

How Homophobia Hurts Everyone

Warren J. Blumenfeld

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).

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—discrimination. 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. 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.

In 2009, the United States Congress passed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which for the first time made it a federal crime to assault or attack a person based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Institutional homophobia refers to the ways in which governments, businesses, and educational, religious, and professional organizations systematically discriminate on the basis of sexual 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 groups 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 had 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 were outlawed in a number of states until 2003. 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 partners 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 transgenderism, 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 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 suggests that the concepts of *tolerance* and *acceptance* should also be included: tolerance because it can, in actuality, be a mask for an underlying fear or even hatred (one is tolerant, e.g., of a baby crying on an airplane while simultaneously wishing it would stop or go away), and acceptance because it assumes that there is indeed something to accept.

HOW HOMOPHOBIA HURTS EVERYONE

It cannot be denied that homophobia, like other forms of oppression, serves the dominant group by establishing and maintaining power and mastery over those who are marginalized or disenfranchised. Individuals maintain oppressive behaviors to gain certain rewards or to avoid punishment, to protect their self-esteem against psychological doubts or conflicts, to enhance their value systems, or to categorize others in an attempt to comprehend a complex world. By excluding entire groups of people, those in positions of power obtain economic, political, ideological, and other privileges. In many ways, though, oppression, in this instance homophobia, ultimately limits heterosexuals.

Homophobia inhibits the ability of heterosexuals to form close, intimate relationships with members of their own sex.

Young people often form close same-sex attachments during their childhood years. But once they reach a certain age (usually around the time of puberty), their elders encourage them to distance themselves from these friends, with the implication that if they do not, their sexuality will be called into question. This means—especially for males—no more sleeping over at each other’s houses, no more sharing intimate secrets, no more spending as much time together. Ultimately, this situation tends to hinder the ability of heterosexual adults to get as close to a same-sex friend as they once did when they were very young.

Homophobia locks all people into rigid gender-based roles that inhibit creativity and self-expression.

Much has been written about gender roles and how they constrain both females and males. In Western culture, concepts of masculinity and femininity promote the domination of males over females and reinforce the identification of maleness with power. Males are encouraged to be independent, competitive, goal oriented, and unemotional, to value physical courage and toughness. Females, on the other hand, are taught to be nurturing, emotional, sensitive, expressive, to be caretakers of others while disregarding their own needs.

Gender roles maintain the sexist structure of society, and homophobia reinforces those roles—for example, by casting such epithets as *faggot*, *dyke*, and *homo* at people who step outside designated gender roles. This pervasive social conditioning based on anatomical sex effectively generates great disparities between males and females. For evidence of this inequality one need only look at the preponderance of men over women in upper management positions and other positions of prestige, or at the fact that women still do not earn

equal pay for equal work. There is also evidence, in a classic 1935 anthropological study of three cultures by Margaret Mead, that there is an increased incidence of violence against women in male-dominated societies.

Homophobic conditioning (and indeed all forms of oppression) compromises the integrity of heterosexual people by pressuring them into treating others badly, which are actions contrary to their basic humanity.

By way of analogy. Frederick Douglass, the famous nineteenth-century abolitionist who escaped slavery, described what he called "the dehumanizing effects" of slavery not on slaves alone, but also on white slave owners, whose position to slavery corrupted their humanity. Describing his experiences with Mrs. Sophia Auld, mistress of the Baltimore household in which Douglass lived and worked during the 1820s, Douglass wrote,

My new mistress proved to be a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. But, alas, this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of (her) heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tigerlike fierceness.

(Douglass 1845, 77-78)

Homophobia can be used to stigmatize, silence, and, on occasion, target people who are perceived or defined by others as gay, lesbian, or bisexual but who are in actuality heterosexual.

For more than two millennia in the West, antihomosexual laws and decrees have been enacted by religious denominations and governments carrying punishments ranging from ridicule to death of the "accused." These decrees have been used to justify harsh treatment of those discovered or believed to have engaged in same-sex activity. But what is often forgotten or overlooked is the fact that these same laws have, on occasion, been used by individuals and governments to silence opponents, regardless of whether they have engaged in same-sex activity.

