

10 MYTHS ABOUT GAY MEN AND LESBIANS

Dissecting the Claims Used by the Hard-Line
Religious Right to Demonize the LGBT Community

A SPECIAL REPORT BY THE
Southern Poverty Law Center
Montgomery, Alabama

10 MYTHS

Battling the 'homosexual agenda,' the hard-line religious right has made a series of incendiary claims. But they're just not true

BY EVELYN SCHLATTER AND ROBERT STEINBACK

Ever since born-again singer and orange juice pitchwoman Anita Bryant helped kick off the contemporary anti-gay movement more than 30 years ago, hard-line elements of the religious right have been searching for ways to demonize homosexuals — or, at a minimum, to find arguments that will prevent their normalization in society. For the former Florida beauty queen and her Save Our Children group, it was the alleged plans of gays and lesbians to “recruit” in schools that provided the fodder for their crusade. But in addition to hawking that myth, the legions of anti-gay activists who followed have added a panoply of others, ranging from the extremely doubtful claim that homosexuality is a choice, to unalloyed lies like the claims that gays molest children far more than heterosexuals or that hate crime laws will lead to the legalization of bestiality and necrophilia. These fairy tales are important to the anti-gay right, because they form the basis of its claim that homosexuality is a social evil that must be suppressed — an opinion rejected by virtually all relevant medical and scientific authorities. They also almost certainly contribute to hate crime violence directed at homosexuals, who are more targeted for such attacks than any other minority in America. What follows are 10 key myths propagated by the anti-gay movement, along with the truth behind the propaganda.

MYTH # 1

Homosexuals molest children at far higher rates than heterosexuals.

THE ARGUMENT

Depicting gay men as a threat to children may be the single most potent weapon for stoking public fears about homosexuality — and for winning elections and referenda, as Anita Bryant found out during her successful 1977 campaign to overturn a Dade County, Fla., ordinance barring discrimination against gay people. Discredited psycholo-

gist Paul Cameron, the most ubiquitous purveyor of anti-gay junk science, has been a major promoter of this myth. Despite having been debunked repeatedly and very publicly, Cameron's work is still widely relied upon by anti-gay organizations, although many no longer quote him by name.

THE FACTS

According to the American Psychological Association, “homosexual men are not more likely to sexually abuse children than heterosexual men are.” Gregory Herek, a professor at the University of California, Davis, who is one of the nation's

leading researchers on prejudice against sexual minorities, reviewed a series of studies and found no evidence that gay men molest children at higher rates than heterosexual men.

Anti-gay activists who make that claim allege that all men who molest male children should be seen as homosexual. But research by A. Nicholas Groth, a pioneer in the field of sexual abuse of children, shows that is not so. Groth found that there are two types of child molesters: fixated and regressive. The fixated child molester — the stereotypical pedophile — cannot be considered homosexual or

heterosexual because “he often finds adults of either sex repulsive” and often molests children of both sexes. Regressive child molesters are generally attracted to other adults, but may “regress” to focusing on children when confronted with stressful situations. Groth found that the majority of regressed offenders were heterosexual in their adult relationships.

The Child Molestation Research and Prevention Institute notes that 90% of child molesters target children in their network of family and friends. Most child molesters, therefore, are not gay people lingering outside schools waiting to snatch children from the playground, as much religious-right rhetoric suggests.

MYTH # 2

Same-sex parents harm children.

THE ARGUMENT

Most hard-line anti-gay organizations are heavily invested, from both a religious and a political standpoint, in promoting the traditional nuclear family as the sole framework for the healthy upbringing of children. They maintain a reflexive belief that same-sex parenting must be harmful to children — although the exact nature of that supposed harm varies widely.

THE FACTS

No legitimate research has demonstrated that same-sex couples are any more or any less harmful to children than heterosexual couples.

The American Academy of Pediatrics in a 2002 policy statement declared: “A growing body of scientific literature demonstrates that children who grow up with one or two gay and/or lesbian parents fare as well in emotional, cognitive, social, and sexual functioning as do children whose parents are heterosexual.” That policy statement was reaffirmed in 2009.

