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Homophobia, Heterosexism and Modern Intolerance

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Racism, sexism, and ageism are all intolerable forms of discrimination. They are not tolerated in any form and are met with outright criticism. It was not until 1973 that the American Psychological Society removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, and homosexuals continue to experience both overt and covert forms of discrimination. Homosexuality in the United States remains culturally invisible because homosexuals that are visible are subject to attacks from society (Herek, 2007). The label gay or lesbian leads many people to reduce the value of the person almost immediately (Basset, van Niekelen-Kuyper, Johnson, Miller, Carter, & Grimm, 2005). The ease with which gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT) people can blend in with society leads them to live secret lives where they only display portions of their true selves, but by hiding they are avoiding prejudices. The reduction of prejudice and eventual universal acceptance of GLBT individuals is an issue that our society struggles to find a solution to.

In the United States heterosexism has become an institutionalized form of prejudice. The government has taken measures to prevent homosexuals from marrying, limit their adoption options, and restrict them from benefits that most married couples take for granted. Institutional heterosexism is defined as “societal-level ideologies and patterns of institutionalized oppression of nonheterosexual people” (Moradi, van den Berg, & Epting, 2006, p. 57). There is also a ban against lesbian and gay military personnel, no legal protection from discrimination in the workplace, housing or other services. Possibly the most institutionalized form of discrimination against GLBTs is the existence of anti-sodomy laws in about one third of all US states (Herek,

2007). The institutionalization of heterosexism in the United States has come about as a result of increased focus from conservatives and religious leaders since the late 1980s. The institutionalization of heterosexism has made anti-gay behaviors and attitudes particularly unique when compared to other forms of prejudice. Heterosexism is more pervasive and more likely to be overtly stressed than any other form of prejudice against any other minority group. This does not mean that heterosexism cannot be stopped, but first possible causes must be identified.

Heterosexism is normative and pervasive within the US, and is not often met with loud public outcries (Basset et al, 2005). The detrimental effects that these complacencies have on the future of the US social institution are humongous. Stereotypes and prejudice are believed to be a result of a combination between direct (actual contact) and indirect (parents, teachers, and students). Indirect contact or intergroup contact successfully changes beliefs and attitudes. The tendency for intergroup interactions to affect behavioral change may be due to the need to conform to intergroup norms (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). Therefore, attitudes within a particular group may be formed as a result of little to no contact with the stereotyped out-group. Furthermore, Sechrist goes on to describe the effects that perceived intergroup norms have on attitude formation. Once a person perceives that the entire group is in consensus on a particular topic their beliefs are strengthened. Interventions dealing with prejudice should therefore rely on providing accurate information and modifying negative beliefs (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). Once the beliefs and attitudes change within the group, the group will begin to conform to the new standards of respecting differences and learning to tolerate them.

Another theory that also involves conformity also seeks to explain why heterosexism in the US is so pervasive is the theory of pluralistic ignorance. Bowen and Bourgeois (2001) define

pluralistic ignorance as “the tendency to believe that others’ attitudes are more negative or positive than one’s own” (p. 92). This theory also explains the spread of prejudice and discrimination within a group. Pluralistic ignorance combined with the need to conform leads to a behavioral change in order to comply with the perceived norms of the group. It has been found that college students typically believed that other students were more in favor of alcohol use than they were (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001). As a result students would consume more alcohol in order to conform to a perceived norm that does not actually exist. Pluralistic ignorance can also be used to explain heterosexism. Where a person does not necessarily hold anti-gay beliefs, but their belief that the others around them do may lead them to express prejudice. Their beliefs may very well be proliferated by the media and the existence of institutionalized heterosexism.

Bowen and Bourgeois (2001) also recommend another explanation for the proliferation of heterosexism. Dynamic Social Impact Theory (DSIT) provides an explanation for the transmission of attitudes within a group setting (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001). “According to DSIT, group attitudes shift as a function of the strength, immediacy, and number of people in the group that hold different views” (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001, p. 92). DSIT depends on proximity and likeness, group members are more likely to come into contact with and interact with people who are closer and more similar to themselves. However, each person also has contact with a unique set of individuals. DSIT suggests that once an idea or belief infiltrates a group system it will then proliferate and spread to other members of the group as long as they are both in close proximity to and similar to the persons spreading the attitude. What DSIT causes is a grouping of people with similar beliefs and attitudes which can be manipulated by changing a few individual’s beliefs within the system. If one person with a group system were to have prolonged

exposure to a GLBT individual coupled with education about GLBT individuals that reduced their prejudice, DSIT suggests that this reduction in prejudice should spread to the rest of the group.

