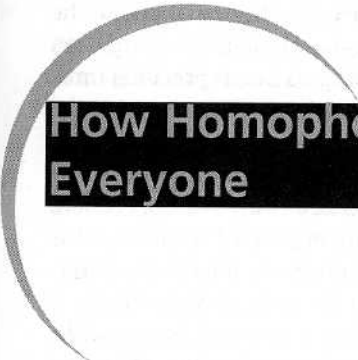


Contexts

46



How Homophobia Hurts Everyone

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It is often said that, in the midst of misfortune, something unexpectedly valuable arises, and this has indeed been my experience. While traveling alone through Scandinavia one summer, I began to lose the vision in both my eyes. When I reached Denmark, I went to a hospital for an evaluation, and, after a number of tests, a physician notified me that my retinas had detached, probably because of a congenital defect. She advised immediate surgery to prevent further deterioration, and I was admitted to the Community Hospital in Copenhagen.

The next day, my sister, Susan, flew to Copenhagen to be with me for what turned out to be nearly two months.

That summer in this distant northern land, fearing the permanent loss of my vision, I lay in a narrow hospital bed longing for friends and relatives back home. But as Susan sat with me day after day, giving her love, her courage, her humor (and spectacular Danish pastries), something remarkable happened. Amid the bells of a distant church tolling away the passing hours, Susan and I genuinely got to know one another for the first time.

Although we inhabited the same house for over seventeen years, there was always some unspoken tension between us, some wall keeping us apart. Having only eighteen months separating us in age, we attended the same schools and had similar peer groups. For the first few years of our lives, we seemed to get along fine. We had a few friends in common, and we usually found time to play together most days. Our closeness, however, was soon to come to an end.

By the time I reached the age of seven or eight, I was increasingly becoming the target of harassment and attack by my peers, who perceived me as someone who was different. Names like *queer*, *sissy*, *little girl*, and *fag* were thrown at me like the large red ball the children hurled on the school yard in dodge ball games. During subsequent years, the situation only got worse. I tried to avoid other children and increasingly kept to myself. Susan and I grew apart. Only when we were both in our early twenties, about the time I went to Denmark, were we beginning to rediscover one another and to share the details of our lives.

While in college, I began to sort out how I had suffered as a gay male under the force of homophobia, but until my hospitalization I had very little idea how it had also affected Susan growing up as my heterosexually oriented younger sister. Smart, attractive,

outgoing, she appeared to have, at least from my vantage point, plenty of friends and seemed to fit in. In Denmark, however, she confided to me that, throughout our school years, she was continually teased for having a “faggot” brother. On one occasion, she recalled some of the older boys laughing at her, asking if she were “like her brother.” When she witnessed other students harassing me, peer pressure, coupled with her own fear of becoming a target, compelled her to distance herself from me by adding her voice to the chorus of insults. I felt betrayed, and at the time despised her for it.

Our time together in my hospital room permitted us the needed chance to define the basis of our past estrangement. Through the tears, the apologies, the rage at having been raised in an oppressive environment, and the regrets over losing so much precious time, we began the process of healing our relationship. As it turned out, my vision was not the only thing restored to me that summer.

This essay represents the growth of a seed planted in my mind back in Denmark. It centers around one primary premise: within each of the numerous forms of oppression, members of the target group (sometimes called “minority”) are oppressed while on some level members of the dominant or agent group are hurt. Although the effects of oppression differ qualitatively for specific target and agent groups, in the end everyone loses.

Most of us hold simultaneous membership in a number of groups based, for example, on our personal and physical characteristics, on our abilities and class backgrounds, and on our cultural, racial, or religious identifications. We may find ourselves both in groups targeted for oppression and in those dominant groups granted relatively higher degrees of power and prestige. By examining how we are disadvantaged as well as looking at the privileges we have, we can develop empathy for individuals different from ourselves and create a basis for alliances.

This essay, therefore, is really about alliances: support for the maintenance and strengthening of alliances where they currently exist and assistance in forging new ones where none has existed before—specifically, alliances between and among lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, transgender people, and heterosexuals.

How Are LGBT People Oppressed by Homophobia?

Lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, and transgender (LGBT) people—are among the most despised groups in the United States today. Perhaps paradoxically, for many in our society, love of sameness (i.e., *homo*-sexuality) makes people different, whereas love of difference (i.e., *hetero*-sexuality) makes people the same.

Much has been written about the ways homophobia in many Western cultures targets LGBT people, ranging from negative beliefs about these groups (which may or may not be expressed), to exclusion, denial of civil and legal protections, and, in some cases, overt acts of violence. Negative attitudes internalized by members of these groups often damage the spirit and stifle emotional growth.

Homophobia operates on four distinct but interrelated levels; the *personal*, the *interpersonal*, the *institutional*, and the *cultural* (also called the collective or societal) (Thompson and Zoloth 1989).

Personal homophobia refers to a personal belief system (a prejudice) that LGBT people either deserve to be pitied as unfortunate beings who are powerless to control their desires or should be hated, that they are psychologically disturbed, genetically defective, unfortunate misfits, that their existence contradicts the “laws” of nature, that they are spiritually immoral, infected pariahs, disgusting—to put it quite simply, that they are generally inferior to heterosexuals.

Interpersonal homophobia is manifest when a personal bias or prejudice affects relations among individuals, transforming prejudice into its active component—discrimina-

tion. Examples of interpersonal homophobia are name calling or “joke” telling intended to insult or defame individuals or groups; verbal and physical harassment and intimidation as well as more extreme forms of violence; the withholding of support, rejection, or abandonment by friends and other peers, coworkers, and family members; refusal of landlords to rent apartments, shop owners to provide services, insurance companies to extend coverage, and employers to hire on the basis of actual or perceived sexual identity. And the list goes on.

