

Queer Studies

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Introduction:

Queer studies, sexual diversity studies, or LGBT studies is the study of issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity usually focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people and cultures. Originally centered on LGBT history and literary theory, the field has expanded to include the academic study of issues raised in biology, sociology, mental illness, anthropology, the history of science, philosophy, psychology, sexology, political science, ethics and other fields by an examination of the identity, lives, history and perception of queer people. Gay and lesbian studies are academic programs dedicated to the study of historical, cultural, social, and political issues of vital concern to lesbian, gay, and, increasingly, bisexual and transgendered individuals. The focus of such programs is on lesbian and gay lives and social institutions, as well as about homophobia and oppression related to sexual orientation. Gay and lesbian studies programs have encouraged many traditional disciplines to reassess their theoretical and political grounding and to consider sexuality and sexual diversity as critical facts determining social behaviors and political structures.

Goals:

The goals of gay and lesbian studies programs are as varied as the programs themselves. The general goals include discovering and recovering the history and culture of homosexuality and bringing homosexuality to the forefront of academic studies, away from being an unspeakable or untouchable subject. The existence of gay and lesbian studies programs helps to challenge the invisibility of homosexuality in society and to expose students to gay and lesbian oppression as it has existed historically. Another goal of lesbian and gay studies is to explore the lives of lesbian and gay people through investigation of identity issues, experiences of oppression, and struggles for recognition. The programs seek to find a common understanding and language in which homosexuals and heterosexuals can better understand gay and lesbian lives. Many programs have an activist agenda that includes such goals as critiquing and transforming the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender situations that continue to oppress gay and lesbian people. In 2000 Jeffery Weeks, a professor of sociology at

the University of London, identified five additional goals for gay and lesbian studies. The first is to find ways for society to learn to live with differences in sexual orientation and to provide a forum for discussing differences. The second is to adopt political and cultural stances that work toward sexual justice, which involves seeking fairness and equity in theory. treatment of all sexual orientations. The third goal is to challenge heterosexual norms that have been created throughout history. By addressing the second and third goals, homosexuality can be validated and affirmed while heterosexual norms are questioned so that equality of sexual orientations can be reached. The fourth goal is to question the existing body of knowledge related to sexual orientation, especially addressing who has the right to speak authoritatively on gay and lesbian issues. The fifth goal is to create spaces for debate, analysis, negotiations, disagreements, and finding common ground regarding issues of sexual orientation.

History:

Gay and lesbian studies emerged from the civil rights movement, yet the roots of this discipline stretch back to the middle of the twentieth century. The Kinsey studies of human sexuality in the 1940s and 1950s challenged scientific assumptions related to sexuality and, by raising the visibility of homosexuality, provided a platform for gay and lesbian studies. Gay and lesbian studies, although taking place in academia, have been strongly influenced by the political and cultural development of gay and lesbian communities, especially in urban areas throughout the United States. As the political and cultural environment within society changed during the latter half of the twentieth century, so too did the frame works in which gay and lesbian intellectuals and scholars worked. Specifically, during the 1950s and 1960s the homophile movement, combined with the gay liberation and lesbian feminism movements that began after the riots at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, helped to create the political climate that allowed for the development of the early stages of lesbian and gay studies in the 1970s. Additionally, the AIDS crisis in the 1980s added yet another layer that helped mature gay and lesbian studies. In 1991 the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) was founded at the City University of New York Graduate School. CLAGS is the first and only university-based research center in the United States dedicated to the study of historical, cultural, and political issues of concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals. Another way of understanding the historical development of gay and lesbian studies is to consider the focus of scholarly activity and its diversification during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Jeffrey Escoffier, deputy director for policy and research of the Office of Gay and Lesbian Health in New York

