

## **Gender-Based Analysis and Op-Ed Writing: The Example of Sexual Minority Reproductive Health**

Developed in Women, Gender and Health 207:  
Advanced Topics of Women, Gender, and Health,  
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### **Teaching Example**

#### **Overview:**

This exercise will focus on the differences between gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behaviors. For courses that have an op-ed writing lesson or courses that would like to expand that capacity, we provide a teaching example on raising awareness and promoting policy changes to address the increased sexual risks among sexual minorities, in particular female youth. This exercise will not only help students develop op-ed writing skills, but also introduce them to gender analysis. Gender analysis is an important component of rigorous public health research and practice and is characterized by analyzing public health problems through the lens of gender. It goes beyond biological differences between men and women to examine the ways in which gender differences have been defined, and how those definitions affect the health of all people, with the understanding that their experiences reflect complex societal, political, and cultural differences.

#### **Appropriate Public Health Core Courses:**

Adolescent Health; Health Communication; OB/GYN Epidemiology; Introduction to Women, Gender, and Health

#### **Brief Background:**

Research findings are often not acted upon because they do not reach an audience outside of academia. Op-eds can be powerful modes for translating research findings into meaningful policy changes.

In the article, “Sexual orientation differences in teen pregnancy and hormonal contraceptive use: An examination across two generations,” Charlton and colleagues (2013) found that adolescent

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sexual minority females have been and continue to be at increased risk for teen pregnancy. Sexual minority women were defined in this study as women who do not identify as heterosexual. The authors used data from two cohorts of U.S. women across two generations (a cohort of nurses, and a cohort of the nurses' children) to examine explore these differences. More specifically, the authors found:

- Teen pregnancy rates were dramatically reduced in one generation.
- In spite of this reduction, sexual orientation disparities in teen pregnancy persisted in both cohorts.
- Mostly heterosexual and bisexual women had over 2 times greater risk of teen pregnancy (i.e., occurring before age 20 years) compared to their heterosexual counterparts.
- Lesbian women had 1.6 times greater risk of teen pregnancy than heterosexual women in the younger generational cohort, but a lower risk of teen pregnancy than heterosexual women in the older generational cohort.

These findings may seem counter-intuitive to some (for example, some may assume that lesbians have not had sexual contact with men). In fact, this article presents an important opportunity to consider the multiple dimensions of gender and sexual orientation (see slide 2 in Instructor Slides, provided as supplemental material) and to discuss the importance of questioning assumptions when approaching sexual and reproductive public health questions.

#### Learning Objectives for Students:

- 1) Students will learn how to write a powerful op-ed to inspire social and policy change.
- 2) Students will gain a better understanding of how to interpret and communicate gender analysis from research.

#### Teaching Methods:

This is an illustrative example of translating gender-informed research and its implications about reproductive health risks to sexual minorities into an op-ed that will increase public understanding of complex, nuanced issues, such as the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation.

#### Teaching Guide:

Begin the lesson by discussing how op-eds can be useful in the public health field (see supplemental materials: Harvard Kennedy School Communications Program, "How to Write an

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Op-Ed or Column”; Instructor Slides, “Gender-Based Analysis and Op-Ed Writing”). Note that op-eds can be useful modes for translating research findings into meaningful policy changes. Research findings are often not acted upon because they do not reach an audience outside of academia. Ask the class to think of examples of research findings that have informed policies, or research findings that should be translated into policies but have not been. Are there any common themes with those findings that have been successfully acted upon?

After discussing the power of op-eds, provide an introduction to gender-based analysis (use provided Instructor Slides). Discuss the differences between sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Discuss how gender may affect population health (use slide 2 to help facilitate discussion). Ask the students in your class how they have seen gender incorporated into their public health curriculum, if at all?

After the discussion, use the article “Sexual orientation differences in teen pregnancy and hormonal contraceptive use: An examination across two generations” (Charlton et al. 2013) as an example of a gender-based analysis that students will use to understand the key components of a strong op-ed. Present each of the following elements, using examples of op-ed style writing based on the Charlton et al. article to illustrate their importance (see slides 3-6).

**Key elements to a strong op-ed, using Charlton et al. (2013) as an example:**

- 1) *Know your audience*: If the audience is physicians, it would be important to focus on what is within their sphere of influence. For example, you could argue that physicians have a responsibility to their patients to discuss sexual minority status, sexual behaviors, and contraception with their patients. If the audience were policy-makers, you could argue that more money should go towards programs and sexual education for sexual minority youth to prevent unintended pregnancy.
- 2) *Personal narrative*: Personal narratives can help readers identify with the issues raised in the op-ed and connect to the writer, which can increase their motivation to complete your call to action. For instance, you might discuss the experience of a lesbian teenager growing up in a stigmatizing social environment to illustrate the importance of acknowledging the risks facing sexual minorities and providing comprehensive sex education. Such experiences could include personal experiences, experiences of students, or experiences of friends or family members.
- 3) *Timeliness*: An op-ed is more likely to be published if it responds to a recent news story or policy issue, like an upcoming vote on a proposed bill. Look for other op-eds and news stories you can respond to (for instance, you could disagree with someone else’s op-ed). A

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current example of a timely issue is Caitlyn (formerly Bruce) Jenner's revelation that she is a transgender woman. This would be an opportunity to discuss the health needs of transgender people, or an opportunity to explain the differences between gender identity, sexual orientation identity, and sexual behavior.

- 4) *Clear, concise argument:* As the op-ed is limited to approximately 750 words, it is critical to have only one key take-home message that readers remember. This message should be introduced towards the beginning of the op-ed and should be covered in just 1-2 sentences. While Charlton's journal article has a number of implications and nuances, you should pick just one aspect to emphasize, such as the need for providers to better understand the sexual risks and needs of sexual minority youth.
- 5) *Action recommendation:* In addition to a clear argument, an op-ed should propose an action step your audience can take to address that argument. While you may introduce this at the beginning, it is critical to include at the end of the op-ed. An example using Charlton's article might be that pediatricians be trained in sexual education targeted to sexual minorities.

### **Assignment:**

The students should write their own op-ed on a topic of their choosing, taking into account the elements of a successful op-ed that were delineated in class. Following feedback, students should be encouraged to submit the op-eds for publication.

### **Selected Examples of Op-Eds (click link below for full text):**

[Mike Lee: Why I voted against background checks \(Mike Lee, USA Today, April 17, 2013\)](#)

[Coke Didn't Make America Fat \(Muhtar Kent, Wall Street Journal, October 7, 2009\)](#)

[My Medical Choice \(Angelina Jolie, New York Times, May 14, 2013\)](#)

[Why Do Stars Think It's O.K. to Sell Soda? \(Mark Bittman, New York Times, January 5, 2013\)](#)

[Breast Cancer Screenings: What We Still Don't Know \(H. Gilbert Welch, New York Times, December 29, 2013\)](#)

### **Reference:**

Charlton BM, Corliss HL, Missmer SA, Rosario M, Spiegelman D, Austin SB. Sexual orientation differences in teen pregnancy and hormonal contraceptive use: An examination across two generations. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2013 Sep; 209(3): 204.e1-8.

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