In 1871, Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code banned homosexuality. It was later used by the Nazi regime to incarcerate and ultimately to send great numbers of men suspected of being homosexual to their death, and was also at times employed to incarcerate Catholic clergy, many of whom were heterosexual, as well as non-Catholic heterosexuals who opposed state authority. In addition, "sodomy" laws remained on the books until 2003 in many states in the U.S. Although designed chiefly to harass persons engaging in same-sex activity, they have also been used to prosecute heterosexuals.

The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund—a New York-based gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender-oriented legal organization—defended a twenty-six-year-old heterosexual man who was denied health insurance because he was unmarried, living in New York City with a male roommate, and therefore presumed to be gay and stereotypically assumed to be at increased risk for HIV/AIDS. Heterosexual male hairdressers and female gym teachers and other heterosexuals working in professions widely perceived to be "gay," along with single people living in red-lined "gay" zip codes, are also vulnerable to victimization by similar homophobia-based discrimination.

Violent "queer-bashing" is not infrequently directed against heterosexuals who are also perceived to be gay or lesbian. The clear implication here is that all people are at risk for attack, irrespective of their actual sexual identity, so long as any group remains the target of violent hate-motivated assaults.

Homophobia generally restricts communication with a significant portion of the population and, more specifically, limits family relationships.

No matter how they are constituted, families will continue to produce lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender offspring. The political and theocratic Right argues loudly that homosexuality poses a direct threat to “traditional family values.” In actuality, however, it is homophobia that strains family relationships by restricting communication among family members, loosening the very ties that bind. Children, fearing negative reactions from parents, hold back important information about their lives. Parents, often not wanting to hear about their child’s sexual or gender identity, never truly get to know their children. Even when parents and children reside in the same house, secret upon secret adds up to polite estrangement and sometimes to a total break.

When LGBT people finally do “come out” to their relatives and friends, the heterosexual relatives and friends sometime go into a “closet” as their homophobia and/or that of those around them leads them to withhold the truth from friends and neighbors. Indeed, family members sometimes become targets of stigmatization when the truth about an LGBT relative becomes known. In any case, the emotional toll can be great.

Homophobia ultimately undermines the process of parenting in all families. It harms not only those in the more obvious cases where there are LGBT children, or LGBT parents, but it also imposes great impediments to “mainstream” heterosexual families with heterosexual children.

Societal homophobia prevents some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from developing an authentic self-identity, and adds to the pressure to marry, which in turn places undue stress and oftentimes trauma on themselves as well as their heterosexual spouses and their children.

The suppression of information about the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender experience reinforces the heterosexist assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and should conform to standard conceptualizations of gender expression. This assumption, coupled with the frequently very real penalties for not conforming to heterosexual norms, has pressured many people either to hide their true sexual and/or gender identity or has restricted their self-realization. Some have married in an attempt to “fit in” or “pass,” or in hopes of “being cured” of their same-sex attractions and/or their gender expressions.

Homophobia is one cause of premature sexual involvement that increases the chances of teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Young people, of all sexual identities, are often pressured to become heterosexually active to prove to themselves and others that they are “normal.” If homophobia were reduced in the schools and society at large, in all likelihood, fewer young people would act out heterosexually during adolescence.

Homophobia combined with sexphobia (fear and revulsion of sex) results in the elimination of any discussion of the lives and sexuality of sexual minorities as part of school-based sex education, keeping vital information from all students. Such a lack of information can kill people in the age of AIDS.

Some religious and community leaders, educators, and parents actively work to prevent honest and nonjudgmental information concerning homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism—indeed, sexuality and gender in general—from reaching young people. Students of all sexual and gender identities need this information to make informed decisions about their sexual activity. Without it, they are placed at greater risk for unwanted pregnancy, STDs, and HIV infection.

Homophobia (along with racism, sexism, classism, sexphobia, and others) inhibits a unified and effective governmental and societal response to AIDS.

It can be reasonably argued that if the majority of people with AIDS had initially been middle-class, white, suburban heterosexual males, rather than gay and bisexual men, people of color, working-class people, sex workers (prostitutes), and drug users, then governmental and societal institutions would have mobilized immediately to defeat the epidemic.

Because of the lack of wide-scale early attention, AIDS has spread to pandemic proportions. The government and society, at least initially, did not make a true commitment to education, research, and treatment. Funding remained insufficient for as many years as AIDS retained its erroneous reputation of a disease of outcast sexual and social minorities. The result was, and in some sectors continues to be, that many heterosexuals have a false sense that they will not be affected, and take no precautions.

