds me of a professor of mine who once said that psychology and other “soft sciences,” as some call them (with more than a small hint of judgment), are no different than physics, chemistry or astronomy, only their relative youth has not yet allowed their being defined mathematically. The assumption here is that mathematics is the gold-standard.

That view is rooted in our Northern European culture. We live in a culture that likes to measure and quantify the world. We seek to create phyla to offer definition to life around us.

With psychology we desire a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: “Aha! Here you are, on page 258: you are a....” We give people IQ tests, so we can discern an individual as a 122, 100, or an 89. With Kinsey’s new vision of human sexuality there is comfort of saying, “I guess I’m a three, maybe three-and-a-half.” Debate now can focus on semantics: “are ‘fours’ bisexual or gay?”³ Through this crystal clear, base-seven measure of humans, we can gain definition to ourselves and to our world.

So what’s wrong with that?

The problem comes when we start to apply these Western measures to the rest of the world (and, for that matter, parts of our world). Take for example the Pashtun of Afghanistan. This past holiday season Marc Forester’s film of Khaled Hosseini’s book, *the Kite Runner*, gave suburban multiplex audiences a glimpse of a culture and a region seldom seen and little understood by most Westerners. After centuries of being ignored by Europeans and two decades of wars and oppression from the Soviets and the Taliban, Afghanistan is now a destination for movie makers, reporters, and potentially anyone with enough frequent-flyer miles (be sure to pack your Kevlar). In 2002, as the dust of war cleared, *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Maura Reynolds was part of a vanguard of Westerners that descended on Afghanistan. On April 3, 2002, Reynolds reported on one of the poorest kept secrets in the region: Pashtun men are very open about their same-sex attractions. Or, one might say, Kandahar is the Fire Island of Central Asia. In “Kandahar's Lightly Veiled Homosexual Habits”⁴ Reynolds reported that “sex between Afghan men is an open secret, one most observant visitors quickly surmise.” According to Reynolds, men commonly adorn themselves with eyeliner and henna and proudly walk arm in arm with other men. Most relationships are between older men and 12 to 16 years old boys,

referred to as *halekon*. Reynolds reported that a professor at Kandahar Medical College “estimates that about 50% of the city's male residents have sex with men or boys at some point in their lives.” A typical life for many Afghan men: get married, have children, and keep a *halekon* on the side.

It occurs to me to ask: What is these men’s sexual orientation? Where do they fit on the Kinsey Scale?

We in the West, like the Pashtun, also have a rich culture with a long history, and we to have our ways of defining same-sex behavior. However, in our case, how we view sexuality has been a moving target for the past century-and-a-half.⁵ One of the reasons there is a need for publications like the *Journal of Bisexuality* is that, as a culture, we’ve been sorting out huge shifts in what same sex behavior means. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of new sciences, most notably those exploring the nature of man, such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology. These sciences reflect a Northern European sensibility and Northern European culture. Just as a German naturalist might stick a pin in a butterfly while other cultures may more likely tell a story about one, sociology, anthropology, and psychology sought to organize our world.

That’s not to imply there is anything inherently wrong with this. After all, we Westerners get to have our culture just like everyone else. However, what is a problem is that we haven’t kept it to ourselves. Our culture, including the part about how we like to measure and quantify, has grown to dominate much of the world, exported with Happy Meals and riding in on aircraft carriers. Given the present sheer bulk of the United States’, not to mention Europe’s, domination of the world, it is hard for other cultures not to be influenced and colored by us.

Take for example our neighbor Mexico. Mexico, as with other Latin countries,⁶ traditionally embraces a view of sexuality that probably remains dominant throughout the world, that of insertive/receptive = masculine/feminine = dominance/submission = strong/weak = favorable/unfavorable. In this model, sexuality is not about sexual identity and politics, nor necessarily about whom you have sex with, but about what one does. This model can also be found in the United States, especially in parts of the African American community, in prisons, and at one time—perhaps still to a degree—in the military. But now in Mexico the GLBT/straight paradigm has begun to take hold. In 2008 Mexico City has gay bars, GLBT organizations, and a gay pride parade. There are even 12 organizations listed at the Bisexual Resource Center resource page,⁷ including groups specifically for bi folks, something most American cities don't even have.

All around the world we see the influence of Northern European culture, from Nigeria to Egypt to Iran. Regarding the latter, President Mahmud Ahmadi-Nejad was wrong: while, like Mexico City, traditionally there were no homosexuals in Iran—just men and women having sex with other people of the same sex—now there are plenty of people identifying as homosexual, and one might guess bisexual too. And in Iran, together with the examples of Nigeria and Egypt⁸, there can be severe consequences for adopting these Northern European ideas of sexual identity, with penalties ranging from prison, to torture, to death. Indeed, sometimes the transgression homosexuals or bisexuals are guilty of is less their sexual behavior and more about being seen as betraying their culture. For example, in the African American community in the U.S. one might be accused of being “too white.” In the case of the Pashtun, while a man taking a male lover receives tacit approval, starting a gay support group may be something else entirely.

