

A bridge too far?

In his series of exchanges with fellow author Laurence Thomas, the American philosopher Michael Levin described his opposition to the introduction of legislation that would seek to criminalise acts of violence perpetrated against lesbians and gay men as 'a protest' against the creation of 'protections for homosexuals beyond those afforded Klansmen or Nazis' (Thomas & Levin, 1999, p.169). The central tenet of his argument, a response to Thomas's appeal for equality before the law, is that 'homosexuals enjoy all the rights possessed by heterosexuals'. As he points out, robbing, assaulting or murdering a member of the Klu Klux Klan is as much a crime as robbing, assaulting or murdering a lesbian or gay man. Levin continues: 'Homosexuals, like Nazis may marry members of the opposite sex – they differ only in that Nazis take advantage of this privilege, while homosexuals choose not to' (p.169).



IAN RIVERS, winner of the Society's Award for Promoting Equality of Opportunity 2001, considers the social inclusion of lesbians and gay men.

The essays of Thomas and Levin attempt to demonstrate the binary nature of society's views of sexual orientation. While many of us may be repulsed by the ironic comparison of the Klu Klux Klan or Nazism to homosexuality, Levin is in fact clarifying a sentiment that is often softened to make it more palatable: when it comes to sexual orientation, few of us are willing to compromise. So the first questions I want to ask are these: How do you as an individual view homosexuality? How willing would you be to stand up against those who condemn the very existence of lesbians and gay men?

In the beginning
Objections relating to the extension of those basic rights afforded heterosexuals undoubtedly have their foundation in Scripture where homosexuality is condemned as an abomination. There is no doubt that, within Judaeo-Christian traditions, the Book of Leviticus warns against male homosexuality. But it constitutes only one of many prohibitions in the Old Testament. Indeed, Leviticus makes it clear that punishment will also

follow those who eat pork, rabbit or shellfish, those women who dress in men's garments, those who wear mixed textiles or those who bear tattoos. Indeed, were we to follow the Holiness Code fully how many of us would agree with the following ordinance?

For everyone that curseth his father or his mother shall be surely put to death.
(Leviticus 20:9)

Do we drag rebellious children before temple elders, and stone them as a warning to others who do not listen to their parents? We do not, nor should we ever. Yet this too is an ordinance, just like that relating to homosexuality. Why is it that so many remain steadfast in the adherence to one ordinance while ignoring so many others?

Of course, many of the diverse laws and ordinances that are found in Leviticus have been abandoned in the light of our greater understanding of the world in which we live, our greater understanding of humanity, and our realisation that these guiding rules of observance are both temporally and culturally bound. However,

WEBLINKS

Gay and bisexual male youth suicide problems:
www.virtualcity.com/youthsuicide
National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality: www.narh.com
Gay/Lesbian Politics and Law:
www.indiana.edu/~glbtpol
Healthy Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students Project: www.apa.org/ed/hlgbsrch.html

those most opposed to any recognition of lesbians and gay men point to the condemnations that can be found within the various translations of Deuteronomy, Kings, Ephesians, Romans and Hebrews. Many of these condemnations relate to cultures where Judaism was either not practised or had been abandoned. Scholars have increasingly suggested that words such as 'abomination' and 'unnatural' are rarely used appropriately within revisions of those texts, and should be replaced by terms such as 'ritually improper' (when referring to temple practices) or simply 'unconventional'.

So how should we view homosexuality? Is it in fact no more an aberration than a rebellious adolescent? Is it perhaps time that we look beyond the selective interpretations of biblical text, acknowledging that where love and companionship are willingly offered by equals, such relationships are just and good?

Psychology and sexology: A historical view

For many, opposition to homosexuality is based on the fact that it has no natural function other than companionship and intimacy. It contravenes the laws of nature at the most fundamental level. Darwinian concepts such as adaptation are lost, and even Richard Dawkins would have to acknowledge that homosexuality is no boon to the selfish gene aggressively trying to reproduce itself. Yet, despite the fact that no children are born to a lesbian or gay couple in the strictest sense, we continue to survive and adapt in the face of adversity. To the shame of our profession, we survive despite the continued efforts of colleagues to pathologise or 'cure' this particular expression of human diversity (see Shidlo & Schroeder, 1999; Spitzer, 2001). In the United States members of our own profession offer reparative or conversion therapies to lesbians and gay men who, as psychiatrist Robert Spitzer has noted, are often driven to such therapies because of their inability to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation.

As a historian as well as a social scientist, I enjoy exploring the origin of words and phrases that have significance for us today. Many of us are aware that the identity and behaviour we describe as 'homosexuality' owes its origins to the condition that was known as 'sexual inversion', coined in the 1860s to indicate a sexual desire for one's own sex. But few recall that 'heterosexuality' was the name

ascribed to a sexual perversion more aberrant than homosexuality (Kiernan, 1892; Rivers, 1998). Indeed, until 1934, *Webster's Medical Dictionary* cited 'heterosexuality' as being 'a morbid sexual passion for one of the opposite sex'. This begs the question what trauma or tragedy befell the patient to warrant such a diagnosis?

