



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: RUDE COMMENTS ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A lack of class comes out in the school staff room

SUSAN PINKER

spinker@globeandmail.com

July 9, 2008

Dear Susan,

I am a gay high school English teacher who has a rewarding career and excellent rapport with my students. Although I am not officially "out" at work, most of the teachers and my principal know I have a male partner because he has attended a few social events at school. Most people are fine with this, but more than once I have had to face ignorant questions and the occasional rude comment in the staff room. Sometimes I feel like telling these people off but I have to continue to work with them. Any advice?

- *Just Call Me Sir*

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Sir,

How you respond depends on who is making the gaffe, and just how out of line it is. You should have an inkling about your colleagues and whether a comment is truly hostile, just curious, or unaccountably dumb. Each merits its own return volley.

Snide and hostile remarks should be countered, and it's not just up to you to draw the line. Discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation are prohibited in every province and territory. If comments are especially unsavoury, you not only have the force of law behind you; most public institutions and many private ones have internal ethics codes, too. These policies usually outlaw homophobic behaviour. In some workplaces, if you're lucky, a local culture of tolerance prevails.

That's the good news, and it means you're on solid ground when you decide to come out, or when you label questions and comments about your sex life or "lifestyle" as harassment or just downright rude.

And now for the bad news. Schools usually have protective policies, but they're not always implemented and there's no national standard of acceptable conduct, says Helen Kennedy, executive director of Egale Canada, an advocacy organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

"Some policies are better than others and it's especially hard in Catholic or rural schools, where teachers are fearful of coming out because they're afraid they'll lose their jobs. There's a whole culture of silence in schools," she says.

Despite a new focus on preventing bullying aimed at LGBT students - a national survey of 1,200 LGBT students released in May found that 41 per cent of them reported they had been sexually harassed - not much is being done to research and assist teachers. They're usually left to fend for themselves.

It behooves your colleagues and principal to stick up for you, of course. Sadly, people who think of themselves as good and moral folk often become passive onlookers when someone else acts like an yob.

Marc Hauser, a Harvard psychology professor and author of the 2006 book *Moral Minds*, calls this "omission bias." Our brains are wired to sound alarm bells at the prospect of directly harming others, but are sluggish when faced with preventing others from doing the same. Most people would agree that it's not moral to stand around and let bad things happen. But we often neglect to take account of the negative consequences when we're simply bystanders.

As a leader, your principal can't fall back on that excuse. "Employers are responsible for taking proactive steps to prevent harassment," according to Karen Busby, a law professor at the University of Manitoba.

If the principal doesn't stand behind you, you should consider lodging a complaint, first with the school board, then with your union, she says. If those routes prove ineffective, consider the provincial human rights commission.

She recounts cases of students and teachers who, whether gay or straight, were subjected to homophobic taunting and destructive whisper campaigns. In several cases, the courts found it was the school board's responsibility (as it would be any employer's), to prevent these situations and promote an atmosphere of tolerance.

But not every boneheaded comment counts as harassment. There may be curiosity on the part of colleagues that reveals their ignorance but shows no real malice. Plus, one of the unique aspects of working in a school or in a hospital is that the staff rooms and nurses' lounges engender intimacy, so typical social boundaries disappear.

Teachers and nurses who have spent years working in close quarters can make unbidden confessions about their marriages, pregnancies and sex lives - and often gossip about the private lives of students and patients, too. Usually female dominated enclaves, they're public spaces that are treated as private ones.

Even if an exchange of personal information is expected, that doesn't mean you're obliged to 'fess up and "share." Still, once you can get over your initial astonishment, an ignorant question can provide a valuable teaching moment. I was once at a school meeting where I stated nonchalantly that I couldn't consult on the suggested day because it was Passover.

A young man on staff approached me afterward and quite sincerely (or so I thought), asked if it was true that I was Jewish, and did my grandfather have horns, like Moses? I took a deep breath and replied that, despite being only five feet tall, my grandfather's skull looked exactly like his own.

I'll bet he never forgot that conversation. Nor did I, which brings us to questions that are hard to believe because they're just so darn dumb. If you suspect that a teacher has lobbed an ignorant question because he or she has led a cloistered life, then it's up to you to provide a real answer. Had my grandfather been in my shoes that day, I like to think he would have quoted Hillel, the Babylonian biblical scholar, who 2,000 years ago famously said: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" But knowing my grandfather, what he probably would have said was: "To tell you the truth ... I've never heard such a question in my life."

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

Time for a PDA holiday?

Has the cellphone and/or BlackBerry invaded your bedroom, your vacation spot, or your social life?
Send questions about how the personal digital assistant is affecting your work-life to:

spinker@globeandmail.com

Copyright Susan Pinker 2008
