

Same-Sex Intimacy in Transition

by Benno Gammerl

Homosexual men and women have constantly adapted their emotional patterns and practices to changing social conditions. Even the way in which they have fallen in love, whether suddenly or gradually, has changed over time. Simultaneously though, homosexuals have contributed to a societal transformation with their feelings, with their anger, with their shame, and with their pride and their joy. Precisely these interactions make the contemporary history of homosexualities such an exciting field for research into the history of emotions.

The 1970s mark an important caesura in this history. Up until 1969 men in the Federal Republic of Germany could be sentenced to prison if they had sex with other adult men. Women who sought out other women were basically invisible at that time. It was only in the 1970s that this began to change with the onset of the lesbian and gay liberation movements. Homosexual men and women were now increasingly provocative in public and stood up confidently for their rights. Numerous lesbian and gay initiatives and organizations opened up new spaces and possibilities for same-sex lifestyles and the expression of various sexual preferences. Parts of the gay and lesbian community who were close to the women's and student movements hoped at the time for a comprehensive revolution in sexual relationships. This hope was not fulfilled. Instead, the movement contributed to an acceleration of the normalization of homosexuality. Where there was once talk of sin and crime, there is now talk of one sexual variety among many. These days, the issues and problems among hetero and homosexual people, so it seems, do not differ much from one another. How did this change impact the position of women loving women and men loving men in society? Did it affect how they responded to feelings of shame, love, sadness or fear, and how they felt and expressed these feelings?



© Der Kreis, 7 (1965), 1

Oral history, that is, research in collaboration with contemporary witnesses, is an important method which can help find answers to these questions. In both passages from this interview, conducted in 2008, Mrs. Fischer describes how she fell in love in two different time periods: in 1972 with Helga and in 1998 with Gesine. All names of people and locations in the documentation or transcription of the interviews have been changed in order to guarantee the confidentiality of the narratives. Concurrently, my coworkers and I have paid close attention to the original inflection of the oration to keep it as recognizable as possible. For this reason, those syllables which were stressed are capitalized and short pauses are marked as such (.). Longer pauses or unspoken utterances, such as laughter, are in brackets. This precision to detail is important as it is not only crucial for the interpretation of the interview *what* the interviewees are saying, but also *how* they are saying it.

This is because the individual narratives about bygone feelings by no means provide direct access to the emotions of the past. Even in the moment that people are experiencing emotions, they do not find it easy to identify these emotions accurately. The memory of past sensations is, accordingly, even more opaque. If a woman or a man were asked to describe what they felt the first time they met their future partners, then their description would certainly have much to do with how they felt back then, even if these feelings were not entirely clear. But in no way would the recollected story correspond one-to-one with the past experience. If the couple had in the meantime separated, then these events would also presumably cast a different light onto the previous experience. And if the person had in the meantime come out as a lesbian or gay, this breakthrough would clearly impact how he or she, in hindsight, would describe or portray his or her early relationship experiences.

Precisely because of their varying perspectives and intricacies, biographical narratives are especially significant as historical sources. Unfortunately it is not simple to obtain definitive results. However, if interviewees describe similar emotionally relevant situations and events that unfolded at different points in time, and if they thereby apply distinct narrative strategies, both in form and content, then historically specific emotional patterns and practices may be successfully recorded. Mrs. Fischer's interview offers exactly this possibility. In both passages she tells of how she fell in love with other women. While the story in the early 1970s emphasized the inexplicability and suddenness of the event, the passage about the late 1990s explains why Mrs. Fischer fell in love with Gesine – her relationship with Annegret was in crisis –, and records in minute detail the detours through different situations, doubts and deliberations that culminate in her getting closer to and finally touching Gesine.

The differences in content correspond in an interesting manner with formal divergences between the two passages. The first narrative resembles a Rondo: the description of the events (1.1-1.6) gives way to a flashback (1.7-1.17), which eventually returns to the opening of the narration (1.18-1.22). In this form the cohesion of the narrative is especially highlighted by the parallels between the *framing* and the *framed* story.