The American Psychological Association found that “same-sex couples are remarkably similar to heterosexual couples, and that parenting effectiveness and the adjustment, development and psychological well-being of children is unrelated to parental sexual orientation.”

Similarly, the Child Welfare League of America’s official position with regard to same-sex parents is that “lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents are as well-suited to raise children as their heterosexual counterparts.”

MYTH # 3

People become homosexual because they were sexually abused as children or there was a deficiency in sex-role modeling by their parents.

THE ARGUMENT

Many anti-gay rights proponents claim that homosexuality is a mental disorder caused by some psychological trauma or aberration in childhood. This argument is used to counter the common observation that no one, gay or straight, consciously chooses his or her sexual orientation. Joseph Nicolosi, a founder of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, said in 2009 that “if you traumatize a child in a particular way, you will create a homosexual condition.” He also has repeatedly said, “Fathers, if you don’t hug your sons, some other man will.” A side effect of this argument is the demonization of parents of homosexuals, who are led to wonder if they failed to protect a child against sexual abuse or failed as role models in some important way. In October 2010, Kansas State University family studies professor Walter Schumm said he was about to release a related study arguing that homosexual couples are more likely than heterosexuals to raise gay or lesbian children.

THE FACTS

No scientifically sound study has linked sexual orientation or identity with parental role-modeling or childhood sexual abuse.

The American Psychiatric Association noted in a 2000 fact sheet on gay, lesbian and bisexual issues that “no specific psychosocial or family dynamic cause for homosexuality has been identified, including histories of childhood sexual abuse.” The fact sheet goes on to say that sexual abuse does not appear to be any more prevalent among children who grow up and identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual than in children who grow up and identify as heterosexual.

Similarly, the National Organization on Male Sexual Victimization notes on its website that “experts in the human sexuality field do not believe that premature sexual experiences play a significant role in late adolescent or adult sexual orientation” and added that it’s unlikely that someone can make another person a homosexual or heterosexual.

With regard to Schumm’s study, critics have already said that he appears to have merely aggregated anecdotal data, a biased sample that invalidates his findings.

MYTH # 4

Homosexuals don’t live nearly as long as heterosexuals.

THE ARGUMENT

Anti-gay organizations want to promote heterosexuality as the healthier “choice.” Furthermore, the purportedly shorter life spans and poorer physical and mental health of homosexuals are often offered as reasons why gays and lesbians shouldn’t be allowed to adopt or foster children.

THE FACTS

This falsehood can be traced directly to the discredited research of Paul Cameron and

his Family Research Institute, specifically a 1994 paper he co-wrote entitled, “The Lifespan of Homosexuals.” Using obituaries collected from gay newspapers, he and his two co-authors concluded that gay men died, on average, at 43, compared to an average life expectancy at the time of around 73 for all U.S. men. On the basis of the same obituaries, Cameron also claimed that gay men are 18 times more likely to die in car accidents than heterosexuals, 22 times more likely to die of heart attacks than whites, and 11 times more likely than blacks to die of the same cause. He also concluded that lesbians are 487 times more likely to die of murder, suicide, or accidents than straight women.

Remarkably, these claims have become staples of the anti-gay right and have frequently made their way into far more mainstream venues. For example, William Bennett, education secretary under President Reagan, used Cameron’s statistics in a 1997 interview he gave to ABC News’ “This Week.”

However, like virtually all of his “research,” Cameron’s methodology is egregiously flawed — most obviously because the sample he selected (the data from the obits) was not remotely statistically representative of the homosexual population as a whole. Even Nicholas Eberstadt, a demographer at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, has called Cameron’s methods “just ridiculous.”

MYTH # 5

Homosexuals controlled the Nazi Party and helped to orchestrate the Holocaust.