Homophobia prevents heterosexuals from accepting the benefits and gifts offered by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities: theoretical insights, spiritual visions and options, contributions in the arts and culture, to education, to religion, to family life, indeed to all facets of society.

In cultures where homophobia is present, there have been active attempts to falsify historical accounts of same-sex love—through censorship, deletion, half-truths, and altering pronouns signifying gender—making accurate reconstruction extremely difficult. This effectively distorts society's collective memory (i.e., history), clouding our sense of identity as individuals and as social beings. Everyone loses from this suppression of the truth.

John Boswell cites an example of this censorship in a manuscript of *The Art of Love* by the Roman author Ovid. A phrase that originally read, "A boy's love appealed to me less" (*Hoc est quod pueri tanger amore minus*) was altered by a Medieval moralist to read, "A boy's love appealed to me not at all" (*Hoc est quod pueri tanger amore nihil*), and an editor's note that appeared in the margin informed the reader. "Thus you may be sure that Ovid was not a sodomite" (*Ex hoc nota quod Ovidius nonfreit Sodomita*).

Boswell also cites a Renaissance example of homophobic censorship in which Michelangelo's grand-nephew changed the sex of the subject of his uncle's sonnets to make them more acceptable to the public.

Closer to our time, government-sponsored censorship of art deemed "homoerotic" by the National Endowment for the Arts ultimately restricted creativity and freedom of expression of the entire artistic community.

In addition, traditional religious teachings on homosexuality keep lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people from entering religious life or from being true to themselves. These teachings also inhibit the ability of many congregations to value and celebrate human diversity and, most importantly, impedes spiritual growth.

Homophobia saps energy from more constructive endeavors.

Like all forms of oppression, homophobia inhibits our ability to understand the nature and scope of truly serious and far-reaching social problems (e.g., poverty, illiteracy, war, disease, environmental decay, crime, and drug addiction). Oppression results in the scapegoating and distancing of people from one another, diminishing our capacity to address these problems and thereby degrading the quality of life for all of us. By reducing the various forms of oppression, we quite literally make our society more socially efficient, increasing our ability to find solutions to the social and ecological challenges that threaten our collective future.

Homophobia inhibits appreciation of other types of diversity, making it unsafe for everyone because each person has unique traits not considered mainstream or dominant. Therefore, we are all diminished when any one of us is demeaned.

As Reverend Martin Niemöller wrote during World War II,

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

(in Bartlett, 1980, 824)

The meaning is quite clear. When any particular group of people is scapegoated, it is ultimately everyone's concern. For today, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are targeted. Tomorrow, they may come for you. Therefore, it is in everyone's self-interest to work actively to dismantle all the many forms of oppression, including homophobia.

CONCLUSION

In truth, homophobia is pervasive throughout the society and each of us, irrespective of sexual or gender identity, is at risk of its harmful effects. Within the schools, homophobia compromises the entire educational environment. Though homophobia did not originate with us and we are not to blame, we are all responsible for its elimination and, therefore, all can gain by a closer examination of the issues.

Lesbians, bisexuals, gay males, and transgender people have been, and continue to be, on the front lines in fighting against homophobia, and standing by our sides are supportive heterosexual allies—people who have worked and continue to work through their own homophobic conditioning, who are secure with their own sexual identities, who have joined us and have not cared when others called their sexuality into question.

We are *all* born into a great pollution called homophobia (one among many forms of oppression) that falls upon us like acid rain. For some people, spirits are tarnished to the core; others are marred on the surface, but no one is completely protected. Yet neither are we to blame. We had no control over the formulation of this pollution, nor did we direct it to pour down upon us. On the other hand, we all have a responsibility, indeed an opportunity, to join together to construct protective shelters from the corrosive effect of oppression while working to clean up the homophobic environment in which we live. Once sufficient steps are taken to reduce this pollution, we will all breathe a lot easier.

References

- Bartlett, J. (1980). *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Douglass, F. (1982 [1845]). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. H. A. Baker, Jr. (ed.). New York: Penguin.
- Tinney, J. S. (1983). "Interconnections." *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* 14(3–4), 4–6.