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Ignorance is Bliss? Undergraduate Students and Lesbian and Gay Culture

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The question was asked of the crowd as to where the significance of the pink triangle came from with-in the gay community. To my surprise, no one in the group could give me the answer, including those that are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This was not so much a shock as a disappointment to me and undoubtedly to the memory of all those people whom [sic] perished wearing a pink triangle. (Wilcox, 2001, p.4)

I was recently surfing the web for some teaching material, when I came across an article written by Peter Wilcox, and published in Flagship (The professional publication of the National Gay and Lesbian Committee of the Fire Brigades Union) called *Mystery of the Pink Triangle: Triangle of Eugenic Utopia*. Reading the article, the quote above caught my attention. Many times I have stood in front of classes of undergraduates who react with horror when I tell them in a lecture on sexualities that until 1973, homosexuality was considered a diagnosable mental illness. Similarly, they act surprised in seminars when we discuss issues of prejudice and discrimination and they find out that same-sex couples cannot legally marry, or that we are not legally protected from discrimination in the workplace. Although our students are drawn from diverse social backgrounds, within the relatively sheltered culture of the university, they appear to believe that lesbians and gay men have more or less achieved equality with heterosexuals, after all, people who express homophobic sentiments are few and far between – in their minds, simply old-fashioned or bigoted.

I am not entirely surprised by their apparent ignorance about lesbian and gay issues, after all most of them are under 25 (cf. “Generation Y2K”, 2000), and probably too young to remember the gay liberation movement; most identify as heterosexual; most do not consider themselves feminists (54% of the present sample); and perhaps more importantly, a sizeable

proportion do not see lesbian and gay issues as anything to do with them (see Ellis, 2002; Ellis, under consideration). Nevertheless, just as one would expect to acquire some knowledge about other cultures, simply by living in the same communities as those people, one would expect people to acquire at least some knowledge of lesbian and gay issues, simply by living and working in a society where gay men and lesbians comprise about 10% of the population. This should especially be the case given the alleged increased visibility of lesbians and gay men within British society. Thinking about these issues led me to wonder just how much my students know about lesbian and gay culture and history. To find out, I undertook a short survey of the students I currently teach.

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of 101 undergraduate students at a large 'new' university in The Midlands. The sample predominantly comprised psychology students, and the balance were taking degrees in Applied Social Studies (e.g. Sociology, Social Policy, Law, and generic Social Studies). Most ($n = 74$) were year two students, and the remainder ($N = 27$) were year three students. As would be expected from a sample taken from the social sciences, most were young (92% were aged 17-24), female (88%), and heterosexual (96%). One respondent self-identified as a gay male, one as a lesbian, one as bisexual (female), and one as 'unsure'. Ethnic minority students were underrepresented in the sample, with 98% of respondents identifying as 'white'.

The Questionnaire

A short open-response questionnaire was developed for this study. The substantive part of the questionnaire comprised eight questions asking about specific lesbian and gay places, organisations or symbols (e.g. What is the Albert Kennedy Trust? What does the pink triangle symbolise? What is Section 28?). Questions were chosen to represent a range of lesbian and

gay general knowledge. The second section of the questionnaire comprised tick-box response items asking participants for information about themselves (e.g. sex, age, ethnic identity, and sexual identity).

Procedure

Students were approached in the final lecture session of Social Psychology (Year 2) and Adult Development (Year 3) and volunteers requested to complete an anonymous questionnaire for a research study that I was undertaking. The questionnaires were completed and collected (in a makeshift postbox) prior to the lecture beginning. Students were told that the questionnaire asked about general knowledge, and that they should answer as many questions as they were able. Written instructions on the questionnaire explained what the purpose of the study was, and gave instructions for completion. Students were given 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Once all completed questionnaires had been collected, students were debriefed, and informed that the questionnaire was about lesbian and gay general knowledge. Answers to the questions were made available to the students electronically, after questionnaires had been collected from both groups. In order to prepare for the data analysis, responses to each question were collated into a grid. Owing to the large number of “don’t know” responses, summarising the findings was relatively straight-forward. Data from the second section was collated in SPSS and descriptive analyses run to summarise the characteristics of the sample.

Results

Lesbian and Gay Symbols

Students were asked about two gay symbols: the pink triangle and the labrys. The pink triangle, now widely adopted by the gay movement, originated from the Nazi concentration camps where it was used to distinguish gay persons in the camps from other groups (each of which had their own coloured triangle). The labrys is a double-headed axe commonly used in

in ancient matriarchal societies as a weapon and harvesting tool. Today it is one of the symbols associated with the lesbian movement, and is a lesbian and feminist symbol of strength and self-sufficiency. (see <http://www.cara-friend.org.uk/glyni/queer/symbols.html> for explanations of a wide range of gay symbols).

When asked ‘what does a pink triangle symbolise?’ 65 respondents wrote "don't know". Only one student (heterosexual male) gave a near correct response stating that it “originates from gay Jews in WWII and is now a symbol of gay pride”. Three others (two heterosexual females and one heterosexual male) identified it as a symbol of “gay pride”. While many knew it had something to do with lesbians/gay men, they were not sure what its significance was. One student thought it was to do with fire. In addition, only one student (heterosexual female, 35-44) stated that the labrys symbolises “female sexual organs” (this is one reading of the symbol). However, no student described it as a double-headed axe, or as a lesbian symbol, and 95 students responded "don't know".

