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Dr. Paul Vasey's gender studies research featured in National Geographic magazine, documentary

While popular culture is just beginning to wrestle with questions surrounding transgender individuals, the University of Lethbridge's Dr. Paul Vasey has been at the forefront of research in these areas for the better part of 15 years. It's no wonder then that National Geographic sought his expertise when putting together its [January magazine](#) focused on gender issues and that he'd be central to the accompanying documentary, [Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric](#), to be broadcast Feb. 6, 2017.



"Right now, debate about transgender individuals and their place in society is omnipresent. So, it's not surprising that there's a lot of interest in my work because it takes place in cultures where transgender people are well integrated into mainstream society and not treated as problematic," says Vasey, who heads the U of L's Laboratory of Comparative Sexology. "People from more transphobic places are interested in how those sorts of cultural dynamics work."

It's not the first time Vasey has been sought out by a major media organization for research insight, rather it's just the latest in a long line of international media hits that have included the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Economist*, *TIME*, and *Oprah*, as well as documentaries by *The Nature of Things*, the *Discovery Channel*, and a previous one by *National Geographic's Ultimate Explorer*.

Since 2000, he has conducted research on the development and evolution of female homosexual behavior in free-ranging Japanese monkeys at various sites in Japan. He also studies the development and evolution of male same-sex sexual attraction in humans. Since 2003, Vasey has worked in Samoa with members of the fa'afafine community – feminine, biological males who are recognized as a "third gender."

This research captured the interest of *National Geographic* and late last fall, they flew Vasey to California where he sat down with Couric for a lengthy interview.

“There’s certainly a prestige that comes along with *National Geographic* that might not be associated with a lot of other media, but I never get too excited about these things because it’s my job, it’s work,” he says, adding that Couric was extremely approachable, professional, and well versed on his studies. “I’ve done enough interviews now to know that journalists need me to communicate about what I do in a completely different way than how I would go about communicating with other academics. Some researchers get very up-tight about this, but I’ve learned to relax.”

Vasey says that at one point during the interview Couric turned to the producer and said, “this guy is a sound-bite machine.” “I was happy Katie said that because I felt like I was making everyone’s job easier.”

The basic question Vasey has been attempting to answer for years is that if reproduction is the engine that drives evolution, why engage in non-conceptive sex? And if homosexuality is heritable, but homosexuals are much less likely to produce offspring than heterosexuals, shouldn’t the genes for this trait have died off long ago?

To answer these questions, Vasey has been working with Samoan fa'afafine who are exclusively sexually attracted to masculine adult men. His Samoan research has subsequently led to the establishment of a second field site in Juchitán de Zaragoza, Mexico in 2015 with another third gender group, the *muxe*.

“Everything we’ve done in Samoa we are going to try to replicate in Mexico,” says Vasey. “We want to know, are the results we’re getting in Samoa culturally specific or do they generalize to other very distantly related cultures?”

Over the years, Vasey’s work has been recognized through awards, grants from all three tri-council agencies, and the attention and respect of his peers in the sexual orientation research community. In 2015, the Vasey hosted the *Puzzle of Sexual Orientation* conference on the U of L campus, attracting over 50 of the world’s leading authorities on sexual orientation to campus. He plans to hold the next one at the U of L in 2020.

By then, Vasey’s work will have evolved as he now seeks to go beyond examining why third gender males exist to how these males impact the heterosexual community.

“In the next 10 years of my career, I want to turn things around a bit and ask, ‘What are the consequences for heterosexual mating systems of having third gender males in the sexual or social environment?’” he asks. “What are the consequences for men’s mating psychology, and what are the consequences for women’s mating psychology?”

As those answers emerge, it is likely Vasey will be in the spotlight once again.

To view online: <http://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/vasey's-gender-studies-research-featured-national-geographic-magazine-documentary>

January issue of *National Geographic*:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/01/how-science-helps-us-understand-gender-identity/>

Trailer for *Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y93MsRaC6Zw>

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