Based upon the original 1886 version of Krafft-Ebing's tome *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the sexologist James Kiernan records that Krafft-Ebing's classification of the various abnormal manifestations of sexual appetite included a 'sexual perversion proper' known as 'psychical hermaphroditism or heterosexuals' (Kiernan, 1892, p.198) which were described thus:

In these inclinations to both sexes occur as well as to abnormal methods of gratification. (Kiernan, 1892, p.199, reporting Chaddock's translation of Krafft-Ebing, 1886)

Later translations of this work have obscured the perversity of 'heterosexuality'. Indeed, in more recent editions the subcategory 'sexual perversions proper' is missing and a new subcategory of paræsthesia entitled 'antipathetic sexuality' is offered (Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1997). However, even here the origins of the term 'heterosexual' cannot be entirely lost as the use of the term 'heterosexual hermaphrodisia' demonstrates the origins of the prefix

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hetero. Social convention tells us that *hetero* means 'different', but the Greek word *heteros* means no more than 'other'. One might argue that it is time for self-labelling heterosexuals rather than

homosexuals to define and defend their sexual status and behaviour, of which, we should remember, there are many variations – legal and illegal.

Modern psychology and the Society

Semantic arguments aside, our recent history demonstrates that homosexuality remains a controversial topic, and fraught with personal and moral dilemmas as well as professional ones. In 2002 the subsystems within the Society received a paper from Professor Celia Kitzinger, chair of the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section, proposing a statement relating to same-sex partnerships and lesbian and gay families. For some members such a statement may challenge personally held moral or religious views; others may object on the grounds that a scientific society has no place in making statements about lesbian and gay lifestyles, or indeed any issue that draws attention to us as a foundation for socially relevant scientific knowledge and discourse.

But in the year following our centenary (the year in which we claim to be 'Bringing psychology to society'), why do we still feel uneasy about making statements founded upon the expertise of our membership? Have we failed in practice to acknowledge that psychology has progressed beyond the confines of rats in a maze or that the 'science' of psychology includes all the Divisions, Sections and special interest groups that reflect the expertise of our membership? How can we bring the psychology of women, lesbian and gay psychology, the psychology of race and disability or indeed any subject of specialism to the majority when we are wary of interacting with that which we seek to inform? How can we reconcile Professor David Legge's observation in a report to the Board of Directors this year that, as a registered charity, the Society 'does not have a charitable object to work for the welfare of humanity or for the benefit of the community at large'?

The next few years will see a fundamental shift in the way in which we view the concept of 'partnership' if not of 'family', as we move towards European integration and acceptance of various EU directives governing partner benefits. Were the Society to release a statement or position paper relating to same-sex partnerships, what ill would befall us? Up until 2000 and the change in the law, the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section tried

on a number of occasions to enlist Society support to release a statement in which we, along with a number of other scientific organisations and charities, would provide a professional commentary on the discrepancy in the age of consent. The proposed statement for which we sought approval read:

The Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society supports current efforts being made to reduce the age of consent for young gay and bisexual men from eighteen years to sixteen years. We can find no cogent, substantive, scientific evidence to suggest that gay or bisexual men reach sexual maturity later than lesbian or bisexual young women, or indeed young heterosexual men and women, or that they develop their sexual identity later.

We are also aware of the increasing research demonstrating the psychological distress associated with an unequal age of consent, and the barriers it presents for those young people seeking advice and support from responsible others. There is ample research evidence to suggest that such distress and isolation can increase suicide risk for young gay and bisexual men. It is our view that the current distinction in the age of consent has no substantive scientific basis and that equalisation will be a positive step in challenging discrimination and alleviating the distress that is experienced by many young gay and bisexual men.

At the time some members may have felt the statement inappropriate, as it was not supported, but how different was the Section's commentary in 1999 to an approved standard letter prepared by the then chair of the Professional Affairs Board (PAB) in 1994?

Following consultation with a number of members with experience in this area, the Society finds no sound psychological reason why the age of consent should remain twenty-one for homosexual young men, nor that it should be different from that for young women or for heterosexual young men. We are also aware of the distress and damage caused by the current legislative situation for a number of homosexual young men, and that suicide rates amongst this group are

significantly higher than for a comparable sample of heterosexual men of the same age.

We conclude, therefore, that neither from scientific research nor from the experience of practitioners do we find any psychological evidence to justify the current disparity in the age of consent. We conclude that the onus is upon those who wish to maintain a different legal age of consent for homosexual relationships compared with heterosexual ones, to justify retaining the distinction.

This letter was far more forthright than the Section's statement, in that it overtly challenged those who sought to discriminate to justify their position. But at what cost do we remain silent following this brave and brief foray into the world of sexual controversy? Do we, as psychologists, have a Society voice that allows us to challenge those who seek to discriminate? Should the Society act as a forum where contemporary social issues are explored, arriving at a conclusion based upon a full understanding of the facts drawn from the research? Our objects as a charity may suggest that the answer is 'No', but is this what we want?

Same-sex partnerships: Where do you stand?

