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## INTEGRATING LESBIAN STUDIES INTO THE FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY CLASSROOM

*Suzanna Rose*

I continue to be amazed at how difficult it is to integrate a lesbian studies perspective fully into my feminist psychology courses, even after teaching them for twenty years. And even as an out lesbian with a research specialization in lesbian sexuality and relationships, I find it a daunting task. This is not to suggest that I have avoided trying, because I am pleased with most of my efforts. However, an event occurs at least once a semester to remind me that I have not come far enough in revising my own "text" to think that I understand what a "true" lesbian-centered approach would be.

Most recently, this realization was brought home to me by having a young, outspoken African-American lesbian feminist student, Tonya, sit directly in front of me each day as I taught *Psychology of Women*. Tonya and I had been in an antiracism group together for the past year and I had encouraged her to take my course when she entered the university, thinking she would find a home for her feminism in women's studies. I did not anticipate the storm I was to feel later as I viewed my lectures through her eager—and sometimes cynical—eyes. What does a psychology of women course have to say of relevance to an out twenty-four-year-old, working-class, African-American lesbian? Her interests definitely were not represented in the standard text. It would be up to me, a forty-four-year-old, privileged, white woman professor, to provide that relevance. It was a responsibility that I only partially fulfilled. However, facing her unspoken expectation on a daily basis made me aware of a level of inclusiveness I had yet to attain in covering lesbian, race, and class issues in my teaching. I began to think more consciously about what issues texts I use to evaluate my teaching from a lesbian studies' standpoint. In this essay, I will apply two criteria, inclusiveness and tolerance, to evaluate how effectively I integrate lesbian studies into my courses. Then I will

discuss some issues concerning how personal development affects each ability to meet these criteria.

Inclusiveness refers to the extent to which lesbians are included in the curriculum. A minimal inclusiveness criterion would require that at least one lecture deal with lesbianism; a more stringent one would demand that material on lesbians be integrated throughout the course. I conscientiously apply both criteria to all the feminist psychology courses I teach, including undergraduate ones on the psychology of women, female sexuality, and homosexuality, as well as graduate courses on human sexuality and women and mental health. I allow at least one week of class time in every course for exclusive attention to lesbian issues, as well as regularly bring up the applicability of other topics to lesbians.

Deciding what content to include requires more strenuous intellectual effort. The courses I teach fall within the areas of psychology of women or lesbian and gay psychology. Each poses a different problem in terms of enhancing lesbian visibility. The subdiscipline of psychology of women is defined by an implicit heterosexism that marginalizes lesbians. The major textbooks convey an unquestioning acceptance of women's emotional, intellectual, and sexual commitment to men. Thus, topics such as theories of personality, achievement, work, nonverbal behavior, biology, health, sexuality, therapy, and violence are framed in terms of heterosexual relations. Solutions to social or economic problems implicitly assume women's continued heterosexuality. Men are to be reformed, but not avoided. Lesbianism most often is represented as an "alternative lifestyle" or "sexual variation" rather than as a challenge to heterosexuality. Typically, origins of sexual orientation and the mental health consequences of being lesbian are explored, usually to illustrate that lesbians are not really deviant. The wide diversity among lesbians in terms of race, social class, age, and ability is rarely mentioned.

Lesbians receive more attention within lesbian and gay psychology than within psychology of women, but generally less than gay men. Due to a gender bias in the research base that defines what questions are asked and who is studied, topics such as origins of sexual orientation, lesbians and gays in the military, discrimination in employment, homophobia, and HIV/AIDS more often are slanted toward gay men. Furthermore, a feminist perspective is often lacking in much lesbian/gay/queer writing. Lesbians' and gay men's common oppression frequently is explored without mention of patriarchy or institutionalized sexism; the different gender status of lesbians and gay men is virtually ignored. Consequently, lesbians' experiences as women are made invisible. For example, research and activism on homophobic violence focus on criminal assaults aimed at gay men (Jennison and Broad 1994), while other violence experienced by lesbians—including rape (unlike it is specifically perpetrated against a woman because she is a lesbian), loss of child custody due to being a lesbian, or racist violence against lesbians of color—is not included in this definition.

Moving the inclusiveness criterion requires that lesbian-feminist issues be addressed systematically in both types of courses. Two significant elements are now available. First, the burgeoning body of knowledge on lesbians in the form of

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