THE ARGUMENT

This claim comes directly from a 1995 book titled *The Pink Swastika: Homosexuality in the Nazi Party*, by Scott Lively and Kevin Abrams. Lively is the vir-

ulently anti-gay founder of Abiding Truth Ministries and Abrams is an organizer of a group called the International Committee for Holocaust Truth, which came together in 1994 and included Lively as a member.

The primary argument Lively and Abrams make is that gay people were not victimized by the Holocaust. Rather, Hitler deliberately sought gay men for his inner circle because their “unusual brutality” would help him run the party and mastermind the Holocaust. In fact, “the Nazi party was entirely controlled by militaristic male homosexuals throughout its short history,” the book claims. “While we cannot say that homosexuals caused the Holocaust, we must not ignore their central role in Nazism,” Lively and Abrams add. “To the myth of the ‘pink triangle’ — the notion that all homosexuals in Nazi Germany were persecuted — we must respond with the reality of the ‘pink swastika.’”

These claims have been picked up by a number of anti-gay groups and individuals, including Bryan Fischer of the American Family Association, as proof that homosexuals are violent and sick. The book has also attracted an audience among anti-gay church leaders in Eastern Europe and among Russian-speaking anti-gay activists in America.

THE FACTS

The Pink Swastika has been roundly discredited by legitimate historians and other scholars. Christine Mueller, professor of history at Reed College, did a line-by-line refutation of an earlier (1994) Abrams article on the topic and of the broader claim that the Nazi Party was “entirely controlled” by gay men. Historian Jon David Wynecken at Grove City College also refuted the book, pointing out that Lively and Abrams did no primary research of their own, instead using out-of-context cita-

tions of some legitimate sources while ignoring information from those same sources that ran counter to their thesis.

The myth that the Nazis condoned homosexuality sprang up in the 1930s, started by socialist opponents of the Nazis as a slander against Nazi leaders. Credible historians believe that only one of the half-dozen leaders in Hitler's inner circle, Ernst Röhm, was gay. (Röhm was murdered on Hitler's orders in 1934.) The Nazis considered homosexuality one aspect of the "degeneracy" they were trying to eradicate.

When the National Socialist Party came to power in 1933, it quickly strengthened Germany's existing penalties against homosexuality. Heinrich Himmler, Hitler's security chief, announced that homosexuality was to be "eliminated" in Germany, along with miscegenation among the races. Historians estimate that between 50,000 and 100,000 men were arrested for homosexuality (or suspicion of it) under the Nazi regime. These men were routinely sent to concentration camps and many thousands died there.

In 1942, the Nazis instituted the death penalty for homosexuals. Offenders in the German military were routinely shot. Himmler put it like this: "We must exterminate these people root and branch. ... We can't permit such danger to the country; the homosexual must be completely eliminated."

MYTH # 6

Hate crime laws will lead to the jailing of pastors who criticize homosexuality and the legalization of practices like bestiality and necrophilia.

THE ARGUMENT

Anti-gay activists, who have long opposed adding LGBT people to those protected by hate crime legislation, have repeat-

edly claimed that such laws would lead to the jailing of religious figures who preach against homosexuality — part of a bid to gain the backing of the broader religious community for their position. Janet Porter of Faith2Action was one of many who asserted that the federal Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act — signed into law by President Obama in October 2009 — would "jail pastors" because it "criminalizes speech against the homosexual agenda."

In a related assertion, anti-gay activists claimed the law would lead to the legalization of psychosexual disorders (paraphilias) like bestiality and pedophilia. Bob Unruh, a conservative Christian journalist who left The Associated Press in 2006 for the right-wing, conspiracist news site WorldNetDaily, said shortly before the federal law was passed that it would legalize "all 547 forms of sexual deviancy or 'paraphilias' listed by the American Psychiatric Association." This claim was repeated by many anti-gay organizations, including the Illinois Family Institute.

THE FACTS

The claim that hate crime laws could result in the imprisonment of those who "oppose the homosexual lifestyle" is false. The Constitution provides robust protections of free speech, and case law makes it clear that even a preacher who suggested that homosexuals should be killed would be protected.

