

Facing the “Phobias”

By David Peterson

Language is an immensely powerful tool, and as the GLBTSA's recent sexist language workshop demonstrated, the words we use often have a unintended meaning.

In the popular media, how often is our community called the gay community, or the lesbian and gay community? Indeed, language can demonstrate bias against sexual minorities other than gays and lesbians: transgendered and bisexual individuals are sometimes appended like footnotes.

Stereotypes about bisexuals continue to persist. To the queer community and its allies, a vocabulary of sexual orientation comes almost automatically, but heterosexual communities aren't necessarily exposed to the same base of knowledge.

To uninformed individuals, the term “bisexuality” may imply negative stereotypes of promiscuity or infidelity. In coming out, bisexual individuals have the added burden of debunking such stereotypes. Bisexual women – along with women of all sexual orientations – are objectified and belittled by misogynistic stereotypes of promiscuity, for example. The queer community can also stereotype bisexuals – writing them off as indecisive or unwilling to surrender “heterosexual privilege.”

Perhaps our vocabulary of sexual orientation is just limited: consider other sexual orientations, like “pansexuality,” in which an individual is attracted to others without regard for gender. With the capacity for fantastic variation in sexuality, there's a tendency for one's own orientation to become a place of security.

Compared to biphobia, transphobia seems to be an even greater problem of misinformation: despite giving visibility to the mere existence of transgendered people, popular television shows like “CSI” and “Law and Order” sensationalize transgendered individuals, portraying them as violent or deeply disturbed individuals – ever seen “Silence of the Lambs?”

Flawed portrayals of that sort sound a lot like the exclusion of homosexuals from the civil service earlier in the century because of fear of espionage, and are extremely poor ways for the transgendered community to achieve visibility.

The queer community itself also suffers from a lack of information and exposure to transgender issues. A recent speaker at the University, Just Evelyn, recounted seeking counseling from a LGBTIQ center for her transgendered child. The counselor with whom she spoke to, however, wasn't well-informed about transgender issues. Spreading information about transgender issues is a big step in advocating for these members of our community.

Transgender Awareness Week, which was held last November, was a step in the right direction. The University's Safe Zone program is also an excellent way to learn about transgender issues.

Beyond the queer community, monolithic issues can dominate advocacy efforts for members of the LGBTIQ community. On the national political and media stage, we're seeing a big push for same-sex marriage from the queer community and its allies. It seems, perhaps, that that issue could be the be-all, end-all of civil rights: we get the rights of marriage, the personal and symbolic value of the marriage commitment and even a stamp of societal approval.

But there are bigger issues to fight for with one of them being transgender medical benefits. Medical benefits for transgendered people may sound like another item on the long grocery list of rights for which the LGBTIQ community is striving for, but all of these rights have powerful implications for us all.

With transgender medical benefits comes greater education in the healthcare and social service sectors on all LGBTIQ issues, which leads to better service. Consequently, last semester's Transgender Awareness Week had a big focus on medical benefits.

Coming to UNC-CH, what struck me immediately in my first GLBT-SA meeting was the use of blanket terminology. Instead of working against “homophobia,” a term that includes only a limited array of behaviors, the GLBT-SA works against “heterosexism,” which encompasses the social and institutional bias for heterosexuality over all other sexual orientations. And to refer to the LGBTIQ community, the term “queer” was used instead of “gay” or “gay and lesbian.” These blanket terms may be effective, but they have their limitations as inclusive language: they don't explicitly mention variations in gender expression.

Let's forget about the diversity alphabet for a minute, GLBTS, LGBTIQ and all of its variations. Let's even forget the word queer, with all its connotations. When you take away the comfortable labels, this community and its allies ultimately stand for diversity in expressions of both sexuality and gender, regardless of label or self-identification.

We grew up in a culture with institutions promoting one way or the highway: heterosexuality and the male/female dichotomy. When we deliver our loud tirades and quiet protests against heterosexism, let's not replace it with another system, more insidious if we permit it to in turn marginalize other segments of the LGBTIQ community, often the very segments facing the greatest hurdles.