

(WHO WE ARE continued from 6)

"types." Some partial explanations follow.

The Impact of Social Expectations

There are some people who fit into the gay stereotype so well that they are quickly suspected of being gay by the people around them. These people are most likely, because of the expectation that they are gay, to examine their sexual identities, and the gays among them identify themselves as homosexuals. These gays also have the most difficulty passing as straight and so are likeliest to be revealed as gay. Thus the gay community's image is self-perpetuating; certain "types" are more likely to come out, leading to ever larger numbers of that "type" being out in the community, reinforcing the stereotype.

Double Oppressions

Those who live under the oppression brought on by prejudices against race, sex (female), class, ethnic background, and others, may find it more difficult to come out. Already facing social sanctions for things beyond their control, this is one fact about about them which would make life more difficult to come out. Already facing social sanctions for things beyond their control, this is one fact about them which would make life even more difficult but which can--perhaps--be kept hidden. The cost of coming out is often much too high when one is struggling to live without the privileges of being white, male, upper-class, non-handicapped, and so on. And in some communities, such as the black community, one also risks losing the support of that community, support which is needed in the face of a society hostile to one's race. Thus it is white, upper-class men who have been in the gay limelight. (This is not to trivialize the sufferings of these men, but to put into perspective the reluctance of others to join them.)

Needs of Other Communities

Those who live under other oppression(s) who are activists are likely to be placing their energies into other, non-gay related things: Lesbians might be launching major projects for all women such as rape crisis lines and battered women's shelters or fighting for reproductive rights; black Lesbians and gay men may be trying to find jobs for black youth or working for expansion/enforcement of civil rights laws; hispanics, whose community faces a galling 1/3 unemployment, may believe their primary task is serving that community's needs; and so on. Who could call these activists undedicated or lazy for not working primarily on gay and lesbian rights?

Media's Willing Submission to Stereotypes

A case in point comes from the 1985 Gay Pride March and festival in Washington, D.C. Though there was a strikingly diverse crowd participating, the pictures run in the next day's Washington Post did not reflect this reality. All four of the pictures were of white men (though the crowd had been nearly half lesbian and about one third people of color); three shots were of men in "drag," and one was of a group of men in "leather." Most readers probably skimmed over or ignored the accompanying article (which was sensitively written), and only noticed the nonrepresentative, stereotypic pictures.

Money and Leisure

One cannot ignore the effects of available money and leisure time. For example, if men, on the average, have available to them \$1.00 for women's 59¢, this inequality of resources is going to be made apparent in the leadership of the gay/lesbian community.

Again, these are a simplification of the pressures behind the misconceptions of Who Gays Are.

To those reasons written this summer, I now find I must add one more:

The Intransigence of the People in an Established Gay (or Lesbians) Group

Already non-representative (mostly because of the forces already outlined), the groups don't usually throw open their arms to these newcomers. A case in point was the bitter fight by Lesbians (with a few male supporters) to add "Lesbian" to the name of the Carolina Gay Association. The guys resisted this change, and some Lesbians, seeing how insensitive the entrenched group would be to their needs, left, never to return. It doesn't usually take out-right opposition to drive off an under-represented minority; plain disinterest in taking up their concerns will be enough.

How the HRCF can get the GWMs to become more active is beyond me. The rest of us will have to be pulled in by a program which shows, at every step, its sensitivity to the issues and problems outlined above.

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