Neither do hate crime laws — which provide for enhanced penalties when persons are victimized because of their "sexual orientation" (among other factors) — "protect pedophiles," as Janet Porter and many others have claimed. According to the American Psychological Association, sexual orientation refers to heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality — not paraphilias such as pedo-

philia. Paraphilias, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association, are disorders characterized by sexual urges or behaviors directed at nonhuman objects or non-consenting persons like children, or that involve the suffering or humiliation of one's partner.

Even if pedophiles, for example, were protected under a hate crime law — and such a law has not been suggested or contemplated anywhere — that would not legalize or "protect" pedophilia. Pedophilia is illegal sexual activity, and a law that more severely punished people who attacked pedophiles would not change that.

MYTH # 7

Allowing homosexuals to serve openly would damage the armed forces.

THE ARGUMENT

Anti-gay groups are adamantly opposed to allowing gay men and lesbians to serve openly in the armed forces, not only because of their purported fear that combat readiness will be undermined, but because the military has long been considered the purest meritocracy in America (the armed forces were successfully racially integrated long before American civilian society, for example). If gays can serve honorably and effectively in this meritocracy, that would suggest that there is no rational basis for discriminating against them in any way.

THE FACTS

Homosexuals now serve in the U.S. armed forces, though under the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) policy instituted in 1993, they cannot serve openly. At the same time, gays and lesbians serve openly in the armed forces of 25 countries, including Britain, Israel, South Africa, Canada and Australia, according to a report released by the Palm Center, a policy think tank at the University of California at

Santa Barbara. The Palm Center report concluded that lifting bans against openly gay service personnel in these countries "ha[s] had no negative impact on morale, recruitment, retention, readiness or overall combat effectiveness." Successful transitions to new policies were attributed to clear signals of leadership support and a focus on a uniform code of behavior without regard to sexual orientation.

A 2008 *Military Times* poll of active-duty military personnel, often cited by anti-gay activists, found that 10% of respondents said they would not re-enlist if the DADT policy were repealed. That would mean some 228,000 people might leave the military in that instance. But a 2009 review of that poll by the Palm Center suggested a wide disparity between what soldiers said they would do and their actual actions. It noted, for example, that far more than 10% of West Point officers in the 1970s said they would leave the service if women were admitted to the academy. "But when the integration became a reality," the report said, "there was no mass exodus; the opinions turned out to be just opinions." Similarly, a 1985 survey of 6,500 male Canadian service members and a 1996 survey of 13,500 British service members each revealed that nearly two-thirds expressed strong reservations about serving with gays. Yet when those countries lifted bans on gays serving openly, virtually no one left the service for that reason. "None of the dire predictions of doom came true," the Palm Center report said.

MYTH # 8

Homosexuals are more prone to be mentally ill and to abuse drugs and alcohol.

THE ARGUMENT

Anti-gay groups want not only to depict sexual orientation as something that can be changed

but also to show that heterosexuality is the most desirable “choice” — even if religious arguments are set aside. The most frequently used secular argument made by anti-gay groups in that regard is that homosexuality is inherently unhealthy, both mentally and physically. As a result, most anti-gay rights groups reject the 1973 decision by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. Some of these groups, including the particularly hard-line Traditional Values Coalition, claim that “homosexual activists” managed to infiltrate the APA in order to sway its decision.

THE FACTS

All major professional mental health organizations are on record as stating that homosexuality is not a mental disorder.

It is true that LGBT people suffer higher rates of anxiety, depression, and depression-related illnesses and behaviors like alcohol and drug abuse than the general population. But studies done during the past 15 years have determined that it is the stress of being a member of a minority group in an often-hostile society — and not LGBT identity itself — that accounts for the higher levels of mental illness and drug use.

