

# Beyond Tolerance: Gays, Lesbians and Bisexuals on Campus

## I. Awareness

This content area will focus on personal awareness of the participant and provide opportunities to take inventory of their own myths, missing information, stereotypes, etc. about people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Investigation of the cycle of socialization to identify how we learned homophobic attitudes and behaviors. Initial exploration of the connection of gender role stereotypes and homophobia/biphobia and how the participants' own actions and inactions contribute to creating and maintaining homophobic/ biphobic/ heterosexist environments.

Program: **15 Questions about Lesbians and Gay Men**

Purpose: This list of questions and answers was compiled by the women at the Lesbian Resource Center, in the University YWCA in Seattle. They are questions commonly asked at speaking engagements. Accompanying many questions are the myths or stereotypes which most of us have heard or believed at some point, and which serve as the basis for the bibliography at the end.

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### 1. What Causes Homosexuality?

There are many, many MYTHS and stereotypes associated with this question. These can be divided into a couple of categories, as follows:

- a) The family-related MYTHS: That all lesbians and gay men come from families that are unstable, probably broken, and at best did not offer the proper love and support; That all lesbians and gay men have submissive mothers and dominant fathers; That lesbians were all tomboys as children and gay men were all sissies.
- b) MYTHS related to sexuality: That all lesbians and gay men experience some sort of sexual trauma or rape at a young age; That all lesbians and gay men are scared of sexual relations with the opposite sex; That all lesbians and gay men were seduced by gay adults when they were children; that lesbians and gay men choose same-sex relations because they are not attracted to the opposite sex.
- c) MYTHS: That lesbians and male homosexuality results from some physical or genetic deformity or abnormality.

All of these myths are theories which have proposed at one time or another to "prove" the cause of homosexuality. No studies have shown conclusive evidence to support any of them. Like their heterosexual counterparts, lesbians and gay men come from all kinds of family backgrounds... from the most stable, loving environment to the most precarious. Their chromosomal/genetic structure are the same as those of heterosexuals, as are hormonal balances. Their behavior patterns and sexual experiences as children can be categorized. Their attitudes toward and fears of the opposite sex are as broad and as narrow as those of heterosexuals toward the same sex. In short, no theory of causality is sound. It is important to consider, when asking this question, why we don't focus on research into this broad range of sexual preference causation, rather than isolating homosexuality. Recent studies of sexual preference indicate that an individual's sexual orientation is determined before the early grade school years are over; but, again, no factor of causality can be isolated.

2. How Many Lesbians and Gay Men are there in our Society?

According to the Kinsey Institute statistics from the early 50's, an average of 10% of the adult population in the United States are predominantly homosexual throughout their adult lives. Recent studies indicate that Kinsey's statistics are, if anything, on the low side. It should be noted that such statistics are very difficult to calculate since much of the population is neither exclusively homosexual or exclusively heterosexual (see question #3).

3. Once You are Gay, are you Always Gay? Can you Change Your Sexual Preferences?

First of all, it is important to note that people in our society cover a broad range on a continuum of sexual preference or orientation. According to Kinsey's studies, a very small percentage of people are exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, with a larger percentage being exclusively heterosexual. Between those two, there are a large percentage of people who experience attractions to both sexes all their lives (which they may or may not choose to act on) or who identify as "straight" at some points in their lives and as "gay" at others. This reality makes dealing with the question, "Can you change your sexual preference?" very difficult. However, surveys of psychiatrists show that attempts to "convert" lesbians and gay men to heterosexuality have met with a very high incidence of defeat. As National Institutes of Mental Health studies (1960) show, homosexual behavior is as deeply motivated as heterosexual behavior and has not been "cured" even by the harshest punishments. Many lesbians and gay men, convinced by the dominant culture that their sexual preference is somehow "wrong" have taken their own lives, spent thousands of dollars trying to change, only to find that the way they can truly find health and happiness is to accept themselves as they are and to realize that their way of life may not be that of the majority, but that it is just as healthy and valid.

4. Isn't Homosexuality Unnatural?

Many people feel that homosexuality is "unnatural," but studies have shown conclusively that homosexual behavior exists in most species of animals and in all human cultures throughout history. Ford and Beach, two anthropologists, surveyed 75 contemporary societies and found that 64% saw homosexual behavior as normal and socially acceptable. There were also a significant number of cultures in which homosexual behavior was experienced by up to 100% of the population. It is only in cultures like our own, with strong antihomosexual taboos, that exclusive heterosexuality is common. The behavior of the minority is no more "unnatural" simply because it is not the majority behavior. We do not consider left-handedness, for instance, an unnatural behavior (though some cultures do, and ours used to) just because most people are right-handed.

