

## Gay Marriage: The Evolving Human Family

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### Abstract

This theoretical discussion centers on the evolving nature of marriage and its underlying function over the course of human history. The author pulls from the constructs of Evolutionary Psychology, Sociobiology, genetics and General Systems Theory to formulate some hypotheses about the changing configuration of the American family. The discussion also identifies various factors which have contributed to the rather rapid shift in social attitudes and public policy about gay marriage in the past decade.

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### Introduction

Imagine a Neolithic village, its members clad in animal skins or coarsely woven cloth; they bear the various face paintings and body piercing emblematic of their status in this essential tribal family. It is approximately 6,500 BC and we zoom in on the village priestess (being a feminist, I like to think of this figure as female and privy to the mysteries of reproduction) as she begins the arcane ritual. The shamanic figure mumbles an incantation while circling a man and woman who stand together in the center of the surrounding villagers. Solemnly, she offers the couple an ear of corn, a water skin, and marks each with the red earth from the tribe's nearby fields. The priestess then ties the couple's hands together with the ends of a woven vine, all the while murmuring the language of this ancestor to the modern rite of marriage. Suddenly the mystical woman turns from the couple and begins to rattle a large gourd in the faces of the villagers. She then shrieks out a warning in the syllables of a now forgotten tongue. Approximate translation: 'You must not come between these two people, tempt them to strife, steal or harm their children. If you violate this commandment, you will ...' The reader can complete the threat with any variety of feared outcomes, e.g. exile from the tribe, being struck down by the god of lightning, etc. The exact punishment, of

course, would arise from the experiences of the tribe itself, its specific geographic and climatic features, as well as the particular brand of animism it had developed as a consequence of those factors.

This mythic tale, born of my personal musings about the ancient ritual of marriage, has become a tool for me in a number of classes. I use it, of course, in an attempt to draw my students into a broader, less temporally and culturally bound discussion of marriage and its evolution in our species. According to the surviving history of significantly earlier cultures, it is clear that both their marriage rites and mating customs were considerably different from those presently observed in modern cultures. And it is that very evolution of marriage, as a long entrenched and highly respected ritual, which is at the heart of our current social and legal debate. Gay and lesbian marriage has moved center stage in a bid for inclusion in a class of individuals who are celebrated with public ceremonies, gifts, and a litany of complex civil protections. The fact that high divorce rates plague our marriages (preceded by numerous trips to marriage therapists and the tears of emotionally distraught children), and have rendered the 'privileged' status of that class as dubious, is irrelevant. The battle is hot and the lines are being drawn. What are the reasons for the numerous worries of the

“over 30” segment of our population (as well as members of the more fundamentalist religious sects) in regard to a homosexual couple’s desire to be legally married? And why would this issue emerge at this particular junction on history’s road? Perhaps it has something to do with changes required for the on-going protection and development of our species.

### **Early Factors Promoting Heterosexual Marriage**

It is likely that the earliest marriage rituals began when Homo sapiens gradually moved from the lifestyle of a hunter-gatherer species to that of an agrarian type, given the evidence of other rituals present in that time period (Bahn, 1995; Starr et al., 1960). The sociologists, Biesanz & Biesanz (1969), offer an interesting discussion of the acquisition of culture “as a learned behavior” (p. 34). The development of a culture serves to preserve the species by ensuring that members can identify other individuals in the tribe as part of the ‘us’ as opposed to the ‘other’ and develop a sense of belonging. Further, as the individual need to eat, rest and discharge sexual tensions may conflict with those of other tribal members, a shared culture works to satisfy both those individual needs while providing a structure for the preservation of the group as a whole. Similarly, the necessity of language development in the construction and maintenance of cultures also points to the importance of establishing rituals such as marriage (Biesanz & Biesanz, 1969). Codifying a couple’s status as inviolable (later “sacred”) would ensure that battles over mates, the elopement of unhappy tribesmen, and deaths associated with such internecine struggles would be reduced significantly.

This cultural process of joining tribal members through ceremony and language likely contributed to the development of a defense mechanism described by Freud as “identification” (Brenner, 1974). This psychological safety mechanism allows an individual to empathize with others, to imagine how someone else would feel in a given situation, so that one member would be less likely to commit some grievous offense against a fellow tribesman. Simultaneously, ceremonies

that honored a member of the tribe offered incentives to remain in the fold due to the reinforcing nature of those privileges. In addition to promoting a stable population base, it would have contributed to the cultural glue that bound the membership base together.

