



## Social activism

By Sean McLennan

If there is a “gay agenda”, it is probably to become equal to heterosexuals under the law. It’s a worthy goal, to be sure, but is it enough? African Americans in the US have achieved that goal—to be equal under the law—but after moving to the Midwest to go to school, I was really taken aback by how much segregation is *still* very much a part of American culture. Laws are relatively easy to change. They are explicit and clear and when they are erased, they disappear and are replaced permanently. But the consciousness of the people—that’s covert, and even when outwardly, consciously, individuals promote equality, they can be subconsciously and unintentionally duplicitous. It would be a shame if the gay community followed suit and, achieving legal equality, wound up still having to fight invisible social barriers that are impossible to localize, let alone eradicate.

Why did the civil rights movement fail to destroy racial segregation in the US? Is there any way that we can prevent the same outcome in our own social activism?

I’m not a political scientist, historian, or even an anthropologist, so in a number of ways, I’m not qualified to speak to this subject. I am a cognitive scientist, however, which allows me to claim that I understand the way people think to some degree (not what they think, mind you). And what I’ve learned as a cognitive scientist has helped me understand some of my own personal experiences with issues of race in the US as well as providing some profound insights into the effects various types of social activism has on the social consciousness.

It would be idiotic to say that I wasn’t aware of ethnic identity when I lived in Canada, but I do notice it more living in the States. One day, walking down the street, I not only noticed the skin colour of a group of people walking past, I realized that it affected me in a way that it hadn’t before. I was so ashamed! It wasn’t that I had negative thoughts about them. It’s that I grew up in place where race was just not relevant in the way it is here, and I took great pride in that fact. For awareness of skin colour to come unbidden into my mind, so rapidly and naturally and without my permission, felt like a betrayal of my own value system. Of course, how I choose to act on that awareness is by far more important, but I was still disturbed by the change in my perception.

Standard psychological theory holds that there are personal characteristics that we are genetically primed to recognize. They are the features that we unconsciously recognize most rapidly, and remember longest: gender, age and race. The same results have been found and replicated repeatedly—these characteristics unquestionably hold a special place in the human psyche. Maybe that was why I was experiencing race so strongly? But if that was the case, why is it that I perceived a change in my perception? My awareness had a quality that it never had before.

It was then that a researcher name Leda Cosmides, one of the founders of the field of “Evolutionary Psychology”, came to Indiana University to give a guest lecture. Evolutionary Psychology has a pretty bad public reputation because of a few crack-pots that have made outrageous claims like “Men are biologically disposed to rape” which the media over-sensationalized. However, its basic claim is simply that if psychology is to hypothesize that a behaviour or thought pattern is innate—genetically specified in some way—then the evolutionary environment of humans has to be taken into account.

Looking at those characteristics (gender, age and race) it makes sense that we may have evolved neural circuitry to deal specifically with gender and age. Both are important for reproduction (gender for mating, age for reproductive ability) and both have been characteristics we’ve been exposed to since long before we were humans. Race, however? It’s only been in the last few hundred years that humans have been mobile enough to really experience people that are significantly different than us. Primitive primates migrating on foot just would not encounter other races—certainly not enough for it to affect evolution.

All the previous research was clear, though; race patterned the same as gender and age. So what gives? Long story short, Leda Cosmides showed in a series of exquisitely designed experiments that race is *not* the salient personal characteristic being processed like gender and age; group membership is. For the duration of human evolutionary history, it has been important to determine who is a member of your in-group—and therefore likely a friend—and who is not in your in-group and therefore, potentially an enemy. It makes sense then from an evolutionary standpoint. Race, then, as indicated by, say, skin colour, will be encoded like gender and age, to the extent it is indicative of group membership within a society. That bears repeating: skin colour will be encoded like gender and age, to the degree that it is shows group membership. In fact, any superficial characteristic (clothing, accent, vocabulary) will be strongly attended to, to the extent that

it is indicative of group membership. (The origin of “gaydar” too?)

