

Conference Goal: The Prevention of Heterosexism

Cleland E. Selby

BURLINGTON -- My computer research clearly demonstrates that heterosexism does not exist! After all, it's not a word according to my "spell check."

Yet for four days, June 14-17, an international group of research scholars in the field of psychopathology gathered in Burlington to debate and present information that heterosexism may in fact be the very core of our collective thinking.

Only a generation ago, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Dr. Celia Kitzinger, the keynote speaker at the Vermont Conference on Primary Prevention and UVM's Department of Psychology's Radisson-based conference, presented evidence that "psychology is a pretty heterosexist science."

"Most gay people still choose to stay silent," Kitzinger warned the approximately 100 participants at the conference which focused upon "Prevention of Heterosexism and Homophobia." "They are so totally surrounded by heterosexist language and behavior."

Under the direction of UVM Professors Lynne Bard and Esther Rothblum, nearly twenty professionals from Great Britain and the United States gathered to present a wide range of research. One participant described this as "the most impressive array of minds I have had a chance to experience in many years."

In addition to the conference itself, the UVM Psychology Department also offered a course of the same title taught by Professor Jackie Weinstock from the University of Washington at Tacoma. Seventeen people took the course which focused upon cultural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels of heterosexism and homophobia; theories of power and privilege; prevention efforts as well as prevention theories and models; and the implications for the future.

One student who requested that her name not be used said, "This is the most incredible learning experience for me, a straight woman who has never considered what life is like for those people who are not heterosexual. I've never been very political, but I'm about to be."

Another student reflected upon the changes she intends to make in her role as a Vermont public school guidance counsellor, including making visible a periodical she had never seen before -- *Out In The Mountains!* (Copies were everywhere at the conference!)

The conference focused upon a variety of issues, always framed within the context of research that has been done, that is being done, or that needs to be done. And throughout the conference, presenters came back to Dr. Kitzinger's reflections that all of us "carry around the 'shoulds' of our childhood, the 'shoulds' that created our values" that all too often we fear examining. "We constantly make moral judgments. The Christian right does not have a monopoly on ethics and morality." Kitzinger admonished her audience to take power, to make moral choices, and to assert their freedom to take ethical action.

Dr. Paula Rust, who is a sociologist on the staff at Hamilton College, focused upon how "coming out changes our position in society." Her specific focus was upon the much broader range of sexual preferences than those suggested by the terms "gay men" and "lesbians," and how bisexuality "has been so ignored." She suggested that our existing "models" for coming out are based upon heterosexists' 'shoulds' and therefore tend to be highly prescriptive and not often relevant to the real identities of the persons who are attempting to come out. Coming out, in her opinion, should be about each person gaining a more integrated identity.

Dr. Charlotte Patterson, from the University of Virginia, focused upon issues that are unique and not so unique to gay parents while Dr. Beverly Greene, from St. John's University, discussed ethnic minority groups. Dr. David Ostrow, a physician from the Medical College of

Wisconsin, presented a wealth of information about a harm reduction approach to substance abuse.

Dr. Tony D'Augelli, a nationally known researcher from Pennsylvania State University, addressed the challenges gay youth have in our postmodern American society including the very high risks for becoming infected with the AIDS virus. He is now able to collect information from youth who are coming out and no longer has to rely upon the memories of adult gay persons who have already come out.

Dr. Rachel Perkins, a psychologist from London, strongly endorsed the rejection of therapy because of its highly heterosexist bias. She recommended the use of our own communities as the resources for our own therapeutic needs.

James Woods, from the College of Staten Island, discussed heterosexism in corporate America, which was followed by Dr. Joy Livingston's presentation on how we can work effectively to create a future that is free of heterosexism.

Kay Frances, the director of the counselling center at UVM, was one of the participants in the conference. "I have seen more pain coming from young people who are attempting to come out than I have ever seen from any other group in my thirty years of professional work ... It is so important psychologically for kids to identify a culture, and I am seeing a new style of lesbian and gay male culture emerging ... And that is wonderful to see."

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