Rituals such as marriage also could be viewed as one element among many that contributed to the gradual development of a separate sense of self. The individual, when recognized as a distinct member of a couple, or through initiation rites at puberty, has his or her importance in the community fully recognized. This is similar to various initiation rites, such as baptism in a religious sect, which continue today. This sense of the “me” encourages individual creativity, which is, paradoxically, another essential element of a vital, dynamic society. This was elaborated on by the Post-Freudian theorists, in their discourse on identity formation and the required ability for humans to establish their individual sense of self as distinct from that of another when living in any type of social structure (Akhtar, 1992; Liebert & Liebert, 1998). These contrasting, but equally important, human abilities are the basic building blocks of a culture. And these essential capacities form the cultural ‘couple’ engaged in a seamless, unconscious tango, the dance of an evolving species.

Of course, the early development of these necessary cultural elements has also produced some of the dilemmas we experience at this current fork in the road of human evolution. The practice of ‘shunning’, still used by Amish communities today, has historically been employed to discipline dissident members of a group. And it is clear that, somewhere on the human timeline, individuals who practiced homosexual behaviors began to be viewed as the ‘other’ in many cultures. Gay and lesbian members of the community have, like many other minority groups, felt the discrimination so often leveled against those who differed in their rituals and customs from those in the ‘mainstream’ of a culture. And, depending on the era, such discrimination has resulted in a variety of traumata that have run the gamut from

verbal slurs and employment bias, to beatings, torture and death.

### **Homosexuality as a Historical Constant**

It is likely that homosexual activity was present in Neolithic times, just as it is today, given our knowledge of the relatively stable rates of that sexual practice in recent decades. The prevalence rate for males who are exclusively homosexual has stayed at approximately 5 – 10% over the past 60 years, and “...up to one third of men have had sexual contact with another man at some time (American Medical Association, 1989, p. 544).” According to that same source, the number of women who are exclusively lesbian is estimated at 5%, with an additional 15% of women reporting some homosexual experience by the time they are 45 years of age. Of course, due to social desirability factors (even with research specifically controlled for this variable), it is difficult to believe that these figures are not somewhat underestimated. The debate continues between a variety of factions about the accuracy of these reported figures.

However, the recent data on gay and lesbian sexuality is not the only indicator of homosexual activity as a stable feature in human history. The frequent references to homosexual practices in earlier cultures such as the Greeks and the Romans imply that this type of sexual behavior was not unusual over 2000 years ago (e.g., Plato, Aristophanes, Juvenal). Thus, it is likely that homosexuality was also practiced at the time of the agrarian revolution. However, it may have either been ignored or not awarded special status/protections, given such relationships were incapable of providing children for the extremely thin and vulnerable population base of that time period. Certainly anthropologists have been aware of fertility “cults” such as that represented by the Willendorf Venus found in Austria (Bahn, 1995; Starr et al., 1960), or the “mother goddess” figurines from the 4000 BC village of Catal Huyuk (Bahn, 1995; p. 69) in what is now Turkey. This evidence strongly suggests that fertility was highly prized by our ancestors, and such reverence was undoubtedly due to the fragility of human life in that day.

Is it possible that discriminatory practices against homosexuality began at that juncture in human evolution? Or were conditions placed on individuals that, regardless of their sexual orientation, they were required to produce children for the preservation of the tribe? It is clear today that numerous people, currently in homosexual relationships, have produced children through previous heterosexual unions (US Census, 2000). And Kinsey’s studies in the 1940’s estimated that bisexual activity was present in approximately half the population at some point in adult life (American Medical Association, 1989, p. 174).

### **Evolutionary Constructs and Their Relationship to Sexual Expression**

The field of Sociobiology can be best considered an offshoot of Evolutionary Theory, and is defined by David Barash (1982) as “...the application of evolutionary theory to understanding the social behavior of animals, including humans.” (Hyde, 2004, p. 42). In this theory, social behaviors are viewed as the handmaidens of evolution. That is, any socially constructed behavior, including the rite of marriage, is reinforced in order to provide environments that promote survival of the “fittest” individual. And the fittest individual will contribute healthy and (hopefully) numerous sperm/eggs into the gene pool, thus ensuring the survival of individual genetic patterns, as well as those of the species as a whole. In classic Evolutionary Theory, any childless individual would, by definition, not be included in the category of the fittest representatives of the species. And, from the standpoint of Sociobiology Theory, this would explain why individuals who were exclusively homosexual would have been discouraged and later, vilified, for not contributing offspring to the culture, especially in a time when staying alive was a precarious task. However, this construct does not explain why homosexual practices have persisted through the ages, given the fact that such behavior did not serve the primary directive of providing a stable population base through reproduction.

Evolutionary Psychology, which springs from Sociobiology, offers some interesting

“principles” that may explain the continued and stable presence of homosexual practices across the millennia. This theory may also help explain why gay and lesbian couples are beginning to risk open identification, as well as to press for equality in a number of arenas, including legally recognized marriage, at this juncture in history. It may also help to explain the growing acceptance of homosexual couples and families by the heterosexual community.

