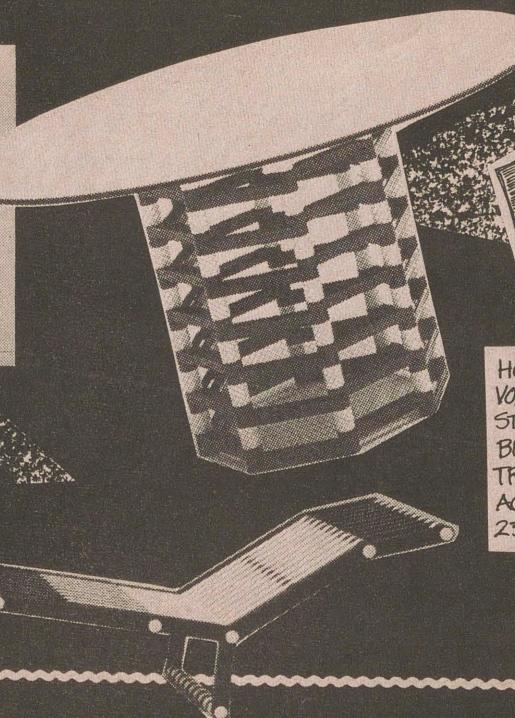




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For Mensa Members Who Happen to Be GAYSIG Getting High on IQ

BY ANDY NYBERG

Remember the typical brainy kids in your class, those "eggheads"—the girl wearing braids and braces, the boy in bow tie and wingtip shoes, both with black-rimmed glasses, both hopelessly awkward in love, athletics and life in general?

Cruel stereotypes. Society, which seems to worship high intelligence, at the same time puts it down. And people who are extra-intelligent and gay sometimes feel a double prejudice working against them.

Nevertheless, several hundred gay men and lesbians, all with soaring IQs, have united under the umbrella of

Mensa, the famous organization of highly intelligent people.

Chairperson of the gay group is Roger Starr, who lives on the Pacific coast just north of San Francisco. "Our original purpose as a gay group," he says, "was to make Mensa aware of our existence and our worth. Now our main efforts are to form a sense of community, to discuss and resolve our mutual problems, and especially to help those who are still trying to find ways to relate to a paranoid society.... Our having a visible presence throughout Mensa encourages and supports our intent to be a communicative, rather than an exclusionary, part of Mensa."

Mensa is latin for "table"; as the title for an organization, it connotes a round-table society. Two British barristers founded Mensa shortly after World War II, with the idea that extremely intelligent people would combine their intellectual skills to help world leaders preserve world peace. Obviously, this ideal wasn't achieved, but Mensa as a

purely social organization flourished. The American affiliate, founded in 1961, now counts nearly 50,000 members out of the 4 million Americans estimated to be eligible.

And what are the eligibility requirements?

There's only one—a score in the top 2% of the population on IQ tests, that is, somewhere above 132 on most exams.

Critics of Mensa call it an elitist society based on a purely biological factor—people are born either with or without—high intelligence. These critics imagine members of Mensa (or M's, as they call themselves) standing around at their meetings and congratulating each other on how smart they are.

While old-fashioned conversation may indeed be the mainstay of many Mensa gatherings, topics run far beyond Mensa itself. American Mensa, in fact, is broken up into hundreds of special-interest groups, or SIGs—national groups whose devotees communicate primarily by mail. It's here that the tremendous diversity of M's is shown, and where stereotypes about intelligent people often falter.

SIG topics include square-dancing, Oriental cooking, calligraphy, physics, boating, vampires, patriotism and television. Other SIGs specialize in allergies, Paul McCartney, assassinations, Star Trek, bread baking, limericks, the Aquarian Conspiracy, cats, Bach and the ever popular trivia.

There are SIGs for M's who are either over 80, alcoholic, feminist, disabled, into bodybuilding or left-handed. Religion? Mensa includes special-interest groups of priests, Jehovah's Witnesses and Episcopalians. Are highly intelligent people stodgy and serious? Ask the M's involved in the Absurd SIG (de-

scribed as "the first refuge of the lunatic fringe") or the Sheltering Oafs or the Degenerates or the IDRCAF ("I Don't Really Care About Football").

And, of course, there are the more than 300 M's involved in the special-interest group for lesbians and gay men, which is simply called the GAYSIG. The group began in Los Angeles more than a decade ago, explains Waugh Smith, who until recently edited the GAYSIG's monthly newsletter, *Le GAMBIT* (a convoluted acronym for "A Bit about Lesbians and Gays in Mensa").

