Awareness Points for Interacting with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) People

(by Dr. Susan C. Turell, Women’s Studies Program Director/Associate Professor, Psychology)

About 10% of the population is estimated to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Many students find that they are free to begin to explore their sexuality when away from their families of origin and in college. You should assume that there are LGBTQ students in most of your classes and that you will be interacting with LGBTQ students and may not be aware of this, given the frequent invisibility of these populations.

1. Don’t assume that all LGBTQ people are alike or have similar concerns.

LGBTQ people are considered sexual minorities by the dominant culture, in that they challenge ideas of gender and sexuality. Although often grouped together, however, each of the letters LGBT stand for groups of people who comprise unique populations and have different concerns and experiences.

Gay men, particularly if they are Caucasian, will often see sexual orientation as the most salient variable in their lives, and will be privileged in many other ways. Lesbians often experience sexism, both within the LGBTQ community and in the larger society. Therefore, they may experience more similarities to other women’s lives than to those of gay men. The LGBTQ community is still male dominated; often the use of the generic term “gay” will render women and their concerns invisible.

Bisexual people are often ignored by gay men and lesbians; bisexuality may be considered an invalid sexual orientation, one that is an indication of confusion on the way to becoming gay/lesbian. They may be seen as traitors to the gay community, receiving privilege if dating or married to someone of the other sex. Therefore, they may feel ostracized by both the heterosexual and the gay communities.

Transgender people challenge the gender they are assigned at birth; their main concern is that of gender identity, and may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual. They can be ostracized by LGB people. Some LGB people don’t see any connection of gender identity to sexual orientation, and do not like the community to include the “T” part. Therefore, Transpeople may feel ostracized by both the LGB community and the larger society.

Queer is a more inclusive term used within the community to include sexual orientation and gender expression. This term allows for a wider conceptualization of inclusiveness for anyone who transcends traditional gender or sexuality expressions.

2. Homophobia/Heterosexism create a context for LGBTQ people that provides a backdrop for many interpersonal interactions as well as psychological development.

Homophobia is the hatred or fear of homosexuality and/or homosexual people.

Heterosexism is the privileging of heterosexuality, and is often manifested by the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. It also includes the assumption that heterosexuality is the best sexual orientation, and that being gay/lesbian/bisexual is not as good as being heterosexual.

Bisexual people and transgender people deal with bi-phobia and trans-phobia respectively. Bi-Phobia is the fear and/or hatred of bisexuality and/or bisexual people. Trans-phobia is the fear and/or hatred of transgender people.

The prevailing culture in the U.S. is both heterosexist and homophobic. Lesbians and gay men are acutely aware of this, from language that is used to overt acts of violence, such as hate crimes. One common expression heard often in many informal student gatherings include “that’s so gay” (meaning bad). The passage of anti-gay marriage laws reinforces the notion that gay = less worthy. Asking if someone is married or partnered with someone of the other sex serves to make homosexuality, and gay, lesbian and bisexual people, invisible.

These examples and others serve to create a climate in which gay/lesbian/ bisexual and transgender people are likely to be careful about revealing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Handout compiled by Patti See / contact seepk@uwec.edu for more information
3. **Coming out includes both a personal realization of one’s sexual orientation and then telling others.**

Heterosexual people do not have to ‘come out’ since heterosexuality is presumed. LGBTQ people have to tell others, again and again. This is a continuous, never ending process.

The coming out process occurs in stages. The person’s stage of development will influence their reactions. The more comfortable they are with their identity as LGBTQ, the more likely they are to disclose to others and the more resiliency they will have in dealing with homophobia and heterosexism around them.

Never assume that anyone is ready to disclose their sexual orientation to others, without explicit agreement. A student may have disclosed to you, but may not want other student’s or other faculty/staff to know. It is their right and choice about whom to tell.

Don’t single out a known gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender student to speak for everyone in the LGBTQ community or even as a representative of their specific group.

4. **Be careful in your use of language, and in challenging others’ use of language.**

Don’t assume heterosexuality in your classes and interactions with students. If using examples regarding relationships, use language that includes the possibility of same sex relationships. If you hear students using derogatory language (such as the “it’s so gay” example mentioned above), challenge them. Most people won’t use derogatory language regarding people of color in front of others; why allow it for LGBTQ people?

