

# Challenging Hidden Assumptions in Loaded Questions



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# 1. Introduction

# Loaded questions

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- Here is a famous example of a “loaded” (or “trick”) question:

“Have you stopped beating your wife?”

- The question makes two important assumptions:
  - You have a wife
  - You have beaten her at some time
- The question invites a “yes” or “no” answer
  - Either of these answers is an admission that you are/were a wife beater
- Better tactics:
  - Refuse to answer the question. Or...
  - Challenge the assumptions made in a loaded question or claim



Focus of this presentation

# Loaded claims

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- Often, claims about oppressed groups are loaded
- Examples for homosexuality (or another aspect of sexuality):
  - “It’s just a phase”
  - “Homosexuality is not normal (or natural)”
  - “Homosexuals are likely to be rapists (or paedophiles)”
- Examples for racism (where “X” stands for an ethnic group):
  - “X people have low moral standards”
  - “X people are rapists, murderers, ...”
  - “X people are terrorists”
- Let’s examine some of these examples

## 2. “It’s just a phase”

# “It’s just a phase”

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- Common reply: “it’s *not* a phase. I’ve been like this for years”
  - Counter-reply: “You will *eventually* grow out of it”
- Implicit assumption in the claim:
  - The word “just” is used in the claim to reduce importance
  - So, the assumption is that a phase is not important
- Actually, phases occur throughout life:
  - Example: childhood, adolescence, (young) adult, middle age, old age
  - Was your childhood unimportant “just” because it was a phase?
- The length of a phase is not a measure of its importance:
  - Childhood lasts more than a decade
  - The “terrible twos” last (hopefully) only a few months but are an important part of a child’s development

# Examples of phases

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- Pablo Picasso went through many phases (periods) in his art:
  - blue period, rose period, African period, (various types of) cubism
- It is common for a musician or band to change musical styles:
  - Early U2 is quite different to later U2. Same for the Beatles
  - Pink Floyd: psychedelic period, Dark Side of the Moon, later on Roger Waters wrote an opera
- During your life you probably had phases for liking:
  - Hobbies: reading, art, model construction, dancing
  - Particular musicians or genres of music, authors or genres of books
  - Particular (genres of) movies, TV shows, actors, directors
  - Particular kinds of sport
  - Particular types of food or drink
  - Particular types of work, so you had a career change



# Phases should be celebrated

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- It is not right to dismiss something because it is “just” a phase
- English idiom: “variety is the spice of life”
  - Means that life is more interesting when you try different things
- Phases in your life bring variety and so should be *celebrated*
- Consider the following hypothetical conversation:

X: “Your homosexuality is just a phase”

Y: “Possibly. Of course, that means my heterosexuality was a phase too.  
Do you think your heterosexuality is also a phase?”

  - X is likely to feel baffled and possibly angry by the response:
    - Y is *not* defending his/her sexuality
    - Instead, Y is challenging core beliefs and assumptions of X

3. “Homosexuality is not normal (or natural)”

# **“Homosexuality is not normal (or natural)”**

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- “Normal” has several meanings, including:
  - Typical, common
  - Moral or ethical
  
- “Natural” has several meanings, including:
  - Occurs in nature (which means that it is typical or common)
  - Moral or ethical
  
- The next few slides:
  - Discuss some common approaches to tackling this loaded claim
  - Then discuss an assumption hidden in the claim

# **“Homosexuality is not common or part of nature”**

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- Common reply to “homosexuality is not common and does not occur in nature”...
- Use an Internet search engine for “homosexuality animals”
  - One useful reference: <http://www.news-medical.net/?id=20718>
- Summary of search:
  - Homosexuality has been observed in over 1500 species
  - Including humans!

# **“Homosexuality is immoral”**

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- Common reply to “homosexuality is immoral”...
- Often, morality is defined in terms of religious beliefs, so...
  - Look in the Bible (or equivalent book for another religion) for:
    - Neutral or positive references to homosexuality
    - Other taboos that are widely ignored today
  - Argue that such contradictions enable us to ignore Bible-based homophobia with a clear conscience

# Hidden assumption

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- There is an assumption in “homosexuality is not normal”
  - Assumption is that something else (heterosexuality) is normal
- This assumption can be challenged with a counter-claim:
  - “I don’t believe anyone is normal. Everyone is a pervert”
  - There are two parts to this counter-claim
- Part 1 (challenging “normal = typical”)
  - There is enormous variety in sexual practices of (even) heterosexuals
  - No one sexual position or act is dominant enough to be “typical”
- Part 2 (challenging “normal = moral”):
  - Religions condemn many sexual acts that (even) heterosexuals commonly employ
  - Therefore, most heterosexuals are just as immoral as homosexuals