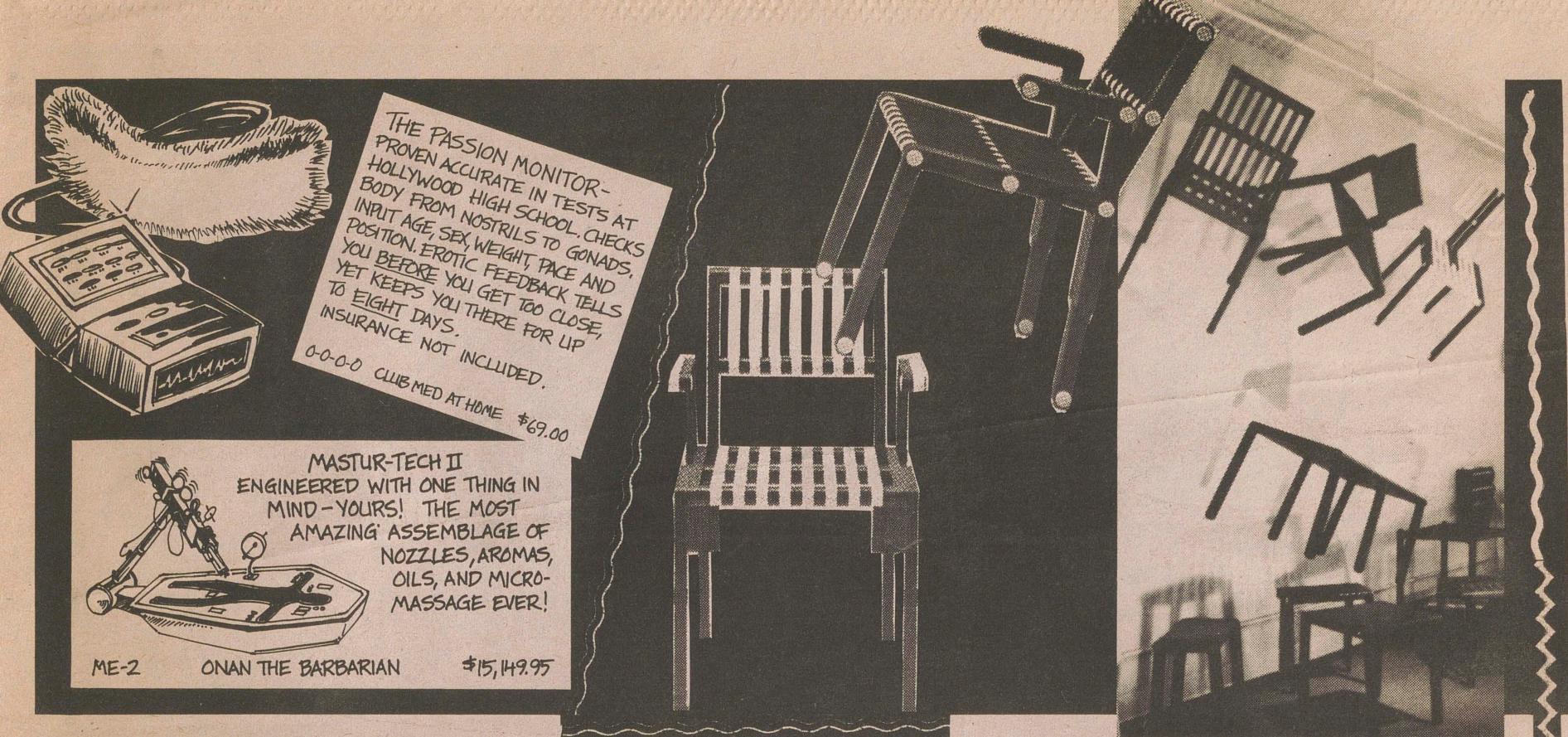
People who feel left out of Mensa may be attracted to the recently formed society for the Diversely Educated but Not Seriously Affected (DENSA). Though the group has yet to establish a gay chapter, its founder points out that many members of Mensa, ironically, also belong to DENSA. "Why be tense when you can be dense?" ask DENSA members, bluntly observing, "Pooh-pooh on IQ!"

To qualify for membership in DENSA, applicants take a "density quotient" test. Questions include:

- Which word doesn't rhyme: *bar, car, far, jar, miscellaneous, star, tar?*
- Define the universe. Give two examples.
- People who eat food will live longer than people who don't eat food; true or false?

For more information about DENSA, write to Box 214338, Dallas, TX 75221.

Andy Nyberg, a free-lance writer based in Northern California, is a frequent contributor to *The ADVOCATE*.



