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## INTEGRATING LESBIAN STUDIES INTO THE FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY CLASSROOM

*Suzanna Rose*

I continue to be amazed at how difficult it is to integrate a lesbian studies perspective fully into my feminist psychology courses, even after teaching them for twenty years. And even as an out lesbian with a research specialization in lesbian sexuality and relationships, I find it a daunting task. This is not to suggest that I have avoided trying, because I am pleased with most of my efforts. However, an event occurs at least once a semester to remind me that I have not come far enough in exorcising my own "isms" to think that I understand what a "true" lesbian-centered approach would be.

Most recently, this realization was brought home to me by having a young, outspoken African-American lesbian feminist student, Tonya, sit directly in front of me each day as I taught *Psychology of Women*. Tonya and I had been in an antiracism group together for the past year and I had encouraged her to take my course when she entered the university, thinking she would find a home for her feminism in women's studies. I did not anticipate the stress I was to feel later as I viewed my lectures through her eager—and sometimes cynical—eyes. What does a psychology of women course have to say of relevance to an out twenty-four-year-old, working-class, African-American lesbian? Her interests definitely were not represented in the standard text. It would be up to me, a forty-four-year-old, privileged, white woman professor, to provide that relevance. It was a responsibility that I only partially fulfilled. However, facing her unspoken expectation on a daily basis made me aware of a level of inclusiveness I had yet to attain in covering lesbian, race, and class issues in my teaching. I began to think more consciously about what litmus tests I use to evaluate my teaching from a lesbian studies' standpoint. In this essay, I will apply two criteria, *inclusiveness* and *tolerance*, to evaluate how effectively I integrate lesbian studies into my courses. Then I will

discuss some issues concerning how personal development affects one's ability to meet these criteria.

*Inclusiveness* refers to the extent to which lesbians are included in the curriculum. A minimal inclusiveness criterion would require that at least one lecture deal with lesbianism; a more stringent one would demand that material on lesbians be integrated throughout the course. I conscientiously apply both criteria to all the feminist psychology courses I teach, including undergraduate ones on the psychology of women, female sexuality, and homosexuality, as well as graduate courses on human sexuality and women and mental health. I allow at least one week of class time in every course for exclusive attention to lesbian issues, as well as regularly bring up the applicability of other topics to lesbians.

Deciding *what* content to include requires more strenuous intellectual effort. The courses I teach fall within the areas of psychology of women or lesbian and gay psychology. Each poses a different problem in terms of enhancing lesbian visibility. The subdiscipline of psychology of women is defined by an implicit heterosexism that marginalizes lesbians. The major textbooks convey an unquestioning acceptance of women's emotional, intellectual, and sexual commitment to men. Thus, topics such as theories of personality, achievement, work, nonverbal behavior, biology, health, sexuality, therapy, and violence are framed in terms of heterosexual relations. Solutions to social or economic problems implicitly assume women's continued heterosexuality. Men are to be reformed, but not avoided. Lesbianism most often is represented as an "alternative lifestyle" or "sexual variation" rather than as a challenge to heterosexuality. Typically, origins of sexual orientation and the mental health consequences of being lesbian are explored, usually to illustrate that lesbians are not really deviant. The wide diversity among lesbians in terms of race, social class, age, and ability is rarely mentioned.

Lesbians receive more attention within lesbian and gay psychology than within psychology of women, but generally less than gay men. Due to a gender bias in the research base that defines what questions are asked and who is studied, topics such as origins of sexual orientation, lesbians and gays in the military, discrimination in employment, homophobia, and HIV/AIDS more often are slanted toward gay men. Furthermore, a feminist perspective is often lacking in much lesbian/gay/queer writing. Lesbians' and gay men's common oppression frequently is explored without mention of patriarchy or institutionalized sexism; the different gender status of lesbians and gay men is virtually ignored. Consequently, lesbians' experiences as women are made invisible. For example, research and activism on homophobic violence focus on criminal assaults aimed at gay men (Jeness and Broad 1994), while other violence experienced by lesbians—including rape (unless it is specifically perpetrated against a woman because she is a lesbian), loss of child custody due to being a lesbian, or racist violence against lesbians of color—is not included in this definition.