While the causes of heterosexism may remain unclear, it is clear that prejudice can be restricted through increased education about and contact with GLBT individuals. Bowen and Bourgeois (2001) found that increasing close cooperative contact with GLBT individuals is one way to reduce prejudice against GLBTs (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001). It has also been found that interventions which included positive contact and opportunities to have discussion sessions with GLBT individuals significantly decrease anti-gay attitudes (Moradi et al, 2006). However, Dasgupta (2006) believes that contact is not enough, but when coupled with increased education levels it can have significant effects. When a low level of education is present there is no motivation to control negative attitudes that may be spontaneously activated. Motivation to control negative attitudes increases at increased education levels. Therefore, increased education leads to a decrease in the expression of negative attitudes (Dasgupta & Rivera, 2006). Similarly other researchers have found that embracing biological explanations for homosexuality, attending human sexuality classes, listening to a GLBT speaker, attending a GLBT peer panel, and watching films that portray GLBTs in a positive way reduce prejudice (Basset et al, 2005).

Heterosexism and anti-gay attitudes lead GLBT youths to face many hardships. They are five times more likely to drop out of school and 28% of those say that they were forced to drop out. GLBT youth have a suicide rate that is four times higher than that of heterosexual youth, and 42% of homeless youth are homosexual (National Organization for Women, 2006). GLBT adults

also experience huge setbacks. Lesbians earn 14% less than their heterosexual counterparts, even after their heterosexual counterparts already earn less than males.

Diversity Course

In accordance to our prejudice intervention, we have created a 100-level college course in which college students have the opportunity to further their knowledge about heterosexism and its implications on our society. We feel that it is important to intervene at the college level because although it would be useful to set up an intervention for a younger demographic, it would be very difficult to implement a program on heterosexism in a K-12 system. Also college students tend to be ready to learn and quite accepting of new information, hence the main reason they are attending college. It would be appropriate to give students the option of one out of three cultural diversity courses (in which they must choose one to fulfill the requirement) being either a course pertaining to racism, a course pertaining to sexism or finally the one that will be focused on here, a course pertaining to heterosexism. The reason for making the cultural diversity fulfillment a requirement is because although it has been shown that courses on homosexuality have been helpful in improving attitudes, it is unknown as to what type of student is signing up for the course, it would make sense that these students that choose to take a cultural diversity course are more open-minded to the subject at hand and more willing to change their attitudes (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001). However, we think that it would be useful that if a student were to display any form of anti-gay prejudice on campus, for example overtly expressing hate or prejudice towards any GLBT member of the university (student, faculty or staff), then he/she should be required to take the heterosexism course (rather than giving them a choice of either the heterosexism, racism or sexism course), and if any student were to display and form of racism

then he/she should have to take the racism course and of course if anyone were to express any form of sexism then he/she would be required to take the sexism course.

This cultural diversity course on heterosexism will be a 4-credit course that lasts for the typical duration of 18 weeks (a full spring/fall semester). The main portion of the class, three hours per week, will be devoted to lecture, reading, in-class discussions, group assignments, tests and quizzes. The remaining credit hour will be devoted to a service-learning project in which the students will be required to participate in some form of community interaction that will expose them to the GLBT population and give them a chance to positively interact with one another. This project may involve becoming a part of a local or school organization that supports GLBTs for example, Shippensburg University's S.A.L.E organization (Students Advocating Lifestyle Equality) or larger organizations such as PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Organizations such as these partake in many localized as well as national activities that the students in this course would be able to do as a part of their service learning projects. The service-learning project will be assigned at the beginning of the semester, each student will have a different project and they will all be required to attend their community interaction for an hour per week, then at the end of the semester they will write a paper and give a formal presentation to the class informing everyone of their experiences and/or enlightenments that may have occurred during their hours.

Service Learning Project

It may come into question as to why a service-learning project, which adds an extra credit hour, should be implemented when a 3-credit course is already being fulfilled. The reasoning of the importance of giving the students an opportunity such as this can be explained by Allport's

contact hypothesis. The contact hypothesis basically states that in order to properly decrease negative beliefs and/or attitudes towards an out-group (GLBTs) contact alone may not be sufficient (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001). In other words although in the service-learning project, the students may be in contact with GLBTs, if they are not doing more than just being in contact with them, then there may be no hope for an intervention. Bowen & Bourgeois (2001) state that other researchers have come up with a list of requirements that should be met in order to help reduce these negative attitudes towards GLBTs and we propose to implement them in the service-learning project. They are as follows, “contact reduced negative attitudes (a) only when interactions between members were cooperative rather than competitive, (b) when in-group and out-group members relied on each other to complete a task, and (c) when contact was supported by sanctioned authority” (p. 91). When applied to the project, we will make it known that at the community interactions, the students will be properly supervised and they will be working cooperatively with GLBT students to complete tasks (i.e. working collaboratively with members of PFLAG or S.A.L.E. at a fundraiser or planned activity), this option makes it so that they must rely on one another to finish the task.