Evolutionary Psychology, in its second principle, states that the “natural selection” process has produced the neural pathways to resolve the dilemmas our progenitors faced across our species’ historical development (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997). Some of those dilemmas may have included isolation, loneliness, physical support, sexual desire and the need for surrogate parents. As the physical, social and economic environment changes on a global scale, our species must change with it to survive. This is the evolutionary principle of adaptation (Colby, 1996) and, as demonstrated in the human, it includes more than simple successful reproduction.

The principles of Evolutionary Psychology imply that the genetic concept of genotypic versus phenotypic expression also have their equivalents in the behavioral trajectories of any given society. For example, in the biological context, an individual with brown eyes may actually have a dominant gene, brown, which masks the presence of the recessive blue gene in the outward expression of eye color. Thus, the phenotype (observed trait) is heterozygous, that is, it has two dissimilar genes for eye color with the dominant gene being expressed. Similarly, behaviors and attitudes expressed at one point in a culture’s development may mask the underlying potential for behavioral variations just as they do in the biological world. Further, more recent information on genetic expression describes the interaction between “environmental triggers” and genetic expression of a trait. In the case of asthma, geneticists have currently identified several sites on Chromosome 7 which could produce diverse types of asthma given the specific environmental trigger (Kreeger, 2003). Evolutionary

Psychology suggests that a similar procedure exists in cultures, with differing environmental conditions signaling which behaviors should be expressed to produce optimal functioning of the species under those specific conditions. In other words, it is possible that the survival of the human species may actually require the ability to join in any type of sexual union, but this may have a variety of phenotypic trajectories, depending upon the environment at the time.

At the dawning of the earliest human groups, it is likely that homosexual unions served to provide companionship, physical and emotional support, surrogate parenting and sexual gratification just as well as did heterosexual unions. That was the age of humans as hunter-gatherers who required a different type of mate or group configuration. It is also possible, during that evolutionary period, that women were equally involved in the dangers of hunting, except during the final days of any pregnancy. A fairly mobile, and physically demanding, day to day existence would exert what would now be described as “masculine” pressures on early woman, and this likely produced spontaneous abortions as well as high infant/maternal mortality rates. This kept population growth rates fairly low, and preserved a hunting range that would support the small human groups it contained. Bisexuality, the ability to be equally comfortable with homosexual or heterosexual relationships, would certainly be an advantage in an age of such uncertainty and high mortality rates.

However, as the ice ages shifted climates around the world and the emerging agrarian economy demanded a growing labor force, the environment required a strong shift in the human toward heterosexual unions. As is suggested by current changes in global economic and physical conditions, it is possible that our environment is, once again, activating a shift in sexual expression and reproduction rates.

In a recent and fascinating article, Stephen Freeland, Ph.D., and Laurence Hurst, Ph.D. (2004), describe the human genetic coding process, how the code triggers the formation of various amino acids necessary for life, and, most

importantly, the fact that this code evolves. Basically, these authors state that the genetic code is not error free, but this small amount of error permits the evolution of our species in an optimized manner. Freeland & Hurst state that: "Indeed, the standard code is not only a product of natural selection; it may act as a search algorithm to speed evolution." (p. 90, emphasis added). Those authors also suggest that, by the relatively low, but consistent rate of error, the resulting mutations are small and more likely to emerge as an improvement in functioning rather than a lethal error.

### **History and Its Impact on Sexual Expression**

Although we lack a specific understanding of Neolithic marriage rituals, we do know that later cultures engaged in a wide variety of ceremonies and customs associated with this developing tradition. The Epic of Gilgamesh, dated at 2000 BC, refers to a "harlot" sent by Gilgamesh to tame his enemy (Starr et al., 1960, p. 26); this reference indicates that the early Sumerian culture already distinguished between types of sexual liaisons and customs. Whether the current connotation of the word, "harlot", matches the ancient Sumerian meaning or was imposed by parochial attitudes of later translators, however, is unclear.

By the time the Roman civilization reached its zenith, marriage was a formalized ceremony (and often in a cruel fashion) to ensure continuation of the bloodlines of the powerful, through its protection of political alliances, wealth and property. And, in "The Twelve Caesars" (1996), Michael Grant describes the practice of keeping a lover as acceptable for both married men and women. The only apparent concern registered about this custom was the possibility of a lover impregnating the wife of a powerful man, and the paternity of the offspring being called into question. This concern was even an issue for Julia, Caesar Augustus' daughter. However, she described herself as being extremely careful by having intercourse with a lover only when she knew she was already pregnant by her husband (p. 78). Grant's detailed description of forced divorces, re-marriages to more powerful or useful mates, false accusations, exiles and deaths of heirs to

ensure the continuation of political tyranny is grim. It is not surprising, given this picture, that marriage was viewed as a tool (at least by the elite), separate from emotional attachment to spouses and children, and not necessarily voluntary on the part of either spouse.