Meeting the inclusiveness criterion requires that lesbian-feminist issues be addressed systematically in both types of courses. Two significant elements are now available: First, the burgeoning body of knowledge on lesbians in the form of

specialized journals such as *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *Women and Therapy*, *Feminism and Psychology*, and *Journal of Homosexuality*. Articles on heterosexist bias in psychological research, diagnosis, and therapy, and in research on lesbians and gays in the military also have appeared recently in mainstream journals such as *American Psychologist* (e.g., Herek 1993, Morin and Rothblum 1991). Book publishing on lesbian issues in psychology is flourishing as well (e.g., Garnets and Kimmel 1993, Greene and Herek 1994, Rothblum and Brehony 1994). Contemporary topics include lesbians of color, relationships and sexuality, pregnancy, child custody and adoption, and health and aging, as well as mental health. A second positive influence on lesbian visibility is the progressive stance concerning sexual orientation taken by the profession of psychology. Recommended changes in language have been the most significant. For example, the use of the phrase "lesbians and gay men" has been recommended as the appropriate replacement for the terms "homosexual" or "gay" in the latest edition of the widely used *Publication Manual* of the American Psychological Association (1994, 51). The rationale given for the guideline is that "homosexual" or "gay" might be interpreted as including only men. Since 1975, the APA has also been an advocate in the wider society against the stigma of mental illness associated with homosexuality and for lesbian and gay civil rights (Garnets et al. 1991, 971). The APA has submitted *amicus curiae* briefs supporting lesbian and gay rights in five landmark cases before the courts (Bersoff and Ogden 1991). The APA also requires that doctoral programs seeking accreditation have a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation. The APA's actions have legitimized lesbianism as a valid area of inquiry within psychology and eased the way for bringing up lesbian issues in the classroom.

Clearly, it should now be possible to meet the inclusiveness criterion in coursework. The material and perspectives described above are available to make integration of lesbian issues throughout courses possible. Furthermore, it is relatively easy to evaluate the inclusiveness criterion by determining how much course content pertains to lesbians. However, one possible consequence of thorough integration is that students will be threatened by hearing "so much" about lesbians. Lesbian faculty report that a too rapid or too extensive (to heterosexual students) focus on lesbians may result in a loss of credibility for teachers whose opinions might be seen as "biased."

*Tolerance* is the second criterion I use to evaluate whether courses include a lesbian studies' perspective. An increase in the amount of tolerance students express toward lesbianism over a semester as assessed by anonymous feedback from students concerning their likes and dislikes at several points during the semester frequently is used to determine whether the tolerance criterion has been met. Increasing students' tolerance demands that teachers attend to the process of learning. Three techniques I use to promote tolerance are familiarization, developing empathy, and shifting paradigms.

*Familiarization* increases tolerance by reducing the shock effect associated with the mention of lesbians. The topic of lesbianism is made so commonplace that it

loses its novelty. One easy strategy to increase familiarity is to use specific language. I am careful to specify that a lecture will cover heterosexual dating or heterosexual and lesbian domestic violence instead of labeling those lectures "Dating" or "Domestic Violence." Another familiarization technique is to ask students regularly to apply concepts to populations with different sexual orientations (or races). For example, most women's studies and psychology courses begin with a discussion of stereotypes. Cultural stereotypes of women include traits like nurturance, gentleness, or not being dominant or aggressive. Having students generate stereotypic traits for white lesbians or African-American heterosexual women quickly serves to illustrate that cultural stereotypes of women are based on notions about heterosexual white women. Thus, the technique reveals the unstated biases concerning sexual orientation and race. A similar point can be made in a lesbian and gay studies course by generating traits of "homosexuals" and then asking students how applicable each trait is to the stereotype of a "lesbian," thereby illuminating the former's implicit male bias.

Familiarization exercises with a more explicit focus on sexuality are useful in countering the deep anxiety associated with it in our culture. This anxiety extends to textbook authors, faculty, and students alike. For instance, I recently was shocked to realize, mid-semester, that the syllabus for *Psychology of Homosexuality* (which I was teaching for the first time) did not include anything about lesbians' or gay men's sexual practices, nor did any of the four texts I had assigned! I immediately revised the syllabus to include two lectures on the topic. Then it occurred to me that a discussion of tribadism and oral sex with sixty students was going to require more introduction. I decided to modify and use a vocabulary brainstorming technique that had been very effective previously in human sexuality classes. In small groups, students generated as many synonyms (scientific, slang, or personal) as they were able for terms such as "intercourse," "masturbation," "oral sex," and "anal sex." Then different groups were asked to read their lists. The exercise resulted in a lot of nervous laughter but increased students' comfort when asking questions.