Similar to Allport’s contact hypothesis is the general notion of comfort. According to Bowen & Bourgeois (2001), in their study with college students and their attitudes toward GLBT students, he found that students who lived in the same dormitories as these GLBT students reported much more positive attitudes toward them, in turn making it appropriate to conclude that the more comfortable one is around GLBT students the less likely they are to hold prejudices against them. With the service-learning project, the students will have the opportunity to grow

more comfortable around people who are different than themselves which we hope will cause them to hold more positive attitudes toward them.

With discussing attitude change it is important to note that individuals who hold more of an egalitarian belief system tend to have motivation to control the biases against individuals whose gender roles are non-conforming (Dasgupta & Rivera, 2006). This makes it clear that changing individuals' attitudes toward GLBTs is a necessity in order to begin to change their actions. In participating in the cultural diversity course as well as the service-learning project, it is hypothesized that the enrolled students will undergo attitude changes after learning about and interacting with GLBTs, hopefully as they all move toward a more egalitarian belief system.

Bowen & Bourgeois (2001) believe that a big part of developing efficient interventions is by correcting any misperceptions about the group that is being prejudiced against. Bowen also states that discussion groups may be the way to go in forming an intervention that helps to correct these misperceptions. This is why in our cultural diversity course, it will be expected of the students to participate in class discussions as well as small group discussions, this may allow for any common misperceptions to be brought up in class so that everyone may understand why the prejudiced group (GLBT) is being misperceived and what can be done about it.

In a study done by Nelson and Krieger (1997), they found that students who had a chance to openly interact with and have a question-discussion forum with GLBT students had significantly lower anti-GLBT attitudes than did students who did not have that opportunity (Moradi et al, 2006). In the service-learning project portion of the class, students will be required to interact weekly with GLBTs, within this interaction they will have the opportunity to

hold a discussion forum with one another in which they can openly discuss and ask questions pertaining to any aspect of heterosexism.

Some researchers believe that a major cause of anti-GLBT attitudes and prejudice is the presence of a threat, in this case GLBT threat. It is also believed that by reducing this GLBT threat, in turn the anti-GLBT attitudes will be reduced, and by providing positive as well as non-threatening opportunities to interact with gays, lesbians, bisexuals and/or transgendered individuals might reduce the GLBT threat as well as the negative attitudes and prejudice (Moradi et al, 2006). Dasgupta & Rivera (2006) feel as though individuals who endorse traditional beliefs are more likely to view GLBTs as threatening. Therefore, in combining the theories of all of the authors mentioned above, the students who participate in our cultural diversity course should have an opportunity to interact in a non-threatening way with GLBTs in order to move their beliefs to a more egalitarian style.

In addition to reducing overall threat for each individual, a diversity course dealing with GLBT issues will also encourage individuals to spread their new knowledge to others they come into contact with. DSIT suggests that once pro-GLBT beliefs enter a group that group will then begin to shift its overall attitudes. Therefore a diversity course dealing with these issues will not only affect each individual student taking the course, but will also affect those they come into contact with. In addition to causing more acceptances of positive beliefs, the realization that not everyone feels compelled to display anti-gay beliefs may alter some participant's behavior. According to pluralistic ignorance, people generally believe that others have a more negative outlook than they themselves do. As a result their behavior may actually be more biased than

their actual beliefs and feelings. With increased education about GLBT issues this may also cease to exist.

When dealing with those individuals who have openly expressed anti-gay discrimination at school or in the community, it is appropriate to approach them much more delicately. As mentioned before, individuals who sign up for cultural diversity courses tend to be more open-minded than those who refuse to sign up or those who express prejudice. It is important to mention that these individuals who hold high levels of anti-gay attitudes also have very high levels of GLBT threat. So, their intervention must include an environment that calmly decreases anxiety by taking small and gradual steps for them to feel less threatened (Moradi et al, 2006).

With the extensive amount of research done in the area of heterosexism and anti-GLBT prejudice, it is clear that there is a need for an intervention. In a society so filled with hatred toward out-groups, it is only appropriate that someone take a stand against all the violence that is occurring now as well as that may occur in the future. The only way that this may be possible is if intervention programs such as the one described here, a diversity course that provides an opportunity for students to reach out and work cooperatively with the minority at hand, are implemented around the country or even around the world.

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