

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

How Many Gay People Are There?

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Suppose your job was to make sure that there were enough left-handed scissors to meet the demand. Would you make enough for everyone who was left-handed, or only for those people who publicly identified as left-handed?

Gary Gates, a demographer at the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, might unwisely counsel you to go with the lower number. If you took his advice, not only would you sacrifice potential income, but a lot of left-handed people would go without proper scissors.

In his recently released study, "How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?" Gates has announced that there are only 9 million Americans who fit those descriptions. He goes with the average number of people who have identified themselves in surveys as openly gay, lesbian or bisexual, and then adds people who have transitioned as transsexuals.

If you are in business, and believe Gates' figures, you will sacrifice potential income, and fail to value the true diversity of your workforce. A recent study has shown that there are as many people in the closet at work as there are out at work. That's true for society at large, too. And the number of transgender people who identify themselves as having transitioned as transsexuals is a fraction of the transgender community. Why Gates, who according to my friends, is an excellent demographer, would announce how many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people there are, based solely on the number who self-identify as gay, or who have transitioned as transsexual, baffles me.

In the same announcement, Gates says that 11 percent of the American population has same-sex attractions, and 8.2 percent of Americans have engaged in homosexual sex. But only 3.8 percent of us self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

For many years, I've suggested that 5 percent to 10 percent of the population is homosexual, and a larger percentage is bisexual. About 1.5 percent of the population is transgender. I think I'm closer to the truth than Gary Gates, but no one can prove either of us wrong. Nevertheless, I think what Gates did was a bit irresponsible. Gay and lesbian people are homosexual even if they don't self-identify. What Gates has actually given us is a number to gauge cultural acceptance of homosexuality. Sixty years from now, I suggest the numbers of self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual people will be much higher, maybe closer to his 11 percent who now claim same-sex attraction.

What disturbed me as much about Gates' findings was his explanation of his findings. He wrote a piece in *The Washington Post* that said, "Back in the 1960s, pioneering gay activists found an obscure passage from a 1948 book written by prominent sex researcher Alfred Kinsey that read, '10 percent of the males are more or less exclusively homosexual... for at least three years between the

ages of 16 and 55.' They used that quote to claim that 10 percent of the population was gay, even though Kinsey's study was not designed to make a population-based estimate."

Gates blames gay people for creating the 10 percent figure, as if it was a plot by homosexuals to deliberately deceive heterosexual Americans. But, he wasn't there, he's not a historian, and he's not a sexologist. He's a self-identified gay demographer who is besmirching the intentions of other gay people perhaps to make a case for his own credibility. As one of those gay educators from the early 1970s, I learned the 10 percent figure from heterosexual, certified sexuality educators, not gay activists. It's a figure that appears in sexuality textbooks. When I was certified as a sexuality educator, it was a statistic used by the professionals who taught me the course. I wish Gates had stuck to what he knows, which is statistics, and not attempted to build his case by telling us that other gay people manipulated data to suit their own political needs. It's offensive and inaccurate.

There are three components to my homosexuality. The first is my sexual orientation, which is my innate feeling of attraction. Gates says that 11 percent of the population acknowledges these feelings. I know of a rich, white CEO who is married with children, who would not acknowledge he makes regular trips to a gay bar out of state if you pulled out his teeth one at a time. He would be disinherited. So, I don't trust the 11 percent figure. It's way too low.

The second component of my homosexuality is my sexual behavior. This is what I do sexually, how often, and with whom. Gates says 8.2 percent of Americans acknowledge same-sex behaviors. Given the incredible prejudice against homosexuality in the black, Latino, Asian, Indian, Mormon, and Muslim communities, and among religious fundamentalists, I think more people have had gay sex than feel comfortable telling us.

The third component of my homosexuality is my identity. This is what I tell myself and others about my sexuality. It's called "coming out" when you tell the truth. Gates says that only 3.6 percent of us are telling the truth. That doesn't surprise me at all, but again, stick around. We'll all see that number grow in our lifetimes.

Telling the world that only 3.8 percent of Americans are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender seems unsophisticated to me. I wish Gary Gates had said instead, "I'm a scientist. Given our research, at this time in history, 3.6 percent of Americans self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, 8.2 percent say they have had homosexual sex, and 11 percent tell us they have same-sex feelings. Additionally, 0.2 percent of the population has transitioned as transsexuals. I will let others interpret these statistics, with the caution that it is difficult to fully trust the accuracy of the data in a culture that does not value same-sex attraction."