*Developing empathy*, my second technique for enhancing tolerance, is actualized by exposing students to guest speakers and through written assignments. Any teacher who has ever invited a lesbian panel, particularly a racially diverse one, to class is well aware of its potential for positive impact. Written assignments can be used to reinforce empathic responses elicited by speakers. One assignment with which I have had a great deal of success requires students to write a short paper based on an interview with someone who differs from themselves on two of the following dimensions: sexual orientation, gender, race, age (minimum fifteen-year difference), or social class. Students individually or in small groups generate a list of interview questions that I review, and later report on their experiences to the group. Another assignment that works well is to ask students to write a three-to-five-page essay about what it would be like (or was like) to come out to one's family. A third exercise to build empathy about the oppressiveness of the closet requires that students display a visible interest in lesbianism/homosexuality in one or more settings, including going to a bookstore and asking where the books on

lesbians are or carrying an obviously lesbian book openly in public places. Having heterosexual students hide their sexuality from their friends, family, and employer for a week and write about the experience also is an excellent consciousness-raising technique.

The empathy exercises described above are largely aimed at making heterosexual students aware of issues lesbians (or gay men) face, but can be modified to increase empathy among lesbian and gay students for diverse groups in their own community. For instance, lesbian students may be asked to select a lesbian of a different race or social class as an interview participant, to write an account about what it would be like for a lesbian of a different race to come out in the racial community that the student knows, or to ask in bookstores about what materials are available for lesbians of color or about racism in the lesbian/gay community.

The third aspect of the tolerance criterion, *shifting paradigms*, encourages students to see heterosexuality from a lesbian viewpoint or to find other ways to challenge heterosexism. Students tend to be less defensive toward and less threatened by a paradigm shift if it occurs after sufficient familiarization and empathy experiences. Asking students to participate in a "heterosexuality panel" is one of the best paradigm-shift methods I have used. Four or five students are asked to volunteer to represent the heterosexual population on a panel. A list of questions commonly asked of lesbian and gay panels, reversed to target heterosexuality (e.g., "When did you first realize you were heterosexual?") or ones more challenging of heterosexuality, (e.g., "Why are so many heterosexual men child molesters?") are then distributed to the rest of the students, who are encouraged to ask them of panelists. The heterosexual panel is extremely effective if it immediately follows a lesbian panel, which can be done if a class period of two to three hours is available. Student responses to the combined empathy-paradigm-shift exercise have been overwhelmingly positive. Most notably, the implicit superiority of heterosexuality that is conveyed by the need to have a lesbian panel is revealed once the roles are reversed.

A paradigm shift also can be promoted in sexuality courses by having small groups discuss how sexual orientation and gender affect definitions of the term "have sex." Participants are asked to generate a list of all sexual behaviors that are likely to "count" as "having sex" for each of four groups: heterosexual women, heterosexual men, lesbians, and gay men. The exercise illustrates that definitions of having sex for men usually involve male orgasm (their own or a male partner's) regardless of sexual orientation, but that female orgasm is used less often by women as the main criterion. Having sex is most likely to be defined by heterosexual women as vaginal intercourse with male orgasm. What lesbians are likely to count is least obvious. The exercise shows that sex researchers' conclusions that lesbians "have sex" less often than heterosexuals and gay men (e.g., Blumstein and Schwartz 1978) could be due to differences in definitions among the groups, as well as male-centered cultural definitions of sexuality.

Guided fantasies are another way to achieve a paradigm shift. Reading (or having students write) a fantasy about a world in which heterosexuality is outlawed

highlights the moral justifications and institutional forces used by the dominant culture to oppress the nondominant group. Religious pronouncements and cultural values supporting the superiority of same-sex relationships help make this point (e.g., "heterosexuals are responsible for the population explosion, therefore their sexuality must be controlled or prohibited"). An exercise that may be used on its own or as a complement to the guided fantasy above is to have students brainstorm about what *advantages* might be associated with lesbian (or same-sex) relationships (i.e., no oppressive gender roles, understanding the body of someone of the same sex, resulting in better sex, et cetera).

Success at meeting the tolerance criterion is more difficult to evaluate than for inclusiveness. The only way I can really tell whether students have become more tolerant toward lesbians is to read student evaluations. I know from surveys I have taken early in the semester that about 40 to 55 percent of students in my classes agree with the statement "I disapprove of homosexuality as a lifestyle for others." By the end of the semester, only about 10 percent of students make negative comments about lesbians specifically. More common are remarks such as "[hearing about lesbianism] opened me up to a deeper understanding and acceptance" or "made me aware of my own prejudices."