A perusal of numerous treatises and essays from antiquity will provide the reader with an understanding of the frequency of homosexual unions in that day, some of which were life long. Plato's "The Symposium" (360 BCE) describes the ease with which the Greeks treated homosexual and heterosexual liaisons side by side in their philosophical discussions of "the god of Love". It does appear that the Roman views of homosexuality were a bit more guarded, but it is obvious from the works of many of the poets and satirists of the day (e.g., Juvenal, Cicero), that homosexuality in that culture was also a common practice (Frank, 1962). And a trip to the Internet will provide an extensive bibliography of the various texts from those early civilizations germane to this topic.

Just as loose knit, animistic village systems gave way to more politically organized cities, then fiefdoms and states, so religious practices also became equally complex and structured. Animism was followed by polytheism, and then monotheistic approaches, each being ways of conceptualizing the powerful forces in daily life over which the human had little control (Starr et al., 1960). And, as there was no separation of church and state in those progenitors of the modern nation, the deity and his servant, the church, were often enlisted by kings and emperors to 'up the ante' in terms of enforcement of these behavioral codes. By the Middle Ages, monotheism had taken hold in most of Western Europe and the Middle East. The Western rationale for heterosexual union being the only acceptable marital/mating practice was that it was commanded by the word of God. Of course, the forms of heterosexual marriage differed between those two areas of the world and still do. In Christianity, punishment for those who defied the homosexual prohibition was no longer simply the death, exile or shunning of the individual violator; now the cost was eternal torture in hell. Considering the

complexity of scholarship in terms of the Torah and earliest versions of the New Testament, it is difficult to know the accuracy of the later translations referencing homosexuality. It is clear, however, that many of the Bible's later versions were produced under the watchful eye of various monarchs, notably the King James edition still in use today by so many protestant sects. The goal of those leaders was to maintain an army to stave off invasions, keep the serfs producing provisions for those armies as well as themselves, and to promote a docile populace while doing so. Clearly, a king of that era needed both personal clout as well as the more terrifying threats wielded by a 'higher authority'.

However, despite the best efforts of the royal families, a steady rumbling for greater equality and freedom grew in Europe and, later, the Americas, during those 'Dark Ages'. The earliest slave revolts in the Roman Empire, most notably that led by Spartacus in 73-71 BC (Frank, 1962) were the harbingers of the later movement away from complete autonomy of the emperors and kings who claimed to be gods themselves or anointed by the deity. And, from the signing of the Magna Carta – forced on King John by the disgruntled barons at Runnymede in 1215 – to the later peasant uprisings after the decimation of the European populace by the Black Death (Starr et al., 1960), a persistent demand for legal protections against despotism was pressed. This process perhaps culminated in the disintegration of various European empires (e.g., the British Raj in India), women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights movement in 1960s America, as well as later legislation such as the Equal Pay Act. Obviously, understanding this socio-political evolution is extremely important in terms of the legal and social precedents set over time in the West. However, this push for greater political freedom was only one of the many forces that would eventually lead to our Constitution's Equal Protection clause, as well as consideration of homosexual couples as a class covered under its umbrella.

### **Other Factors Contributing to Homosexual Prohibitions**

A number of other economic, technological and social conditions delayed the challenge to

heterosexual marriage as the only acceptable form of couple and family configuration, and continued until the early 20th century. The first of these factors was the short human life expectancy, with the average American dying at approximately 47 years of age in 1903 (Mathews, 2003). This is revealing in terms of the layperson's attitude about life and the social mores associated with it at the time. When one considers the fact that the remains of adults from the Neolithic settlement of Catal Huyuk (Turkey, 6250 – 5400 BC) were found to be in their early to mid thirties (Bahn, 1995), the difference in life expectancy between the two cultures was perhaps only 15 years. Of course, these data cannot accurately depict the variance in regard to mortality figures in either time period, and it is possible that the Catal Huyuk human skeletal finds represented an extreme on the aging continuum for that culture. Nevertheless, in 1903 an absence of scientific knowledge, technology and adequate medical treatment made medical conditions such as diarrhea and tuberculosis among the top five causes of death in our country (Mathews, 2003). It appears that, until the 1920s, advances in technology and the sciences were insufficient to tempt average citizens away from religious and social conventions that had comforted them and their ancestors for over a millennium. And the fact that life expectancy today, only one hundred years later, has nearly doubled speaks to the rapid changes in science and technology that have occurred in this very short interval on the historical timeline.

Another important economic and social factor worthy of consideration is the recent movement of our culture away from an agrarian life style and into a primarily technological and human service economy. In 1903, farming was still a common occupation for a high percentage of Americans and Europeans, and this approach to making a living still required large families to maintain the energy demands for reasonable crop production. As in the earliest civilizations, this necessitated the elements of both a stable heterosexual couple to produce children as well as the long term protection and control of those offspring. The belief that an agrarian life would be the goal of past, present and future

generations of a family limited its interaction with the larger society and produced a sense of an insular existence. It is no surprise that in 1903, 10% of Americans were illiterate, only 6% of our population graduated high school and 90% of our medical doctors never attended college, but instead received their education from what was described as “substandard” medical schools (Mathews, 2004, p. 2). Anecdotally, my own parents (now in their late 80’s) scoffed at the “book fools”, as they described the college educated, because they believed (as did many from their generation) that higher education was impractical and in no way prepared one for the real world. The advent of the nuclear family (and loss of extended kin systems) was unanticipated by most individuals born prior to and during World War I.