Richard J. Wolitski, an expert on minority status and public health issues at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, put it like this in 2008: “Economic disadvantage, stigma, and discrimination ... increase stress and diminish the ability of individuals [in minority groups] to cope with stress, which in turn contribute to poor physical and mental health.”

MYTH # 9

No one is born a homosexual.

THE ARGUMENT

Anti-gay activists keenly oppose the granting of “special” civil

rights protections to homosexuals similar to those afforded black Americans and other minorities. But if people are born gay — in the same way people have no choice as to whether they are black or white — discrimination against homosexuals would be vastly more difficult to justify. Thus, anti-gay forces insist that sexual orientation is a behavior that can be changed, not an immutable characteristic.

THE FACTS

Modern science cannot state conclusively what causes sexual orientation, but a great many studies suggest that it is the result of biological and environmental forces, not a personal “choice.” One of the more recent is a 2008 Swedish study of twins (the world’s largest twin study) that appeared in *The Archives of Sexual Behavior* and concluded that “[h]omosexual behaviour is largely shaped by genetics and random environmental factors.” Dr. Qazi Rahman, study co-author and a leading scientist on human sexual orientation, said: “This study puts cold water on any concerns that we are looking for a single ‘gay gene’ or a single environmental variable which could be used to ‘select out’ homosexuality — the factors which influence sexual orientation are complex. And we are not simply talking about homosexuality here — heterosexual behaviour is also influenced by a mixture of genetic and environmental factors.”

The American Psychological Association (APA) acknowledges that despite much research into the possible genetic, hormonal, social and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no evidence has emerged that would allow scientists to pinpoint the precise causes of sexual orientation. Still, the APA concludes that “most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.”

In October 2010, Kansas State University family stud-

ies professor Walter Schumm said he was about to release a study showing that gay parents produced far more gay children than heterosexual parents. He told a reporter that he was “trying to prove [homosexuality is] not 100% genetic.” But critics suggested that his data did not prove that, and, in any event, virtually no scientists have suggested that homosexuality is caused only by genes.

MYTH # 10

Gay people can choose to leave homosexuality.

THE ARGUMENT

If people are not born gay, as anti-gay activists claim, then it should be possible for individuals to abandon homosexuality. This view is buttressed among religiously motivated anti-gay activists by the idea that homosexual practice is a sin and humans have the free will needed to reject sinful urges.

A number of “ex-gay” religious ministries have sprung up in recent years with the aim of teaching homosexuals to become heterosexuals, and these have become prime purveyors of the claim that gays and lesbians, with the aid of mental therapy and Christian teachings, can “come out of homosexuality.” Exodus International, the largest of these ministries, plainly states, “You don’t have to be gay!” Another, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, describes itself as “a professional, scientific organization that offers hope to those who struggle with unwanted homosexuality.”

THE FACTS

“Reparative” or sexual reorientation therapy — the

pseudo-scientific foundation of the ex-gay movement — has been rejected by all the established and reputable American medical, psychological, psychiatric, and professional counseling organizations. In 2009, for instance, the American Psychological Association adopted a resolution, accompanied by a 138-page report, that repudiated ex-gay therapy. The report concluded that compelling evidence suggested that cases of individuals going from gay to straight were “rare” and that “many individuals continued to experience same-sex sexual attractions” after reparative therapy. The APA resolution added that “there is insufficient evidence to support the use of psychological interventions to change sexual orientation” and asked “mental health professionals to avoid misrepresenting the efficacy of sexual orientation change efforts by promoting or promising change in sexual orientation.” The resolution also affirmed that same-sex sexual and romantic feelings are normal.

Some of the most striking, if anecdotal, evidence of the ineffectiveness of sexual reorientation therapy has been the numerous failures of some of its most ardent advocates. For example, the founder of Exodus International, Michael Bussee, left the organization in 1979 with a fellow male ex-gay counselor because the two had fallen in love. Alan Chambers, current president of Exodus, said in 2007 that with years of therapy, he’s mostly conquered his attraction to men, but then admitted, “By no means would we ever say that change can be sudden or complete.” ▲