The last issue that I want to discuss is how much one's own personal development affects one's ability to meet the inclusiveness and tolerance criteria. The example of my response to Tonya, the young African-American lesbian mentioned earlier, characterizes the dilemma colleagues and I often face when trying to balance two cultures—the heterosexual academic world and the lesbian one—in the classroom. I have noticed that being able to cope with the pressure of biculturalism or to tip the balance toward using a lesbian frame of reference is directly related to the strength of three components of my personal development as a lesbian-feminist faculty: internalized homophobia, vision, and self-nurturance.

Internalized homophobia among lesbian faculty is frequently discussed in terms of how it affects coming out in the classroom and the comfort level with bringing up lesbianism (e.g., Zimmerman 1994). Distancing oneself from very open, outspoken, or obvious (e.g., "butch") lesbians is another form of internalized homophobia I have seen many lesbian faculty express. Vision and self-nurturance are the components of my personal development that positively influence what I can accomplish from a lesbian studies' standpoint. Vision refers to my own ability to shift paradigms, to see the world in a lesbian-centered way. My and colleagues' normal strategies for enhancing vision include reading widely, actively participating in the lesbian community, and consciously reflecting on how heterosexism and sexism affect us. Self-nurturance pertains to assessing and meeting the emotional and physical needs that accompany the challenging of oppression.

These three components are deeply intertwined. My vision has been profoundly and positively affected by my competence at self-nurturance, which also enables me to contend with my internalized homophobia more effectively. For example, I have become more aware of how my effectiveness at coming out is as much about me as about "them"; my fears and reactions are as important to its success as are

students'. How confident, apologetic, curt, or defensive I am determines, in large part, how they will react. Thus, I focus more on appreciating the strain it puts on me to tell from twelve to two hundred students at a time that I am a lesbian. I also quit motivating myself through criticism (e.g., "Tenured faculty *should* come out") and began praising and rewarding myself. Now I set aside several hours the day before my coming-out class for a long walk or other exercise during which I may or may not contemplate what I will say. After coming out, I take the rest of the day off. This small amount of self-nurturance has paid off. I am much more relaxed and creative about what to say.

In conclusion, like many other lesbian faculty, I now have the academic tools and the teaching experience necessary to meet the criteria of inclusiveness and tolerance that are relevant to lesbian studies. What appears to be needed to make us more effective and perhaps to move us to a new level of understanding is to look more deeply inside, to use ourselves as a guide for where we need to go next. By the phrase "using ourselves," I mean doing more than simply identifying how we have internalized the "isms." I am referring to shifting some focus to our fears and needs and using them as a springboard for teaching. I do not have many examples to offer of how this will work, because I have only started to get serious about this type of analysis. However, it is reasonable that, after several decades of lesbian-feminist scholarship and activism, we might want to turn in this promising direction.

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## TEACHING FEMINIST LESBIAN DISABILITY STUDIES

Barbara Hillyer

When I designed my course on women and disability, I chose the only texts which specifically addressed women's experience of disability (as distinct from men's or a disembodied generic person's). It wasn't until a student reacted to these texts with homophobic defensiveness that it occurred to me that I was also teaching a lesbian studies course.

It hadn't occurred to me that I was *not* doing so; I just hadn't thought about it at all. I take this curious unconsciousness on my part to be a reflection of my own well-integrated stage of coming out and, at the same time, a reflection of the state of the arts in feminist disability studies, where lesbian experience is either central to the discussion or conscientiously included. What is curious about this situation is that until recently, disability studies scarcely recognized the experience of women as a separate category and feminist studies ignored disability.

What changed, beginning in the late 1980s, was that a few feminist theorists (notably Julia Penelope 1990 and Sarah Lucia Hoagland 1988) began including disability experience in their illustrations of lesbian linguistic and ethical dilemmas. About the same time, three key volumes in feminist disability studies were published: Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch's *Women with Disabilities* (1988), Jenny Morris's *Pride against Prejudice* (1991) and my *Feminism and Disability* (1993). One foundation for these was an anthology of disability stories, *With the Power of Each Breath*, edited by Susan Browne, Debra Connors, and Nanci Stern (1985). These personal experience narratives were strongly influenced by the tradition of lesbian coming-out stories and many were written by lesbians. *With Wings* (1987), edited by Marsha Saxton and Florence Howe, contains similar personal experience narratives along with fiction and poetry, integrating lesbian experience with many other kinds of disability stories. Connie Panzarino's *The Me in the Mirror*, published in 1994, uses autobiography for a powerfully political end.

*With the Power of Each Breath* was especially important to my students because