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Sex and the Military: Implications of the Exotic as Erotic

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Title: Sex and the Military: Implications of the Exotic as Erotic

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Abstract. This article describes Bem's developmental theory of sexual orientation and its implications for United States Government (USG) military personnel policies.

Bem's developmental theory of sexual orientation attempts to explain the who and what of sexual attraction for all individuals: heterosexuals, homosexuals, and other socially constructed labelings of desire. According to Bem, every individual possesses biological characteristics that lead to temperaments, e.g., a preferred level of activity or threshold of aggression. These temperaments, in turn, influence preferences for individual and social behaviors that are statistically typical or atypical for one's own sex. These preferences for behaviors lead to a preference and hopefully a greater amount of time spent with like-minded individuals, i.e., for peers who enjoy similar activities. Individuals will find others who don't like similar activities or who engage in them with some desired frequency as more different than individuals who do. This finding of others as different induces biological arousal, viz., of the autonomic nervous system. This autonomic arousal is later transformed into erotic and romantic attraction. Thus, the exotic becomes the erotic. (The theory does not depend on resolving whether all human functioning from the earliest moments of life always has at least some sexual element. Pace, Freud.)

What are the implications of this theory--a theory that is supported by a significant amount of empirical and experimental research on human sexual orientation--for personnel policies of the USG's military forces? (1) Personnel policy stigma towards some sexual orientation groups, e.g. homosexuals, has often been predicated on the group bearing a medical disease: literally, anatomical oddities, bacteria, viral infections. Bem's theory would be compatible with the notion that if sexual orientation-related-disease has ontological validity, it may cover no one, everyone, or some individuals among the sexual orientations. (2) Personnel policy stigma towards some sexual orientation groups has often been predicated on some accompanying psychological dysfunction related to the sexual orientations themselves. Bem's theory suggests that, if there is psychological dysfunction, it may be treated similarly to (1) above. (3) Personnel policy stigma towards some sexual orientation groups has often been based on such groups violating natural law or the word of God(s). Bem's theory is not helpful here, although this stigma is probably unconstitutional in the US as a basis for personnel policy. (4) Personnel policy stigma towards some sexual orientation groups has often been based on the introduction of otherwise nonexistent sexual motivations to a nonsexual, military situation. Bem's theory would suggest that there already are existing sexual motivations. Moreover, one should discount the rationale of introducing otherwise nonexistent sexual motivations since the introduction of women into combat and combat support positions. (5) Personnel policy stigma towards some sexual orientation groups has often been predicated on members of other groups feeling uncomfortable around the presence of the former--largely based on the latter possessing the beliefs explicit in personnel policy described in (1) through (4). This is a legitimate concern dependent on corresponding effects on morale, military deterrence and fighting performances, and the iconic, totemic, and idealized roles of the military in US society. Bem's theory counters these beliefs but does not extinguish them. In fact, it may exacerbate them via reactance and psychodynamic conflict. (6) Personnel policy stigma towards some sexual orientation

groups has often been predicated on the groups' higher probability of being blackmailed. Given the substance of military personnel policies concerning sexual orientation, this is a legitimate concern--even if the sources of blackmail potential are based on largely scientifically discredited or illegal beliefs. Bem's theory, again, counters supporting beliefs but does not extinguish and may exacerbate them. (7) Perhaps most threatening to US military personnel policy, Bem's theory--as do some others--posits that all individual may be characterized by values on both heterosexual and homosexual continua, that even if a group of individuals appear similar on some sexual orientation dimensions, they may be very different on the many other dimensions of including fantasy, gender identity, sexual gratification postures and techniques, and so on. Also, sexual orientation(s) of an individual may fluctuate dependent on an interaction of inner dynamics and external realities, e.g., temporary duty assignments and foreign deployments and permanent changes of station. Moreover, not only are sexual orientation labels socially constructed, but they may not even be based on gender--i.e., male or female--but on other characteristics, e.g., skin, eye, or hair color; physical size, structure, or fat-to-muscle ratio; psychological or behavioral styles, etc. Here the subjugating discourse of military personnel policy concerning the nature of sexual orientation and its effects is most threatened.

Bem's theory and other theories addressing human sexuality parse military personnel policy on sexual orientation--leaving the latter with legitimate, if unfortunate, concerns about blackmail and the comfort level of others who themselves are fueled by ignorance, misunderstanding, or unconstitutional matters. Don't ask, don't tell, but US military personnel policy on sexual orientation has a problem. (See A straight word on sex in the United States armed forces. (June 20, 1997). IBPP, 2(8); Bem, D.J. (1996). Exotic becomes erotic. *Psychological Review*, 103, 320-335; De Cecco, J.P., & Elia, J.P. (1993). If you seduce a straight person, can you make them gay? Issues in biological essentialism versus social constructionism in gay and lesbian identities. Cited in Bem, D.J. (1996). *Psychological Review*, 103, 320; Sex as a military weapon. (February 28, 1997). IBPP, 1(14); Shively, M.G. & De Cecco, J.P. (1977). Components of sexual identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 3, 41-48; Shively, M.G., Jones, C., & De Cecco, J.P. (1983-1984). Research on sexual orientation: Definitions and methods. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 9, 127-136.) (Keywords: Military, Personnel, Sex.