The case against same-sex partnerships, like so many other objections to the recognition of homosexuality, is complicated by extremist views on both sides. In UK law, as in the laws of many other countries, marriage is an undertaking

that can only be made by a man and a woman. For many it is not only a civil union but also a religious one, and on that point alone cannot be extended to those who practise male homosexuality. Yet, this has not always been the case. In his text *The Marriage of Likeness* Boswell (1995) quotes an excerpt from the journal of Michel de Montaigne who, in his travels through Italy between 1580 and 1581, witnessed the marriage between two men in Rome at the Church of Saint John of the Latin Gate:

Two males married each other at mass, with the same ceremonies we use for our marriage, taking Communion together, using the same nuptial Scripture, after which they slept and ate together. (Boswell, 1995, pp.264–265)

According to Montaigne, such unions were allowed on the basis that since a man and a woman could only legitimately sleep together following the act of marriage, so it was 'equally fair' for the Church to authorise same-sex ceremonies that allowed two women or two men to legitimately sleep together. While Boswell suggests that the Church's allowance of same-sex unions was initially a technical oversight in 13th century ecclesiastical law, such ceremonies were still allowed and technically licit until the early 18th century – the last being the marriage of two women in Dalmatia. However, the fact that such marriages existed at all clearly indicates that the marital bed was never one solely restricted to the practice of procreation.

Today the Human Rights Act 1998



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(which guarantees many of the freedoms identified by the European Convention on Human Rights) explicitly reserves the right to marry and found a family to heterosexuals, excluding lesbians, gay men and transsexuals – until this is tested in a court of law. However, the very same Act acknowledges the existence of same-sex partnerships, the right to private and family life, and the enjoyment of all the convention rights (save marriage) without fear of discrimination. Indeed, putting religious objections aside for one moment, objections to the recognition of same-sex partnerships or civil unions are becoming more tenuous as the years go by. In 2001 when barrister Roslyn Levine (acting on behalf of the Canadian government) was asked in the Ontario Supreme Court about the negative effects of same-sex marriage, she was forced to admit ‘we don’t know what they are’. Perhaps it is about time we found out.

Growing up lesbian and gay: A forgotten issue

The fact that lesbians and gay men ‘grow up’ is often forgotten. Prior to the 1990s it seemed as if being lesbian or gay was a status reserved for women and men aged 21–50 years. Indeed, there remains little research on the developmental challenges faced by lesbian and gay youth or indeed elders.

In 1994, when I began my research on the bullying experiences of lesbians and gay men in school, I had no idea what I would find, or indeed how this research would be received. Ten years earlier Hugh Warren (1984) had published a booklet entitled *Talking About School* in which he briefly discussed bullying, but since then nothing had been written. It was only six years after the introduction of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, and no school would entertain the idea of a researcher asking about homophobia for fear of being seen to ‘promote’ homosexuality.

Using retrospective reports gathered from 190 lesbians and gay men over a three-year period, I found that ‘homophobic bullying’ as it is now called was a pernicious form of aggression, perpetrated by pupils and teachers alike, and one that often lasted throughout secondary school (Rivers, 2001a). Recent estimates, drawn from a meta-analysis, suggest that it affects around one third of young lesbians and gay men (Rivers & Duncan, 2002), and is correlated with high levels of self-harm, depression and anxiety.

In my own study 53 per cent of former victims of homophobic bullying ($N = 119$) described how they had contemplated suicide because they feared going to school; 40 per cent said they had attempted to self-harm, three quarters of those more than once (Rivers, 2001a).

Although there were criticisms of this research, particularly the use of retrospective reports (addressed in Rivers, 2001b), the issue was raised in Parliament in a debate sponsored by the Liberal Democrat peer Graham Tope in 1997. This began a chain of events that resulted in the incorporation of ‘homophobic bullying’ into guidance provided by teachers’ unions (NUT and NAS/UWT), and the government’s anti-bullying pack ‘Bullying: Don’t Suffer in Silence’. Today, the Department for Education and Skills recommends that teachers guarantee confidentiality to pupils who seek their advice on sexuality, and that homophobic bullying is included in whole school policies governing behaviour. If we can make headway in schools in less than a decade, I wonder what we can do for society as a whole?

The challenges ahead

Although the Human Rights Act reserves the right to marry and found a family to heterosexuals, it also provides for the freedom to express one’s sexuality. Home Office guidance suggests that state and public authorities may have positive obligations to ensure that the rights and privileges guaranteed by the Act are not prohibited by private individuals. Yet we know that discrimination remains within the public arena. It features in our schools, and is found in our universities and colleges, places of work, taxes, bills,



insurance policies and mortgages. Though the Society does not have a charitable object to provide for the welfare of humanity, members and those employed by public authorities have professional and ethical responsibilities to work in the best interests of clients, patients, research participants and students, and to promote equality of opportunity where there is none. It is time we matched what we do as a profession with what we wish to do as a Society of professionals.

■ *Dr Ian Rivers is in the School of Sports Science and Psychology, York St John College. E-mail: i.rivers@yorks.ac.uk.*

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