# Should hidden assumptions be challenged?

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- The purpose of the previous slide:
  - Is *not* to force you to argue that “everyone is a pervert” rather than “homosexuality is as normal as heterosexuality”
  - But is to make you aware of more *options* you have in arguments
- Note: if 2 things are “equally good” then they are “equally bad”
- Therefore, the following seem like opposites, but are similar:
  - “Homosexuality is as normal as heterosexuality”
  - “Everyone (heterosexual and homosexual) is a pervert”

## 4. Implicit comparisons



# Implicit comparisons

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- Consider the following claims (“X” denotes an ethnic group):
  - “Homosexuality is just a phase”
  - “Homosexuality is not normal (or natural)”
  - “Homosexuals are likely to be rapists (or paedophiles)”
  - “X people have low moral standards”
  - “X people are rapists, murderers, ...”
  
- All of these claims contain implicit comparisons:
  - “**Unlike heterosexuality**, homosexuality is just a phase”
  - “**Unlike heterosexuality**, homosexuality is not normal”
  - “**Unlike heterosexuals**, homosexuals are likely to be rapists (or paedophiles)”
  - “**Unlike us**, X people have low moral standards”
  - “**Unlike us**, X people are rapists, murderers, ...”

# Challenging implicit comparisons

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It can be useful to challenge the implicit comparison:

- Could heterosexuality be a phase?
- Is heterosexuality normal?
- Do crime figures prove that sex-related crimes per 1000 heterosexuals is lower than sex-related crimes per 1000 homosexuals?
- Do non-X people have high moral standards?
- Do crime figures prove that non-X people have lower crime rates?
  - Perhaps non-X people commit lots of crimes that are socially acceptable and hence go unrecognised. Examples:
    - Job and housing discrimination against X people
    - Harassment, exploitation, rape, murder, genocide of X people
  - Often, crimes by non-X people are viewed differently than similar crimes committed by X people

# Background information about Malcolm X

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- His original surname was Little. He grew up poor
- Became a criminal:
  - Robbery, selling drugs, illegal gambling, “steering” (escorting white clients to brothels in black ghettos)
- Spent 8 years in prison. Converted to Islam while in jail
- Changed his surname to X to reject the name of slave owner
- When released from prison:
  - He became a minister in the Nation of Islam and helped increase membership from 400 to 40,000
  - He was a black-rights activist in the 1950s and 1960s
- Wrote “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” before being assassinated

# **“X people have low moral standards”**

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- Recall, “X” stands for an ethnic group
  - Do not confuse the “X” placeholder with Malcolm X
- Chapter 7 (“Hustler”) of Malcolm X’s autobiography:
  - His “steering” job and conversations with prostitute friends enabled him to compare the (lack of) moral standards of whites and blacks
  - Probably a better-informed comparison than that of many “respectable” people
  - His conclusion: “The hypocritical white man will talk about the Negro’s ‘low morals’. But who has the world’s lowest morals if not whites?”

## **“X people are rapists, murderers, ...”**

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- Often, non-X people conveniently overlook the large-scale crimes that their government commits on their behalf
- Chapter 11 (“Saved”) of Malcolm X’s autobiography:
  - Malcolm X read lots of books in the prison library
  - “And I read the histories of various nations, which opened my eyes gradually then wider and wider, to how the whole world’s white men had indeed acted like devils, pillaging and raping and bleeding and draining the whole world’s non-white people.”

# Double standards

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- Often, non-X people use a double standard when commenting on similar crimes committed by X and non-X people
- Chapter 18 (“El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz”) of Malcolm X’s autobiography:
  - “New York white youth were killing victims; that was a ‘sociological’ problem. But when black youth killed somebody, the power structure was looking to hang somebody.
  - ...
  - When whites had rifles in their homes, the Constitution gave them the right to protect their home and themselves. But when black people even spoke of having rifles in their homes, that was ‘ominous’.”

## Double standards (cont')

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- In July 2007, some Muslims:
  - Planted two car bombs outside London nightclubs
  - Crashed a car into Glasgow airport
- These events were widely reported in the English media
  - But there was significantly less reports of the 25+ retaliation attacks in the following weeks  
(including a car bomb, a petrol bomb, and a near-fatal stabbing)
- Results of Google searches:
  - “car bomb Glasgow airport”: 75,500 results
  - “car bomb Glasgow airport revenge”: 882 results

## 5. Summary and conclusions



# Summary and further reading

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- Often, claims about oppressed groups are loaded with hidden assumptions
  - Example: “Homosexuality is just a phase” assumes that a phase is bad
  - Example: “**Unlike us**, X people have low moral standards”
  - The assumption is that non-X people have high moral standards
- You can counter such claims by challenging the hidden assumptions/comparisons
- Recommended book:
  - “The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense” by Suzette Haden Elgin
  - This was the first in a series of books
  - Other titles in the series tailor the message for different audiences. Examples: at work, communicating with children, ...