7. Is it Possible for Lesbians or Gay Men to Develop Long-term Stable Relationships?

There is a common MYTH that all lesbians and gay men are far more promiscuous than their heterosexual counterparts and seldom, if ever, form long-term, love relationships.

Few studies have been done in this area, but the frequency of long-lasting, even lifelong relationships between lesbians and between gay men is much higher than is generally believed. Given the fact that short-term relationships are more and more common in our society in general (consider the rising divorce rate) and given the strain that any lesbian or gay man is under in a long-term relationship (difficulty in finding living space or good jobs, taboo against showing affection in public, social unacceptance of gay couples attending functions, family gatherings, etc., together) it is surprising that there are as many long-term relationships as there are. It should be noted that lesbians and gay men, just like heterosexual women and men, vary greatly in their desires and motivations toward finding long-term love relationships.

8. Don't Lesbians and Gay Men Molest Children?

The MYTH related to this question is that lesbians and gay men prefer sex with children.

Research indicates that child molesters are most often heterosexual males and are often family members and friends of the family. In assaults on children, 99% of the offenders are male, and 93% of the victims are females. Sexual abuse of children, particularly incest, is a serious problem and more extensive than most of us every thought possible. But the problem is not caused by lesbians and gay men; rather, most often it is by heterosexual men in a family setting.

9. Do Gay Men and Lesbians "Recruit" Children?

The MYTH related to this question is that lesbians and gay men are biologically incapable of reproducing, so they have to "recruit."

The fact that a large percentage of lesbians and gay men are parents indicates that this MYTH has no basis in fact. There is, furthermore, no evidence to indicate that gay men or lesbians are in any way interested in "recruiting" children or adults to share their sexual orientation. On the contrary, most gay people understand quite well that a particular sexual orientation is not something anyone can be persuaded to adopt; they have learned this lesson well as the heterosexual majority in our society has tried to convince them to change their own sexual orientation. Those who must "recruit" others to their own way of life

display an insecurity which does not allow them to accept anyone different from themselves. This insecurity can be found both in some heterosexuals and in some lesbians and gay men, but that does not mean it is characteristic of either sexual orientation.

10. Don't All Lesbians Hate Men and All Gay Men Hate Women?

This is a very commonly-held belief, and a question which we often encounter. Following the logic of this question, it would be necessary to assume that all heterosexual women hate other women and all heterosexual men hate other men. To assume that one hates half of the population because one is not sexually attracted to them is ridiculous – for lesbians and gay men as well as for heterosexuals. (Following this logic even further, one who leads a life of celibacy must hate all people.) Those lesbians and gay men who “hate” the opposite sex are not more the norm than heterosexual men or women who “hate” their own sex.

11. Aren't Lesbians Trying to be Men and Gay Men Trying to be Women?

The MYTH involved here is that lesbians and gay men dress in the clothes and behave like the opposite sex.

No one can tell who is or who isn't a lesbian or gay man by appearance or behavior alone. There are gay men who are football players, airline pilots, doctors, secretaries, politicians, welders, artists, and farmers ... just as there are lesbians who are models, laborers, grandmothers, doctors, scientists, and sorority women. For the most part, these women and men are indistinguishable from their colleagues, friends, and neighbors. There are, of course, some lesbians and gay men who adopted mannerisms, styles of dress, and patterns of behavior which they believe are expected of them as gay people. But oftentimes, the gentle, nonaggressive male or the independent, career-oriented female is not a homosexual, but rather a human being who has stepped beyond the socially-imposed role restraints assigned to her or his sex.

12. In Gay Relationships, Doesn't One Person Play the Husband and the Other Wife?

The MYTH involved here is that lesbians and gay men are attempting to imitate heterosexual relationships, and the assumption is that heterosexual relationships always include one dominant partner and one submissive partner.

This is an intriguing issue, since sex roles in our society are changing for many people – gay and heterosexual. The assumption that heterosexual couples always consist of a dominant husband and a submissive wife is clearly not valid. Research by Masters and Johnson shows definitively that the concept of women as naturally passive and man as naturally active sexually, is untrue, and that few

heterosexual couples today confine themselves to these traditional sexual roles. Many heterosexual couples are trying to define new relationships in which there is a basis of equality in all areas of life, rather than adopting dominant and submissive roles. Likewise, "role-playing" relationships among lesbians and among gay men – relationships in which one "plays" the dominant role and one the submissive role – are less and less common as the society at large questions the validity of such sex role stereotypes. What was common twenty years ago is rare today. It should be noted that for both gay and heterosexual couples who are trying to build relationships as a basis of complete equality of both partners, there are very few role models to look to. This "new" kind of relationship is not a very difficult process and an exciting challenge.