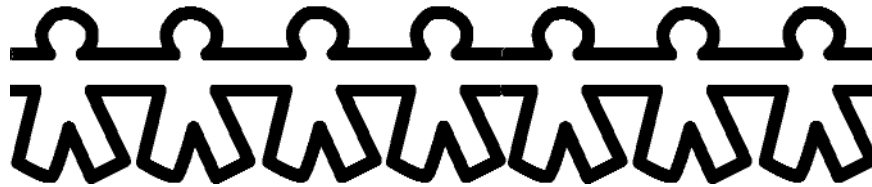
The shift in my perceptions was probably a result of witnessing countless examples of segregation in my midwestern surroundings; the human mind is extremely sensitive to the statistics and group dynamics it experiences. The

social realities of in-group and out-group are simply (and tragically) different from Calgary where I grew up, and eventually it had an impact on my perception, as it would on any human being.

Group membership—in this case black and white—is not only reinforced by negative pressures like racism, but also by all the valuable, positive forces like solidarity, culture, and community. It’s ironic that the empowerment that allowed change to occur legally for African Americans in the US helps prevent change from occurring socially to end their social inequality.

Andrew Tobias, in *The Best Little Boy in the World Grows Up*, says that the

continued  
opposite



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goal of GLBT activism is to achieve “ho-humization”. To make being gay such a banal and uninteresting fact that it’s treated in the same way as being blond or having glasses. I agree that this should be our goal, but I wonder if it is the direction in which we’re heading.

Displays of group solidarity—rallies, protests, marches, Pride festivals, dedicated TV stations—all build community strength, but also accentuate the boundaries that define group membership. They subconsciously build an us/them division within society, and while solidarity and community strength are better ways to effect about institutional change, they do nothing to alter the underlying prejudices.

Is it a “Catch-22”? If GLBT people unite to achieve civil rights, will we similarly be condemned to a being legally equal, but socially marginalized? Do we have to give up Pride and community in order to achieve ho-humization? No. Not if we’re careful about our activism. Here’s one more crucial element to consider: group membership is hierarchical. We all belong to more groups than we can count—everything from our families, to *Buffy* fans, to Canadians, to homosexuals, to owners of tri-coloured cats. Every charac-

teristic really is an indicator of group membership of some type. Obviously, some are more meaningful than others. I think that the key to finding the balance between Pride and changing societal attitudes is always to emphasize that there are group memberships that supercede being gay.

Who are those that are the easiest to bring around to understanding homosexuality? Family and friends. Why? Because even after we come out, we are still their daughter/son/brother/sister/best friend. We have a relationship—group membership—that creates a force that draws us together and is much stronger than the force sexuality has to drive us apart. Consequently, if there are fundamental conflicts in the belief systems of our families and friends, they are more likely to resolve themselves in our favour.

In that way, we have an advantage over the civil rights movement of the ‘60s, in which genetics, history and social circumstances divided black and white more completely. Most of us have been born into heterosexual families, which provides us inherent access to the group that we are attempting to gain equality with. We develop our first relationships before our friends (and we, ourselves) know that we’re gay.

If the only time that heterosexuals see homosexuality is as a community that they do not belong to, or worse, as a community pitted against them (or perceived as being pitted against them), they will have no reason to try to understand. No reason to see “gay rights” as “human rights”. We will be exposing them to countless examples of segregation, and that will have a psychological impact. If instead we first establish a relationship—a group membership—to which we are both members, we are in a much better position to spread acceptance and understanding.

Visibility is key. What becomes important to combat the divisive effects of confrontational political activism and public displays of community solidarity is being open and out in other contexts. GLBT people already belong to every conceivable group—if we are also being perceived passively as being gay when we interact with straight people at work, at social gatherings, or just walking the dog in the evening, that will eventually erode the wall that comes between us.

*Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he’s currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does Web design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.*



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