

Gay Marriage and Human Sexual Nature

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"Women's complimentary sexual nature...is uniquely suited for the task of constraining men's natural proclivity for sexual diversity"

Proponents of homosexual marriage have to be heartened by recent judicial and church decisions that may be harbingers of the complete governmental sanctioning of such matrimony. Before this becomes a reality, I want to make a few observations that I hope will be considered in the discussions of this important social issue.

As a starting point, a highly respected national survey in the mid 1990's reported 42.8 lifetime sexual partners among gay/bisexual men (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). This compared to 16.5 partners for heterosexual men. Women of either orientation reported far fewer sexual partners than their male counterparts.

Proponents often argue that allowing homosexual marriage will help stabilize these relationships and thus should be affirmed by anyone who speaks in terms of wanting to promote fidelity and commitment. However, if differences in the rates of sexual partners were simply due to social discrimination against gays and their inability to legally marry, then one would expect to find similar lifetime numbers of sexual partners among gay men and lesbians, as well as among heterosexual men and women. Clearly, this is not the case, and other factors must be influencing these statistics.

While some gay men do sustain sexually monogamous partnerships—and plenty of heterosexual men have difficulty maintaining monogamous relationships—the general trend moves in the opposite direction and begs for an explanation.

A recent study published in the July, 2003, issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* may provide an answer. Psychologist David Schmitt and colleagues surveyed 16,288 people across 10 culturally distinct regions of the world and found support for a universal theme: men tend to seek sexual variety, while women tend to seek long-term sexual relationships (Schmitt, 2003).

Consider the number of subjects who reported wanting more than one sexual partner *in the next month*. The study found that 25.4% of heterosexual men and 29.1% of homosexual men endorsed this desire. By contrast, only 4.4% of heterosexual women and 5.5% of lesbians wanted multiple sexual partners in the next month. Notice how these statistics divide along gender lines rather than sexual orientation. This suggests that the real social challenge is how to civilize male sexuality as a whole, rather than homosexual practice per se.

The study also examined differences in desire for more than one sexual partner based on relationship status. The desire for additional partners among men grew progressively as the level of commitment decreased: starting at 12.8% of married men, moving up to 18.2% for cohabiting men, then 19% for exclusively dating men, and a full 28.6% of men without an exclusive attachment expressed an interest in having more sexual partners in the next month.

Yet the desire for multiple partners in the next month among women remained essentially flat, from 3.5% of married women to 6.2% of women who were unattached. Note the quite striking gender differences, in addition to the above-cited trend for men to desire additional sexual liaisons as the strength of their relational commitment decreases.

Whether understood in evolutionary or religious terms, these findings suggest that the women's complimentary sexual nature, when aided by a strict marriage bond, is uniquely suited for the task of constraining men's natural proclivity for sexual diversity.

Undoubtedly, heterosexuals have done more than their fair share to undermine this bond and have a lot of soul searching to do. However, despite the socially destructive rates of marital dissolution, the social ideal of traditional marriage has never been seriously questioned. Homosexual marriage challenges the foundation of this union as a life long, sexually exclusive and heterosexual ideal, replacing it with the broader and more flexible vision of marriage as grounded in consent between adults.

The question at hand is whether the sanctioning of homosexual marriage will, by itself, extensively alter the pursuit of sexual variety among gay men in the absence of the constraining influence of female sexuality. Some data suggest this might not be the case. One study reported that 79% of closed-coupled gay men acknowledged at least one incident of nonmonogamy in the previous year (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990). This compared to prevalence rates of 19% among lesbians, 10% among married heterosexuals, and 23% among cohabiting heterosexuals.

Alternatively, then, one may ask, will the legal recognition of gay marriage might instead serve to further loosen the constraining influence of marriage for heterosexual men? If this latter thesis proves to be true, then those who stand to lose the most with the acceptance of homosexual marriage may be heterosexual women and their children.

Indeed, one study that analyzed census data found the unraveling of the marital pair-bond template was associated with a host of serious social dysfunctions, including increased rates of infant mortality, out-of-wedlock births, and violent crime (Immerman & Mackey, 1999).

An additional factor that may impact the manifestation of male sexual nature is another apparently universal gender difference: men are far more likely to be risk-takers than women (Stark, 2002). It also appears plausible that the complimentary nature of men and women may characteristically enable monogamous, heterosexual marriage to promote a constraining influence on the risk-taking impulses of some men. This may also help explain the relatively higher prevalence of risky sexual behavior such as barebacking (deliberate unprotected anal intercourse) and sex in public settings found among gay men in comparison to heterosexual men (Eisenberg, 2001; Flowers, Hart & Marriott, 1999; Halkitis, Parsons & Wilton, 2003; Yep, Lovaas & Pagonis, 2002).

These are difficult things to say publicly, because many of us have gay or lesbian children, relatives, friends or colleagues who are wonderful people and we would wish them no harm. We instead want them to achieve satisfying relationships, and our feelings may be pulled to endorse homosexual marriage as a means to that end.

Yet an action that appears compassionate for an individual does not always translate into compassionate results for a society. Given the sexual nature of men irrespective of orientation, the approval of homosexual marriage could well operate in a different manner culture-wide than it may appear to function with any single gay or lesbian couple.

By suggesting such a complete overhaul of the social ideal, well-meaning advocates of homosexual marriage may in fact be further weakening the most important institution in

any society to effectively civilize male sexual nature.

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