Lesbian and Gay Organisations

The questionnaire asked students about two organisations. The first of these was The Albert Kennedy Trust, an organisation working with homeless gay and lesbian youth in Manchester and London (see <http://www.akt.org.uk>). Stonewall is the national organisation, which lobbies for lesbian and gay civil rights (see <http://www.stonewall.org.uk>).

Responses to the questionnaire indicated that knowledge of gay organisations was also extremely poor. In answer to the question "what is the Albert Kennedy Trust?", 82 stated that they did not know. One student (heterosexual female, 17-24) identified the Albert Kennedy Trust as a “trust for gay people coming out”, another (bisexual female, 17-24) as “something to do with AIDS/HIV – help and support for sufferers”, the latter apparently confusing it with the Terence Higgins Trust. Three thought it was a cancer charity and two a

male rape victims organisation. Although I did not expect many students to have heard of the Albert Kennedy Trust, I did expect most to have heard of Stonewall, as they have a very public profile. However, when asked "what is Stonewall?" two students identified it as "a nationwide organisation dedicated to the promotion of gay issues" (bisexual female, 17-24) and "a gay rights organisation" (heterosexual female, 35-44), whilst 76 stated that they did not know what Stonewall is. Furthermore, several students wrote that Stonewall was an ancient monument or wall, two thought it was a prison, and one claimed that it "prevents you from accessing porn on the net", obviously confusing Stonewall with a 'firewall'!

Places with Lesbian or Gay Connections

Students were asked three questions about places with lesbian and/or gay connections: (1) Where is/was the Stonewall Inn and what is its historical significance? (2) What is the Homomonument and where is it? and (3) What is Greenham Common famous for?

Knowledge of historical places with lesbian and/or gay connections, was also rather poor, with 88 respondents (Stonewall Inn) and 84 respondents (Homomonument) responding "don't know". No respondent had heard of the Stonewall Inn, the birthplace of the lesbian and gay liberation movement (as a specific political movement), or knew where it was. Three students (all heterosexual females aged 17-24) identified the Homomonument as "a monument symbolising gay rights", and one (heterosexual male, 35-44) "a monument to those who have died because of their sexuality at the hands of others". Whilst these answers are partially correct, the monument is actually dedicated to the past, present and future struggles of gay liberation, and is the only gay related monument which is not solely a testament to gay victims of AIDS or the holocaust. The Homomonument is in Amsterdam – a number of my students thought (guessed?) it was in London, Brighton, Manchester, or the USA!

I also asked 'what is Greenham Common famous for?'. Although not strictly a lesbian historical place, it is often associated with lesbian feminism. Seven students identified it as famous for "women protesting against nuclear weapons". Although two students claimed it was famous for "lesbians", many claimed it was famous for rent boys, cottaging, a meeting point for gay males, and the arrest of an MP for gay sex. To my knowledge Greenham Common is associated with none of these things – It is probable that students were confusing it with Clapham Common, famous for an 'incident' of alleged gay sex involving former Welsh Secretary Ron Davies. A further 66 students wrote "don't know" in response to this question.

Section 28

Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988¹ (the law referred to here) states that a local authority shall not "intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (Trade Unionists Against Section 28, 1989, p. 27). Since Section 28 had been specifically mentioned on more than one occasion in lectures, I expected most students to have some knowledge of this. In contrast to all the other questions, only 39 students responded "don't know". Twenty-two respondents gave answers that were at least in part correct, in that they referred to teaching/promoting homosexuality in schools (e.g. "Where you can't promote homosexual lifestyles in school"; "summat about not teaching/discussing being homosexual in school"; and "law about lesbians and gays. Includes info on whether teachers and other figures of authority can promote being gay or lesbian as a 'normal' family or relationship").

Although this is commonly how Section 28 is conceptualised, this section of the Local Government Act actually pertains to “local authorities” and not to schools *per se*. Oddly, 15 respondents thought that Section 28 was about the legal age of homosexual sex!

Discussion

I am sure these findings will not come as much of a surprise to anyone, but they are significant for a number of reasons. First, this lack of knowledge limits our ability as lesbians and gay men to recognise each other in a world where we are too often invisible, whether we choose to be so or not. Being able to recognise other lesbians and gay men by visible symbols is therefore fairly important for organising as a community. Second, the lessons learned by many cultural and ethnic communities around the world teach us that if the knowledge is not passed on, it becomes lost, and the whole culture is put in jeopardy. This is the philosophy on which total immersion language programmes are based. It is not that long ago that lesbian feminists began to reclaim lesbian history and culture. We need to preserve lesbian and gay culture and history before it too becomes lost.

Perhaps most importantly though, a knowledge of lesbian and gay culture among wider society is extremely important in attempting to secure our claim to recognition within human rights discourse. To be recognised for human rights, a group needs to be viewed as a coherent social group with a shared culture (hence the inclusion of race, religion and political opinion as explicitly stated categories in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and the exclusion of age, disability and sexual orientation as specifically mentioned categories). We therefore need to be seen as having a coherent history and culture. Although I simply surveyed a small and non-representative sample of university students, if these levels of ignorance about lesbian and gay history and culture are more widespread than simply this very localised sample, then our claim is in jeopardy. This degree of ignorance reinforces our

inequality, reduces our identities to simply a matter of sexual preference or practice, and denying us the ability to be seen as a culture in our own right. A culture worthy of the same rights as any other group within society.

Notes

¹ Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 is due to be repealed.

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