A study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) found that more than 90 percent of the respondents had experienced some form of victimization based on their sexual identity and that over 33 percent had been threatened directly with violence: “More than one in five males, and nearly one in ten females, say they were ‘punched, hit, kicked, or beaten,’ and approximately the same ratios suffered some form of police abuse. Assaults with weapons are reported by one in ten males and one in twenty females. Many of those who report having been harassed or assaulted further state that incidents occurred multiple times” (1984, 4). Approximately one-third of the respondents were assaulted verbally, while more than one in fifteen were physically abused by members of their own families.

Reports of violence directed against lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, and transgender people have increased each year since the NGLTF has been keeping records, and such incidents are only the tip of the iceberg. By no means are they isolated to certain locales; rather, they are widespread, occurring throughout the country.

Institutional homophobia refers to the ways in which governments, businesses, and educational, religious, and professional organizations systematically discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or identity. Sometimes laws, codes, or policies actually enforce such discrimination. Few institutions have policies supportive of LGBT people, and many actively work against not only those minorities but also heterosexuals who support them.

Consider, for example, the “Briggs” Initiative in the late 1970s: had it passed, it would have required the dismissal of California teachers who support gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights regardless of those teachers’ actual sexual identification. The U.S. military has a long-standing policy excluding lesbians, gays, and bisexuals from service. In most instances, rights gained through marriage, including spousal benefits and child custody considerations, do not extend to LGBT people. Homosexual acts are outlawed in a number of states. And although a number of municipalities and some states have extended equal protection in the areas of employment, housing, insurance, credit, and public accommodations, no such statute exists on the national level.

Although agreement concerning same-sex relationships and sexuality does not exist across the various religious communities, and while some denominations are rethinking their negative stands on homosexuality and bisexuality, others preach against such behaviors, and as a matter of policy exclude people from many aspects of religious life simply on the basis of sexual identity.

Until 1973, established psychiatric associations considered homosexuality a disordered condition. People were often institutionalized against their will, made to undergo dangerous and humiliating “aversion therapy,” and even, at times, lobotomized to alter their sexual desires. Same-sex lovers and friends are often still denied access to loved ones in hospital intensive-care units because of hospital policy allowing only blood relatives or a legal spouse visitation rights.

Today, although a number of practitioners within both the psychiatric and the medical professions hold genuinely enlightened attitudes regarding the realities of homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenering, some, unfortunately, remain entrenched in their negative perceptions of same-sex attractions and gender expression, and these perceptions often affect the manner in which they respond to their clients.

Cultural homophobia (sometimes called *collective* or *societal* homophobia) refers to the social norms or codes of behavior that, although not expressly written into law or policy, nonetheless work within a society to legitimize oppression. It results in attempts either to exclude images of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people from the media or from history or to represent these groups in negative stereotypical terms. The theologian James S. Tinney (1983) suggests seven overlapping categories by which cultural homophobia is manifested.

- 1, 2. *Conspiracy to silence and denial of culture.* These first two categories are closely aligned. Although not expressly written into law, societies informally attempt to prevent large numbers of individuals of a particular minority (or target) group from congregating in any one place (e.g., in bars and other social centers), deny them space to hold social or political functions, deny them access to materials, attempt to restrict representation in any given educational institution or employment in any business, and inhibit frank, open, and honest discussion of topics of interest to or concerning these groups.
3. *Denial of popular strength.* Many studies have found that a significant percentage of the population experiences same-sex desires, and that these individuals often define their identity in terms of these desires. The cultural assumption exists, however, that one is heterosexual until "proven guilty." According to Tinney, "Society refuses to believe how many blacks there are in this country 'passing' for white and how many lesbians and gays [and bisexuals] there are out there passing as heterosexuals" (Tinney 1983, 5).
4. *Fear of overvisibility.* A form of homophobia is manifested each time LGBT people are told that they should not define themselves in terms of their sexuality or gender identity or when they are accused of being "blatant" by expressing signs of affection in public, behaviors that heterosexual couples routinely take for granted. They are given the message that there is something inherently wrong with same-sex desire and that individuals so inclined should keep such desire well hidden and to themselves.
5. *Creation of defined public spaces.* Society tends to force disenfranchised individuals and groups into ghettos, where there is little possibility of integration into the general life of the community. Neighborhoods, business establishments, and even professions are thus set aside for LGBT people as they are for other target groups. Individuals enter these areas hoping to find temporary respite from the outside world's homophobia.
6. *Denial of self-labeling.* Epithets and other derogatory labels are directed at every target group. LGBT people have chosen terms of self-definition (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, for example) to portray the positive aspects of their lives and loves more adequately. Recently, increasing numbers of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people have reappropriated such terms as *queer*, *faggot*, and *dyke* in order to transform these venomous symbols of hurt and bigotry into tools of empowerment.
7. *Negative symbolism (stereotyping).* Stereotyping groups of people is used as a means of control and a further hindrance to understanding and to meaningful social change. Stereotypes about LGBT people abound, ranging from their alleged predatory appetites, to their physical appearance, to the possible "causes" of their desires.

In addition to Tinney's categories of cultural homophobia, psychologist Dorothy Riddle (1985) suggests that the concepts of *tolerance* and *acceptance* should also be included: tol-