"We began meeting unofficially as GLAD, or Gay Liberation and Development," says Smith. "Then, later, we tried to run a notice of our meetings in the *Mensa Bulletin*, the monthly magazine of American Mensa—and it wasn't put in. We made an issue of it, and Mensa responded by passing a resolution banning any gay mention in the *Bulletin*, claiming it was a 'controversial' topic with 'political overtones' that might damage Mensa's tax-free status as a nonprofit organization. The gay group objected, of course, but in a friendly way, since we did want to remain part of Mensa. And it worked. By the end of the year, American Mensa passed a new resolution saying it wouldn't discriminate against gays, either by action or inaction."

GLAD soon outgrew Los Angeles, and in 1976 the GAYSIG was recognized by the national headquarters. Its hundreds of members, including more than 20 from other nations, correspond through LeGAMBIT and meet in numerous regional groups. GLAD is going strong in Los Angeles; the Homogeniuses meet in New York; GaWsh in Washington, D.C.; Gay M in San Francisco; and countless other subgroups of the subgroup meet in locations around the world—including Phoenix, Seattle, Toronto, Milwaukee, San Antonio, Chicago, and Australia. "We use the usual '10%' figure for counting gays," says Smith, "so our goal is to get 5,000 of the 50,000 M's into the GAYSIG." (Smith admits they're a long way from that goal.)

Elitist? Many M's point out that Mensa has only that single membership requirement—a high IQ—while several other organizations restrict their memberships on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, age, ethnic back-

ground, profession, religion or other factors.

"Everything's elitist in some ways," Smith says. "All the people who get together because they can high-jump six feet are elitist." And far from bragging about their brains, most M's point out that it's not intelligence itself that's really important, but how people use the intelligence they have.

"One of the great things about Mensa," Starr asserts, "is that glorious feeling of going into any group and not having to explain myself—to discuss virtually anything and have people right there with me. I'm not saying that conversations are right out of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, but most M's are

Smith say many GAYSIG members are closeted. "We ran a survey," Smith says, "that showed at least half weren't out at work, although about three-quarters were out to their families."

It doesn't help, Starr adds, that a great many members live in isolated parts of the country, "and for many of them this is their very first contact with other gays. Some say that if it weren't for the GAYSIG, they wouldn't belong to Mensa at all; while some also belong to other SIGs." Incredibly, Starr says he spends 40 to 60 hours a week on the GAYSIG, much of it in simply dealing with correspondence. Now in his third year as chairperson, he receives a flood of mail and tries to answer it all, even

says many are computer programmers and teachers.

More generalizations about ultra-intelligent gays may be revealed by a current project of the GAYSIG that's expected to be completed soon. This is the "personality testing" prepared by the Institute for Personality and Ability Testing at the University of Illinois, Urbana. Interested GAYSIG members answer a battery of 272 questions; the results are poured into a computer that will produce a compilation of the results later this year.

Another GAYSIG project is the Travel Exchange, whose participants correspond through a twice-yearly roster in order to host fellow GAYSIG tourists in their homes, or simply to exchange travel information. The roster has included addresses all across the country, as well as in the Caribbean, the South Pacific and Europe.

Interested in joining Mensa and its GAYSIG? Many M's qualify on the basis of a previously taken test, such as an Army IQ test or an SAT score; the latter must be 1300 if the test was taken before September 1977, or 1250 if taken afterward ("Many people say Mensa is a bunch of people good at taking tests," Starr points out with a laugh. "There's more truth than poetry in that").

Official Mensa qualifying tests must be timed by a proctor, but for a general at-home test just to see if you're in the running, send \$8 to the American Mensa headquarters at 1702 West 3rd Street, Brooklyn, NY 11223; phone (212) 376-1925. The same address may be contacted for referral to the GAYSIG.

Membership in the GAYSIG is a donation of \$10, which includes a subscription to LeGAMBIT; nonmembers may subscribe to the newsletter for \$6.●

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well-educated, good conversationalists. And someone who's not in that category understandably would feel a little left out."

GAYSIG members are of all ages; the youngest is 15, the oldest in her 70s. Between 10% and 15% of the GAYSIG membership is lesbian. "We do have difficulty getting women involved," Starr admits. "Maybe they're not joiners as much as men, maybe they tend to be more self-sufficient, more 'hearth and home' than 'party time.' At least once we started a women's page in the newsletter, but there was very little response."

Can any generalizations be made about highly intelligent gays, or at least about the ones who join Mensa?

Well, for one thing, both Starr and

though, he says wryly, "it builds up."

Special effort protects the privacy of closeted members. No membership information is forwarded to the American Mensa headquarters in New York, and names and addresses are shared with other GAYSIG members only with the permission of the members involved. Even the name of the newsletter, LeGAMBIT, was changed from GaySignificance when postal laws required that the sender's name be placed on envelopes; LeGambit is now sent in such a way that gay never appears on the outside of the envelope ("We argue about this a lot," Smith admits).

GAYSIG members are of numerous professions, although Smith