

Social Activism: Implications from Evolutionary Psychology

**Sean McLennan
Linguistics / Cognitive
Science
Indiana University**

**5th Annual UNCA GLBT Studies
Conference
Asheville, North Carolina
March 21st, 2003**

Psychology and Race

- Traditional claim that the cognitive encoding of certain personal characteristics is *automatic* and *mandatory*
 - gender, age, race
 - huge base of experimental support
 - argued that humans have innate neural circuitry to deal with these characteristics
- Essentially: when you encounter someone briefly, you'll remember gender, age, and race even if you remember nothing else.

Psychology and Race

- Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides (2001):
 - Evolutionarily it makes no sense for race to be one of these characteristics
 - it's only been very recently that human beings have been consistently exposed to racial differences
 - Through a series of experiments demonstrated that in fact “Coalitional Alliances”, i.e. group membership is what is important
 - manipulating social context can override attention to race

Psychology and Race

- Conclusions:
 - humans are very sensitive to social dynamics
 - humans are very sensitive to indicators (often visual) that are statistically correlated with group membership
 - categorization based on group membership is largely an unconscious, automatic, and mandatory process

and perhaps most importantly...

Psychology and Race

Any arbitrary characteristic
(ex. skin color) will be
attended to and automatically /
mandatorily encoded in
memory *to the degree* it is
predictive of group
membership

GLBT Implications

1. Persistence of popular stereotypes
 - based on observable cues (primarily visual)
 - self-reinforcing because majority of the GLBT community is invisible

2. “Gaydar”
 - queer people become (unconsciously) sensitized to subtle cues due to high social interest / motivation

GLBT Implications

Most importantly:

3. Changing Social Attitudes

- perceived group membership differences, regardless of occurring in positive or negative contexts, reinforces social segregation which in turn invites differential treatment and discrimination
- meaningful changes in attitude diffuse quickly within social groups but slowly (if at all) across group boundaries (Rogers, 1995)

Changing Social Attitudes

- Rallies, Pride Festivals, Gay TV Channels, Gay Districts, etc.
 - good for developing community and solidarity
 - necessary for increasing public *awareness* and *political* change
 - probably hamper public *acceptance* and *social* change

The terrible irony: the very thing that gives us strength as a community may be acting against our ultimate goal of “hohumization”

Changing Social Attitudes

- The Good News
 - Social context is manipulable
 - Group membership is hierarchical
 - at any given time, any given individual belongs to a practically infinite number of “groups” with varying degrees of social impact
 - establishing environments where the salience of a unifying group identity *supercedes* the GLBT/straight division can facilitate changes in attitude
 - ex: family; “Shad Valley” (Canadian program for high school students); “GLB Speaker’s Bureau” (IU program)

Changing Social Attitudes

- The Good News con't
 - GLBT community has some advantages
 - unique, generally negative fact that GLBT people are typically not born into GLBT families (which subverts youth support), guarantees a presence in all demographic groups
 - invisibility, which unfortunately helps reinforce stereotypes, permits the element of surprise; social environments can be established before homosexuality is introduced into the dynamic

Conclusion

- The goals of political equality and social equality do not necessarily proceed together (strategies good for one can even hinder the other)
- By being aware of how humans process social information we can consciously balance actions, programs, and education in order to simultaneously bring about both goals