5. **Include LGBT people in your curricular materials.**

Make LGBT people more visible in course materials. This may include examples of same-sex couples or relationships, mentioning sexual orientation as a characteristic that shaped someone’s work or ideas, and purposeful inclusion of LGBT authors of course materials.

6. **Examine your own attitudes about LGBTQ people and become an ally.**

Allies are people that appreciate LGBTQ people and understand the effects of homophobia/heterosexism/biphobia/transphobia in their lives. Allies challenge these oppressive forces when they observe them.

Being tolerant is not enough, as it implies that there is something wrong that needs to be tolerated. Work to develop an appreciation for LGBTQ people. Identify for yourself areas of discomfort relating to each group (L, G, B, and T) and work to undo areas of prejudice. Read about the lives of LGBTQ people, talk with others who are openly LGBTQ, and ask questions of them.

If you find that you are uncomfortable with some aspects of LGBTQ people and our lives, know when to refer a student to someone who can better help them with their questions/concerns. Be careful to not let your areas of prejudice bias your interactions with students and your evaluation and/or interactions with them.

7. **To be an ally, you will want to know LGBTQ resources in the Chippewa Valley area.**

To be an ally, educate yourself about the resources in our area. These include but are not limited to the Chippewa Valley LGBT Community Center, the UW-EC LGBT student group Spectrum, Chippewa Valley PFLAG (Parents and friends of lesbians and gays) and faculty and staff who are visible as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This is the link for the resource page from the UW-EC Student LGBT student group that may be helpful in finding resources. <http://www.uwec.edu/Lgbtsa/resources.htm>
How to Be an Ally to Transgender & People with Intersex Condition
By Jessica Pettitt, Gender Advocate

From “Out on Campus Online”

Validate people’s gender expression. It is important to refer to a transgender person by the pronoun appropriate to their presented gender. In other words, if someone identifies as female, then refer to the person as she; if they identify as male, refer to the person as he. If you are not sure, ask them. Never use the word “it” when referring to someone who is transgendered. To do so is incredibly insulting and disrespectful. Some transgender people prefer to use gender-neutral pronouns: “hir” instead of “her” and “his,” and “zie” or “ze” instead of “she” and “he.”

Use non-gender specific language. Ask “Are you seeing someone?” or “Are you in a committed relationship?” instead of “Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?” or “Are you married?” Use the word “partner” or “significant other” instead of “boyfriend/girlfriend” or “husband/wife.”

Challenge your own conceptions about gender-appropriate roles and behaviors. Do not expect people to conform to society’s beliefs about “women” and “men.”

Do not assume that someone who is transgendered is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or that the person will seek to transition to become heterosexual.

Do not automatically include people with the Intersex condition in “transgender” and “queer” categories. Many people with the Intersex condition do not feel included or represented by the trans and queer movements.

Use the words “crossdresser” and “intersex” instead of “transvestite” and “hermaphrodite,” respectively. The latter terms are often considered pejorative.

Never ask someone who is transgendered or has an Intersex condition about how they have sex or what their genitals look like. This is inappropriate in every situation.

Do not share the gender identity of individuals without their permission. Do not assume that everyone knows. The decision to tell someone about their gender should be left to the person.

When you learn about someone’s transgender identity, do not assume that it is a fad or trend. While public discussions about transgenderism and transsexuality are a relatively recent phenomenon, most transgender people have dealt with their gender identity for many years, often at great personal and professional costs. It is important to trust that someone’s decision to present themselves in a gender different from their birth gender is not made lightly or without due consideration.

Educate yourself and others about transgender and intersex condition histories and concerns. Introduce trainings, readings, and other resources to your colleagues to continue educational efforts to deconstruct social norms around gender, sex, and sexual orientation.

Work to change campus policies in areas such as housing, employment, student records and forms, and health care that discriminate against transgender people and seek to include gender identity/expression in your school’s non-discrimination policy.

Developed by: Brett Beemyn, GLBT Student Services, Ohio State University and Jessica Pettitt, Office of LGBT Student Services, New York University