Additionally, the Victorian age and its extremely prim view of sexuality spun much of the thread weaving the social fabric of early 20th century Europe and America. The tenets of that era exerted a powerful influence even on the newer branches of science and philosophy such as Freudian psychology, and its radical view of human sexuality. Although Freud was branded a heretic because he dared to suggest that sexual interest and gratification persisted from earliest childhood on, he, too, could not totally escape the restrictive social climate of his time. He postulated that homosexuality, or “inversion” as he described it (Freud, 1938, p. 554), was an aberration, and resulted from an incomplete identification with the same sexed parent. Freud did stop short, however, of referring to homosexuals as “degenerates” and stated that, with the exception of sexual practices, homosexuals showed “...no marked deviation from the normal.” (p. 556). Nevertheless, he suggested psychoanalysis as a potential source of treatment for this “aberration”, and reinforced, even among his more sophisticated devotees, that homosexuality was to be seen as a disorder.

Thus, in the early years of the 20th century, our culture maintained the homosexual prohibitions set out in various versions of the Bible (King James [1611, AD], Douay [1582, AD], and Vulgate [4th century, AD]) which governed the

Christian church, from Protestants to Catholics (Guralink, 1984). The facts behind the translations and editions of these “holy books” were blurred by their depiction as the “revealed word” of the deity, as William Jennings Bryan testified during the Scopes trial (Linder, 2002). And, indeed, the 1925 case, *Tennessee v. Scopes*, brought the conflict between the literal interpretation of the Bible and the empirical evidence of science into bold relief. The court’s decision to simply fine the high school biology teacher a mere \$100 sent a message reverberating across the country: the narrow notion of a strict biblical interpretation, and its corresponding sway over public policy, had been forever compromised. Even though, according to Douglas Linder’s (2002) summary, the U.S. Supreme Court did not overturn the prohibition against teaching evolution until 1968 (in *Epperson v. Arkansas*), the death knell had been sounded. If the law had begun to honor scientific explanations of creation as equally acceptable with that of Judeo-Christianity, then other improbable biblical ‘facts’ would soon be similarly questioned. It was then only a matter of time before issues such as racial and gender equality, school prayer, flag burning and sexual expression would come under the same legal microscope.

### **Global Factors and the Changing Face of Marriage**

In contrast with our ancestors’ fears about maintaining a sufficient population to sustain an agrarian economy, the argument about the impact of the population explosion over the last century continues to rage. According to Moore (1999), the Malthusian thesis and its proponents, including the Zero Population Growth movement, predict a variety of catastrophes springing from the mushrooming of the world’s population. The basic concern of this movement is that cultures will be unable to sustain their growing populace with the planet’s finite resources. The Libertarian position, which pooh-poohs its opposition’s gloomy predictions, appears committed to retaining the freedoms of earlier centuries unencumbered by environmental regulations and controls. Nevertheless, the original snail’s pace of the world’s human population growth has given way

to a shocking rate of expansion in an extremely short time period. David Price, Ph.D. (1995), of Cornell University offers estimates of the rate of population growth over time. He suggests that the world population was approximately five million by 8,000 BC in the early stages of the agrarian revolution, but rose to approximately 200-300 million by the time of Christ. By 1,650 AD, the planet contained 500 million people, despite the devastating Black Death which eliminated approximately 25% of the European population (Starr, et al, 1960). In 1800, Dr. Price estimates the global population had reached one billion, and in the next 130 years that figure doubled. And between 1930 and 1986 the human population ballooned from two billion to five billion. Regardless of one's position about the potential threat of such an explosion and its impact on resources, it is clear that we can suspend our worries about a vulnerable human population base.

Currently, we also see a global split between the developing countries and the technologically/economically advantaged nations in their differing priorities. As reproductive rates have fallen dramatically in the West over the last half century (Moore, 1999), those rates in the developing nations of Africa and Asia have only begun to decline recently (Haub, 2003). Further, we see a dramatic increase in the adoption of orphaned children from these developing countries, or those that can be described as war-torn or decimated by famine and disease. As infants available for adoption in Western countries decrease, cross-cultural adoptions become increasingly attractive to childless couples in the more stable, developed nations (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004). From an evolutionary perspective, the various racial and cultural groups of developing countries may be able to maintain a strong presence in the gene pool by the protection of their children through the adoption process. Further, although current approaches to cross-cultural adoption usually involve heterosexual couples, the sexual orientation of the adoptive couple is irrelevant. In terms of evolutionary principles, it is only important that the adoptive parental unit can provide the essential scaffolding for the adopted child to survive and

successfully reproduce. And, as lifestyle expectations change radically for both the Western single woman, as well as its couples (Matlin, 2000), it seems likely that the world may need a fail-safe mechanism to protect the seed populations of these diverse, and, in some ways endangered, racial groups. Perhaps gay and lesbian couples also offer a safety net for this global need.