City, in 1992 identified several different interdisciplinary paradigms that arose during that period. The first, “Search for Authenticity, 1969–1976,” was formed by the Stonewall generation as an effort to encourage research and writing from gay liberation and feminist perspectives. For example, during this period the Gay Academic Union was formed in New York City with the goal of confronting homophobia in academia. Although the union lasted only a short while, it did provide a forum for academics interested in issues related to sexual orientation and led to further organizing and eventually to program development. “Social Construction of Identity, 1976–present” focuses on homosexual identity and how this identity is shaped and formed not only by homosexual behaviour but also by cultural and societal action. “Essentialist Identity: Lesbian Existence and Gay Universals, 1975–present” is the complement to the socially constructed aspect of identity and concentrates on the structures and similarities in the gay and lesbian experience that span historical periods. “Difference and Race, 1979–present” addresses how culture, ethnicity, and race combine with homosexuality. One of its many concerns is that gay and lesbian studies and scholarship not remain focused on white culture, but rather emphasize the diversity of experience in gay and lesbian lives. The final paradigm, “The Pursuit of Signs: The Cultural Studies Paradigms, 1985–present,” builds on the social construction of identity paradigm to include all forms of texts, cultural codes, signifying practices, and modes of discourse that form attitudes toward homosexuality.

Current Configurations:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, gay and lesbian studies programs vary widely in terms of focus, structure, and connections with other academic units. Most programs are at large institutions, both public and private, and most of these institutions are in urban areas. There are few programs at small, private, rural liberal arts colleges. Most programs are gay and lesbian specific while some also include the general categories of gender and sexuality. Others have expanded to include emphases on bisexuality, transgender issues, and queer theory. The majority of the lesbian and gay studies programs offer undergraduate minors or certificate programs. Few institutions offer undergraduate majors or graduate degrees strictly in gay and lesbian studies. Some institutions offer undergraduate programs in which lesbian and gay studies can be combined with a traditional major (e.g., a major in history with a focus on gay and lesbian studies); others offer the opportunity to create degree programs through individualized learning or liberal studies programs; and some institutions offer dual or

integrated graduate degree programs where lesbian and gay studies can be combined with programs in other disciplines. Because lesbian and gay studies focuses on a group of subjects instead of a concept, it is difficult to place the field within a specific academic discipline. Therefore, virtually all programs are interdisciplinary in nature, working with other departments on campus covering a wide span of disciplines including biology, anthropology, anatomy, cultural anthropology, English, literature, film and video, history, art history, political science, psychology, religion, sociology, ethnic studies, and women's studies. Additionally, lesbian and gay studies programs are most often linked to or coupled with women's studies or gender studies. The disadvantages of interdisciplinarity include diffused academic power and influence, constrained resources, and a lack of a disciplinary home. The advantage of interdisciplinarity is that once established, lesbian and gay studies programs are difficult to isolate and sequester. Interdisciplinary study then results in a change in how gay and lesbian lives, experiences, and reality are experienced, studied, and understood. It forces scholars to integrate the often fragmented disciplines into which the academic experience has been sorted. Scholarship and study in separate disciplines makes it easier to ignore diversity and complexity and allows important questions to go unasked, a few chosen issues to be raised, select individuals to be studied, and leaves a large portion of the lesbian and gay population ignored. Interdisciplinarity reinforces the fact that no longer are there only the categories of heterosexual and homosexual, but that there are many variations in between. Interdisciplinary study encourages a constant questioning of the assumptions underlying theories that are being used and why they are being used. Two growing areas under the rubric of lesbian and gay studies are lesbian studies as a self-contained unit and queer theory. There have been some efforts to separate lesbian studies from gay studies and women's studies because of concerns about sexism (in gay studies) and heterosexism and homophobia (in women's studies). The argument is that lesbian oppression has been ignored and needs to be investigated from the perspective of multiple disciplines separate from gay studies.

Conclusion:

The category of queer theory first appeared in the early 1990s. Teresa de Lauretis is the theorist often credited with inaugurating the phrase. Queer theory expands the focus of lesbian and gay studies from socially constructed or essentialist identities to sexual practices and sexual representations. Queer theorists view sexuality along a continuum and question whether it is ever fixed at one point. Queer theory challenges all identity categories, such as heterosexual,

homosexual, male, and female and analyses the power imbalances that are inherent in them. So, we should educate them before that we study them for their upliftment in this society.

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