13. Are There any Differences Between Lesbians and Gay Men?

Of course, it is a well known fact that women and men are raised differently in this society. The activities and lives of women are considered so much less important than those of men that even the word used to describe lesbians and gay men is a word which is really descriptive of men – "homosexual." The laws which govern sexual conduct among adults are primarily concerned with male sexual activities, and the word "homosexual" conjures up, for most people, images of stereotypical gay men with women not thought of at all, or only as an afterthought. Some inconclusive studies have indicated that lesbians tend to seek long-term relationships more than do gay men. However, the Kinsey studies show that 71% of lesbian women and 51% of gay men limit their sexual experience to no more than one or two partners in a lifetime. This figure is almost exactly the same breakdown as for heterosexual men and women. In short, the differences between lesbians and gay men are essentially the same differences as those between heterosexual women and heterosexual men.

14. Don't all Lesbians and Gay Men Hang Around Bars Most of the Time?

The MYTH here is that all lesbians and gay men are alcoholics or drug addicts and are basically unhappy; and, that there are no places for lesbians and gay men to meet each other except in bars.

It is generally whispered that all sexual minority people live their lives saturated with alcohol, in dens of opium, and "burn out" by the age of 30. One study, however, by Fifield of Los Angeles County, indicates that 25-35% of the urban gay population abuses alcohol and that, of that number, only 10% are at crisis stage. It is important to remember that the gay bar has long served as the community center for gay people and that this situation has occurred because our society made it very difficult for lesbians and gay men to congregate socially any place else. Certainly there are lesbians and gay men who are unhappy or who are alcoholics or drug addicts, but it is doubtful that their numbers are

proportionately higher than those for the general population. With the variety of pressures applied to lesbians and gay men by a hostile society, it is perhaps surprising that there aren't more alcoholics and drug addicts among them. Researchers who have studied lesbians and gay men in the general population have discovered that the majority of these people are as psychologically healthy as their heterosexual counterparts. As more and more social outlets become available to the gay community, fewer members of the community have to turn to alcohol and drugs to cover their loneliness and lack of self-esteem, because the loneliness disappears and the self-esteem is raised.

15. Isn't Homosexuality a Sign of the Decline of the Society?

The two MYTHS associated with this question are: 1) There are a lot more lesbians and gay men in American society now than every before, and that this coincides with a general moral decline; and 2) That all lesbians and gay men are Communists and social misfits.

It is commonly believed that "rampant homosexuality" has accompanied the fall of such great civilizations as the Roman Empire. However, no reputable historian has seriously considered this theory since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Some great civilizations, such as the Persian Empire have declined in spite of strong anti-homosexual taboos. Some cultures where homosexuality has been accepted (like certain American Indian and African tribes) have neither risen to nor fallen from what is traditionally called "greatness." Homosexuality has thrived during the heights of Periclean Greece, Renaissance Italy, and Medieval Japan. And with the case of the Roman Empire, the decline of the civilization was accompanied by an increase in anti-homosexual restrictions, not an increase in acceptance.

The argument that homosexuality is socially destructive comes out of the notion that if everyone were exclusively homosexual, the human race would die out. (See question #4). It should be noted here that many people in our society (including those in religious orders) choose a life of celibacy, but no one proposes that because of them, the species is going to disappear. Our notions of the socially destructive nature of homosexuality date back to such groups as the ancient Hebrews, who could not allow for non-procreative sexual preference because of the importance of increasing the tribal population. Today these restrictions are retained even though the reasons for them no longer exist. And our society enforces them with a kind of mania – through socially sanctioned discrimination and hostility. Lesbians and gay men have been used as scapegoats, as have other minority groups. Hitler exterminated 200,000 gay people along with Jews and other "inferior breeds" and "social misfits." In this country, during the McCarthy era of the '50's, lesbians and gay men all over the country were labeled "Communists" and imprisoned. It is interesting to note that homosexuality is associated with Communism in this country and with the decadence of Capitalism

in the repressive social structure of current day USSR. We should posit that it is this kind of rampant discrimination and harassment of a minority group which is socially destructive.

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Partial Bibliography: *20 Questions*, Gay Activist Alliance, New York; *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, Ford and Reach; *Final Report of the Task Force on Homosexuality*, Evelyn Hooker, et. Al., for the National Institute of Mental Health; *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, Weinburg; *Lesbian/Woman*, Martin and Lyon; *Woman Plus Woman*, Klatch; *The Gay Mystique*, Fisher; *Time for Consent: A Christian's Approach to Homosexuality*, Pittenger.