Another equally important issue is the changing status of women, as well as their increasing ability to control their lives in regard to reproduction. Of course, the scientific technology that produced the first birth control pill in 1960 was a significant contribution to this new reproductive freedom, as was the Roe v. Wade decision that made abortion legal in 1973. Additionally, the increasing ease in attaining a successful professional career, assisted by federal workplace legislation – not to mention the presence of an encouraging social climate for achievement in women – are creating real options for the modern woman (Hyde, 2004). Now a growing number of women are choosing to either delay childbearing or to remain childless. The U.S. Census Bureau (1997) reported that 12% of married women between the ages 40 - 44 did not have children, and that 9% of women between the ages of 18 – 34 stated that they would likely not have children. Further, it appears that attitudes toward women who remain childless are also changing, with far less negative bias held by the community about such women (Matlin, 2000, p. 385). And some of the reasons both members of these heterosexual couples cite for their choice not to have children reflect these changing social and physical realities. Among those reasons listed were the couple's awareness of the irrevocable responsibility, the cost of raising children, the loss of the "satisfying and flexible" lifestyle of the couple, and the couple's fear of raising children under threat of nuclear war and other global problems (Matlin, 2000, p. 387).

It is interesting to note that a similar change in attitude about childbearing was also found in ancient Rome at the height of its European hegemony. Tenney Frank (in Kagan, 1962) quotes the Roman satirist, Juvenal, who



described this curious social development in Roman culture at that time:

“...on golden couches, scarcely any women bear children; for there are so many skills and drugs which can make one sterile.” (in Kagan’s “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire”, 1962; p. 54; emphasis added)

Although it’s not terribly surprising that the Roman culture had discovered a variety of ways to control reproduction, it is these experts’ speculations on the extent of contraception in the Roman upper class and the reasons for it that capture our attention. Numerous historians, both the respected and the suspect, have focused on the Roman use of slaves, and the economic and social repercussions of that practice. The resulting rapid population growth of the slave class increased the pressure on Roman aristocracy to provide adequate food and resources to support that segment of their society. However, the slave population not only provided the manual labor which freed the patrician class for greater leisure, the professions were almost exclusively made up of those same slaves, and this included physicians, teachers, scribes, and engineers. As a consequence, the few occupations the upper class participated in were the political roles required by the state, as well as the military leadership that tightly controlled its populace. As a consequence, marriage in the upper classes, with its intrigues and frequent tragedies, became one more tool to maintain control. Further, childbearing and the strong attachment between mother and child which so often ensues, would carry some negatively loaded connotations for a Roman woman. Not only would she have been influenced by some of the factors modern women consider in the decision to have a child, she would also have been concerned about the physical fate of her child. In his discussion of this issue, Dr. Frank commented on the ramifications of this bifurcated social system of slaves and the Roman upper class. And he clearly describes the “...startling inability of such families (the Roman patricians) to perpetuate themselves” in contrast with the

extremely prolific slave population (p. 54). It also appears that the Roman aristocracy, as a consequence of this self-imposed infertility, frequently adopted children and sometimes from the classes of freed slaves. And, although Caesar Augustus did not emerge from the slave caste, he was an example of this custom, as Julius Caesar adopted Augustus after the death of his father.

This attitude that childbearing need not be a biological inevitability or societal pressure, but simply a potential source of pleasure or angst, clearly alters a woman’s (as well as her mate’s) approach to proactively constructing an adult life. And although some cultural feminists (as well as Christian fundamentalists) may promote the argument that there is a hard-wired instinct toward motherhood in most women, it is very possible that much of that behavior is socially constructed at an early age (Hyde, 2004; Matlin, 2000). The principles of Evolutionary Psychology imply that these social pressures derive from the worldview of earlier generations, but may not be recognized as maladaptive for future progeny.

### **Recent Changes in Social Attitudes and Public Policy**

One could argue that the numerous forces, now united to challenge ‘traditional’ attitudes about marriage, finally merged sometime in the 1990s. A number of events point to the possibility of such a nexus, and its potential impact on public policy. For example, in the most recent US Census (2000), over 600,000 “same-gender-partner households” were counted (Hyde, 2004, p. 353), and such same-sex partnerships were found in 99% of all counties across the country. Further, the Census figures indicate those couples were rather evenly split between gay and lesbian partnerships. It should also be noted that these figures might represent an underestimate of the actual number of same-sex partners constituting American households, according to Smith & Gates (2001, in Hyde, 2004). In contrast, during the 1990 census taking, if a same-sex couple reported themselves as such, the statisticians in the Census Bureau “...changed the gender of one of the partners and counted them as a heterosexual married

couple.” (Hyde, 2004, p. 353). So, within a single decade, the Census Bureau had altered its format and included a specific category for same-sex households.