Both begin with a type of heading (1.1 and 1.7), then depict the situation (1.2 and 1.8-1.9) and the catalysts for getting intimate, before they end with the reflections about the aforesaid (1.4-1.6 and 1.12-1.17). This self-contained Rondo resembles in its uniformity a geometric figure, which appears as suddenly and unexpectedly in the story as the "bright between us."

In comparison, the second passage is clearly more heterogeneous, structured more openly and shaped by a forward-moving rhythm. Initially the narrator names the theme (2.1), then depicts the situation at the outset (2.2), then builds up the narrative tension by mentioning the (initially) one-sided affinity (2.3) and then lines up in rapid succession descriptions of various processes, perceptions, feelings and intentions (2.4-2.27). Only the narrative climax and the happy ending (2.28-2.30) provide the story with coherence. This narrative structure corresponds, in contrast to the sudden intimacy with Helga, to the gradual coming together of Mrs. Fischer with Gesine.

This leads to the thesis that same-sex intimacy up until the 1960s followed a paradigm of immediacy and unexpectedness, whereas in later years it would follow a moderately progressive pattern. This assumption is confirmed when looking at other biographies. While older interviewees often described how they unexpectedly fell in love, such as Mr. Schumann born in 1935, younger participants predominantly report gradually becoming closer with their partners, such as Herr Uhl born in 1970. There is a similar case with love stories in homosexual magazines as well. For example, the novella "Days with Antonio" published in "Der Kreis" (1960) describes the meeting of the narrator with the title character as an event that instantly and radically changed both their lives. Whereas in "Du & Ich" (1975), the two protagonists in the short story "Verloren und Gewonnen" become closer while pitted against one another in a series of everyday problems and conflicts. These examples show that the diverse patterns in Mrs. Fischer's story are not only due to individual-personal development, but also to socio-historical changes. Until 1970, these tumultuous encounters remained in the foreground, which were afterwards replaced by partners gently and gradually coming together.

The transformation of same-sex intimacy from sudden to slow, I would argue, is closely connected to the change in spaces where men loving men and women loving women could become more intimate with one another. Such opportunities, as in public toilets, in seldom held balls for "like-minded" participants or in hidden bars, whose doors would only open when rung, were very narrow by time and space until the 1960s. Since the 1970s, though, when the taboo on homosexuality was softened, lesbian and gay projects and organizations opened up spaces in shops, universities, community centers and elsewhere that allowed for the gradual development of intimacy between men and between women.

This transformation of emotional patterns and practices correlates to shifts in the social situation of homosexual men and women and is, from an emotional historical perspective, quite revealing. However, these findings still pose broader questions, which oral history and the previously discussed material alone cannot easily answer. Nevertheless, it is at least worthwhile to pose them: Do heterosexual encounters not simultaneously shift from suddenness to step-by-step, as the weakening of the so-called "Procurators Paragraph" (*Kuppeleiparagraf*) around 1970 granted them a more relaxed environment as well? Is the opposition between tumultuous and cautious not generally critical to the Western understanding of love, at least since the Romantic period and up until today? These questions conclusively indicate that emotional patterns and practices change at differing levels and speeds. The analysis of short-term tendencies, such as the one affecting same-sex intimacy in the 1970s, shows the history of love as being far from being fully explored. With this we finally return to the complexity, which makes not only oral history, but also the history of emotions, so exciting and appealing.

Further Reading

- James R. Averill, "The Social Construction of Emotion. With Special Reference to Love," in *The Social Construction of the Person*, Kenneth J. Gergen et al., eds. (New York: Springer Verlag, 1985), 89–109.
- Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- Francesca M. Cancian, "The Feminization of Love," *Signs* 11, no. 2 (1986): 692–709.
- Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia. Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- Rolf Petri, "The Idea of Culture and the History of Emotions," *historein* 12 (2012): 21-37.
- Andreas Pretzel and Volker Weiß, eds., *Rosa Radikale. Die Schwulenbewegung der 1970er Jahre* (Hamburg: Männerschwarm, 2012).
- Michael Roper, "Analysing the Analysed: Transference and Counter-Transference in the Oral History Encounter," *Oral History* 31, no. 2 (2003): 20-32.

Citation

Gammerl, Benno. "Same-Sex Intimacy in Transition", in: *History of Emotions - Insights into Research*, October 2013, DOI: 10.14280/08241.8