Much can be lost in this cultural colonialism. Take for example the affects of not only bricks-and-mortar colonialism but also the destruction of culture on those people we now call “Two-Spirit.”⁹ Many nations of indigenous people of North America have space for those neither traditionally gendered nor Kinsey zeroes. Indeed, in some Indian nations, these individuals are healers, shaman, or otherwise holding a privileged role in their culture. As we all know, Northern European culture has not been kind to the American Indians, not the least Two-Spirit people, who along with being stripped of their culture were also stripped of their honored role in it.

Paired with, and related to, this cultural colonialism is another core value of Northern European culture: that of hubris. We are SURE that we have the answer, the ONLY answer. If the answers elude us, we know it’s just a matter of time until we figure it out and have it defined, quantified, and categorized. In this Eurocentric world view, our way of interpreting the world isn’t cultural at all. It is the only real way.¹⁰ “Culture,” in our culture, is something other people have. It is colorful and entertaining and primitive; the stuff of children. Cultures are about exotic food, strange music, interesting stories, and funny hats, and one day, after they get enough Western education, not to mention FOX news, they’ll see our way as the right way, the only way, and save the hats for when they dance for us.

One effect of this Eurocentrism is that it allows us to redefine the world to our liking. Consider the above example of Two-Spirit people. Now, depending on the speaker, Two-Spirit people are really bisexuals, homosexuals, or transgendered people. For the Pashtun, one might look at these men with their lovers sitting on their knee and start to make assumptions. “That man is gay, obviously.” Or, “That man is straight and just looking for a sexual outlet because women are kept at arm’s length.” Or, “This man shows how we are all really bisexual.” These

men are whatever we want them to be. What they can't be from a Eurocentric point of view is simply a typical Pashtun man. This ability to redefine our world to suit our current vision also applies to our own history. For example, "ancient Greece" and "bisexual" are now often heard in the same sentence.¹¹ Kinsey himself, especially after the movie about his life came out, is often redefined as bisexual by many even though no reference can be found to his ever identifying as such.¹²

Now, it also must be acknowledged that adopting a view of sexuality as being defined by one's culture is not without problems. There is a danger of seeing culture as deterministic:¹³ "You are Pashtun. You cannot be gay." In fact, in the West as in elsewhere, there are always people who transgress from their cultural norms. Obviously just because there is no room in a culture for, say, lesbians, doesn't mean there aren't people who feel that way, and, if given the words, may identify as such. Or, one might imagine a Pashtun man saying, "But I don't want to take a male lover!" Alternatively, in Northern European culture there are people who don't fit well into our schema. Take for example married men who are attracted to other men, the subject of near universal derision in Middle America, might fit right in if they lived in Kandahar. It appears that if you can name a system of sexuality, you can always find dissidents to go along.

In sum, Kinsey's work has been invaluable. It is important, however, to acknowledge that not everyone fits neatly on a number line, and that his research doesn't exist in some scientifically pure vacuum, but instead firmly entrenched in Northern European culture. Given that, it is also important to see other cultures as not less than our own. It is important to see the role sexual expression holds across the world as diverse, complex, and as meaningful as Kinsey's. We must listen, learn from, and accept that individuals of these cultures—as well as

our own—may not fit neatly on a number line. And along the way, we might perhaps choose to also question if we ourselves do, too. Perhaps then we can embrace Two-Spirit people as, in fact, just that: Two-Spirit.

We are left to ask: what if Pashtun culture dominated the world in the same way Northern European culture does now? Would men wearing eye-liner walking with their beautiful creamy skinned lovers say of us, “How strange: the men there don’t keep *halekons*? How primitive.”

¹ See: Garnets, Linda and Kimmel, Douglas C, *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 673

² Kinsey, et al., *Sexual Behavior and the Human Male* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1948) p. 656

³ Regarding debate on whether a Kinsey 3 is bisexual, or all of 1-5s: Marjorie B. Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2000) p. 58

⁴ Reynolds, M., Kandahar’s Lightly Veiled Homosexual Habits, *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2002

⁵ *On changing roles in western culture of the meaning of sodomy, see: On writ of certiorari to the Court Of Appeals of Texas, Fourteenth District, brief of professors of history, George Chauncey et al, Washington, D.C., Supreme Court of the United States, John Geddes Lawrence and Tyron Garner, Petitioners, V. State of Texas, Respondent*

⁶ See: Swanson, Philip, *The Companion to Latin American Studies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press US, 2003) p. 209

⁷ <http://www.biresource.org/listings/Mexico.shtml>

⁸ Weill-Greenberg, Elizabeth, World's worst places to live if you're gay, Online edition of the *Southern Voice*, www.southernvoice.com/2006/3-17/news/national/abuse.cfm , MAR. 17, 2006

⁹ See: Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E., *Gender In History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001) p. 218

¹⁰ *For more on cultural relativism, see:* Phillips, Kim M. and Reay, Barry, *Sex and history*, (Florence, KY: Routledge 2001) p. 29-30

¹¹ *Regarding ancient Greek sexual practices, see:* Herdt, Gilbert, *Same sex, different culture* (Bolder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) p. 66-76

¹² *Regarding Kinsey's own sexuality, see:* Duberman, Martin, book review of " Jones: *Alfred C. Kinsey*," www.indiana.edu/~kinsey/publications/duberman.html reprinted from *The Nation*, November 3, 1997, p. 40-43

¹³ *See:* Weeks, Jeffrey, *Sexuality* (Florence, KY: Routledge 1986) p. 55-56