According to demographer, Gary Gates of the Urban Institute in Washington, DC, data from the 2000 US Census reveals that several million children currently reside in the homes of same-sex couples, where one of the partners is the biological parent. And in that same interview, Dr. Ellen Perrin reported on the results of numerous studies in the past decade regarding the health and psychological well being of children raised in same-sex-partnership households. She stated that there were “no significant differences” between children from these households and children raised in the homes of heterosexual couples on a number of issues including “...self-esteem, peer relationships” and a variety of mental disorders. Dr. Parent also stated that the confidence level for these findings was high, given the consistent results of the various studies over time (Talk of the Nation, March 22, 2004; National Public Radio). Although Gates’ figures about the number of US counties reporting same-sex-partner households differs slightly from those reported by Hyde (96% vs. 99%), he states clearly that same-sex-partnerships with children “...are more likely to live” in areas where families with children are found, rather than in gay communities. Gates also reported, again using data from the recent US Census, that there were a greater number of children raised in lesbian households than in households headed by gay couples; again, this differs from the data reported by Hyde (2004).

Despite the fact that the nuclear family has been described by many Americans as the model exemplifying ‘traditional family values’, that family form experienced a relatively short life span on history’s time line. It’s predecessor, the extended family, rapidly decreased after World War I. But only a few decades passed before the communes of the 1960s emerged, and the single parent/step-parent families became common alternative forms to that of the nuclear family. Other family variants such as gay/lesbian couples with children, and households

consolidated from two separate partial family groups also gained strength in the 1980s/90s (Benokraitis, 2005; Wallerstein, 1995). And one could argue that the anomie often experienced by the modern, fractured family is being addressed by some of the current, non-traditional family configurations, and sometimes in ways the nuclear family model could not. Further, modern educational research, material and training programs for marriage and family therapists now commonly address all or most of these variants in their didactic and experiential protocols (Benokraitis, 2005; Hyde, 2004; Wallerstein, 1995). And state licensing boards (e.g., California Board of Behavioral Sciences) governing the practice of marriage and family therapy usually include questions related to these recently evolved family structures in both their written and oral examinations.

Another example of recent and powerful changes in social attitudes regarding homosexual relationships and families is found in survey data from recent decades. Gallup polls surveying social attitudes about homosexual relationships demonstrate a considerable change over the past four decades. Currently, those polls indicate that 60% of those surveyed believe that homosexual relations should be legal; this is in contrast to 44% in 1996, and 33% in 1986 (CNN, November 18, 2003). And a closer look at these figures indicates that there is a strong difference in attitudes between generations regarding this issue. 72% of Americans in the age range of 18-29 appear to be in favor of legalizing homosexual relationships, in comparison to only 39% of individuals over 65 years of age (Benokraitis, 2005, p. 256). Recent Newsweek polls evidence similar if not more dramatic changes in broad public acceptance for the inclusion of homosexual couples and families as simply one more of the diverse groups present in modern society (Diversity Central web site, 2004).

Changes in social attitudes are usually reflected in public policy, and one example of this is found in a recent and dramatic Supreme Court ruling. In 1998, two men were jailed on charges of sodomy after being found in bed together by members of the Houston, Texas police force. In

2003, the Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling in the *Lawrence v. Texas* case, stating that “The petitioners are entitled to respect for their private lives”. Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the majority, elaborated by saying “The state cannot demean their existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime.” (CNN, November 18, 2003). It is interesting to note, however, that this decision was based on the “due process” construct rather than on the Equal Protection clause currently being used as the precedent in various states to question the previous interpretation of their existing marriage laws.

The past three years have been fraught with evidence of changing public policy in regard to inclusion issues for the gay community. In April of 2000, the Governor of Vermont signed the civil union legislation directly resulting from the *Vermont v. Baker* case. That specific suit had challenged the current legal interpretation of Vermont’s marriage laws in respect to couple status for the gay and lesbian community. In June of 2003, the Rev. Gene Robinson was elected the new bishop of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in New Hampshire. Of course, this would not be particularly noteworthy, except that he was an openly gay man, and the election had been highly debated by the church members (ABC News, June 9, 2003). Rev. Robinson’s election indirectly impacted the issue of gay marriage, as it sent a message from a well established, traditional sect of Christianity. The Episcopal Church was recognizing the acceptability of Rev. Robinson’s union with his male partner, and that such union in no way compromised his status as a clergyman of God’s servant, the church. In November 2003 the Massachusetts court decided to legalize gay marriage, and this was “...reaffirmed in February”, 2004. According to that statute, gay marriages will begin being performed on May, 17 of this year, and those marriage ceremonies can continue for “two and a half years before any constitutional amendment could go on the ballot for popular approval.” However, an amendment has just been approved this March by that state’s legislators to ban same-sex marriages and institute civil unions instead. But, according to the Jennifer Peter of the

Associated Press, it appears that this may be a strategy by advocates of gay marriage to ensure that a large number of same-sex couples are legally wed in the interim (Boston.com News, March 11, 2004).

A flurry of activity followed rapidly on the heels of the Massachusetts decision. Republican Governor, Mitt Romney, proposed enacting an amendment to the US Constitution specifying marriage as a strictly heterosexual union, and President Bush endorsed the action. This seemed to immediately precipitate the decision by San Francisco Mayor, Gavin Newsom, to sanction gay and lesbian marriages. According to its assessor, Mabel Teng, San Francisco had conducted 4,037 civil marriages for gay and lesbian couples from over 46 states in our country at the time of her announcement (NBC news coverage, March 17, 2004).

Thus, as the pace of change in population, technology and information access increases exponentially, the pressure for rapid social and public policy change is similarly demanded. And this is a good fit for the principles of Evolutionary Psychology with its references to cultural change being triggered by alterations in the environment. This theory also helps explain the powerful sense of polarization between three subsequent human generations on the issue of sexual expression. Evolutionary change has always been thought to be slow, gradual and, therefore, offering time for psychological and social adjustment. Perhaps the theory of evolution is also being thrown ‘a curve’ at this point in time, due to the relative abruptness of change in these environmental triggers. Or perhaps this is the sensation our progenitors have had at similar moments in human history. Such moments are frequently referred to as ‘watersheds’.

### **Toward a New Definition of Marriage and Family**

As suggested by Sociobiology Theory, the forces of social construction persist and work for the long-term evolutionary goals of preservation of the species. And the original proponents of Evolutionary Theory postulated that this is achieved through successful mating of

individuals best suited to their environment. Today, however, it appears that the simplistic definition of mating as the primary vehicle for this purpose represents a narrow vision of the process. Clearly, lack of reproduction is not the only way for a species to die out. Evolutionary Psychology states that “Natural selection... is a process in which a phenotypic design feature causes it own spread through a population” regardless of its consequences. Further, the “adaptionist approach” embraced by Evolutionary Psychology suggests that a phenotypic “...design feature will cause its own spread over generations if it has the consequence of solving adaptive problems” (Cosmides & Tooby, 1996, p. 14). As we are now clearly assured of a sufficient population base to continue a human presence on the planet, our species may now need to focus on ensuring the conditions that would optimize our functioning, and reduce the possibility of lethal errors in judgment. In other words, it is likely that the human genome has always had a more complex definition of the concept of what is “fittest”.

Like our primate relatives, humans are social animals and interdependent – another consequence of the process explained by the principle of adaptation. Although we may not physically die without companionship and the physical or emotional support of others of our kind, most mental health professionals acknowledge the importance of social interaction to a human being’s sanity. Harry Stack Sullivan described this psychological principle when he coined the term, “consensual validation”, and defined it as the importance of a shared understanding of reality between members of our species (Beavers, 1977, p. 13). Perhaps the individual who is fittest is not necessarily one who can reproduce, but one who can provide the stability and nurturance – the scaffolding essential for the survival of both the individual and the family. And in this case we could define the family as the nuclear family

(with or without children), various modern family configurations, and the communities and nations making up the global family in which we all live.

There is an elegant logic to the premise that the human species, during its long evolutionary process, developed a phenotypic design for multiple means of sexual expression. And, as Evolutionary Psychology proposes, it is equally logical that the rules governing human behavior parallel those at work in the biological sphere. It is a tribute to nature’s wisdom that our species could behaviorally adapt to changing environmental conditions through alternate forms of sexual expression. General Systems Theory, a predecessor of modern Family Systems Theory, also supports this thesis with its principle of isomorphism, which, it states, operates in all living organisms. Isomorphism is defined as “...the presence of similar structure in seemingly dissimilar systems” (Beavers, 1977, p. 26; emphasis added).

In a recent commentary, Jonathan Rauch seems to speak for the growing number of gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual Americans who identify with this excluded class in our society.

“A solitary individual lives on the frontier of vulnerability. Marriage creates kin, someone whose first “job” is to look after you. Gay people, like straight people, become ill or exhausted or despairing and need the comfort and support that marriage uniquely provides. Marriage can strengthen and stabilize their relationships and thereby strengthen the communities of which they are a part. ...society benefits when people, including gay people, are durably committed to love and serve one another.” (New York Times Magazine, 2003)

In reflecting the timeless human need for solace, this collective voice may be an echo of our ancient, genetic code.

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