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# HETEROSEXISM

## Introduction

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Oppression directed against all females, lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, pansexuals,<sup>1</sup> asexuals,<sup>2</sup> transgender people, and intersexuals<sup>3</sup> goes by many names and has a number of subdivisions and definitions. What connects them is the socially constructed and socially enforced binary systems that divide people along strictly demarcated boundaries and borders into either/or categories related to societal norms of self-presentation. The socially constructed notions of "sex," "gender," and "sexuality" are organized and maintained upon oppositional binary frames with their attendant meanings, social roles, values, stereotypes, and behavioral and attitudinal imperatives, expressions, and expectations. These features serve to maintain power and privilege for those who accord with these norms, while marginalizing and disempowering groups and individuals who violate them. This structure is established and enforced on the societal, institutional, and individual/interpersonal levels (Hardiman and Jackson, 1997). The most extreme and overt forms of oppression are directed against those who most challenge, confound, or contest these binary frames.

This section should be read in the context of the preceding section on sexism and the following section on transgender oppression. These three sections, taken together, present a comprehensive view of the ways in which societal privileges and disadvantages follow socially constructed understandings of the roles and expressions that attach to sex, gender, and sexuality. This section's website provides further resources to explore and understand these three interrelated yet distinctive components of sex, gender, and sexuality.

## HETEROSEXISM DEFINED

I define *heterosexism* as the overarching system of advantages bestowed on heterosexuals based on the institutionalization of heterosexual norms or standards and founded on the ideology that all people are or should be heterosexual, which privileges heterosexuals and heterosexuality, while excluding the needs, concerns, cultures, and life experiences of lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, pansexuals, and asexuals. We live in a paradoxical society in which loving sameness makes

you different while loving difference makes you the same. Often overt, though at times subtle, heterosexism is oppression by neglect, omission, erasure, and distortion. A related concept is *heteronormativity* (Warner, 1991) and *compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich, 1986), which emphasize the normalization and privileging of heterosexuality on the personal/interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels.

Examples of heterosexism include parents who automatically expect their children to marry a person of another sex; media portrayals of only heterosexuals in positive and satisfying relationships; teachers presuming that all of their students and their students' parents are heterosexual, and teaching only about the contributions of heterosexuals. Heterosexism also takes the form of pity toward lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, pansexuals, and asexuals as unfortunate human beings who "can't help being the way they are."

Heterosexism's more active and at times visible component, called *homophobia*, is oppression by intent, purpose, and design. Derived from the Greek terms *homos*, meaning "same," and *phobikos*, meaning "having a fear of and/or an aversion toward," *homophobia* was coined by George Weinberg (1972). Other terms include: *homosexphobia*, *homonegativism*, *lesbian- and gay-hatred* or *-hating*. *Homophobia* refers to the fear and hatred of those who love and are attracted affectionally, emotionally, romantically, and sexually to some members of the same sex. Homophobia includes prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence brought on by that fear and hatred. Other related concepts include *lesbophobia* or *lesbiphobia*, which can be defined as the fear, hatred, discrimination, and acts of violence stemming from this fear and hatred against women who love women, and *biphobia*, which is fear, hatred, and oppression directed against bisexuals and pansexuals: people who reject the sex/gender binary, and who find that gender and sex are irrelevant in influencing whether they will be sexually, emotionally, and romantically attracted to others—therefore, they are attracted to people regardless of their gender and sex.

*Heterosexism* is a more inclusive and expansive term than terms based on a "phobia" meaning a fear that is "irrational" or "unreasonable." This section takes the view that some fears and hatreds (and forms of prejudice) are *taught* as a normalized process of socialization and thus exist within the realm of *learned* responses. Therefore, for purposes of discussion throughout this book and this section, though we sometimes use the terms "homophobia" and "biphobia," we are also employing the term "heterosexism" in its expanded and inclusive form.

## OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION FRAMEWORKS

The histories of homosexuality, bisexuality, and gender non-conformity are filled with incredible pain and enormous pride, of overwhelming repression and victorious rejoicing, of stifling invisibility and dazzling illumination. Throughout the ages, dominant groups have labeled minoritized sexual and gender people using many terms: from "sinners," "sick," and "criminal," to having a "preference," "orientation," "identity," and even being given "a gift from God." Though same-sex attraction and sexuality and gender non-conformity has probably always existed in human and most non-human species, the concept of "homosexuality," "bisexuality," "transgenderism," "heterosexuality," and "gender conformity," in fact, sexual and gender identities in general and the construction of identities and sense of community based on these identities is a relatively modern concept. It is only within the last 160 or so years that there has been an organized and sustained political effort to protect the rights of people with same-sex and both-sex attractions, and those who cross traditional constructions of gender identities and expression.

## RELIGIOUS ENDORSEMENTS FOR HETEROSEXUALITY

Many people cite religious texts to support the social norms of heterosexuality, even though there is no monolithic theological endorsement for heterosexuality, and even though these religious texts contain many internal contradictions. Instead, religious scholars and various faith traditions and denominations within those traditions interpret religious textual passages related to same-sex sexuality, same-sex relationships, and transgressive expressions of gender very differently (see section website for further resources on this issue).

Though many religious denominations throughout the years have worked vigorously to end oppression toward a number of groups, including those who transgress heterosexual norms, religious textual passages have been referenced throughout the ages to justify and rationalize the practices that marginalize, harass, deny rights, persecute, oppress, and even kill entire groups of people based on non-conforming sexual, gender, and other social identities. During various historical periods, people within different faith traditions have applied specific religious texts to establish and maintain hierarchical positions of power, domination, and privilege over individuals and groups targeted by these texts. For example, individuals, organizations, and entire nations have quoted specific textual passages to justify the construction and maintenance of the institution of slavery, the persecution and murder of Jews, male domination over and denial of rights of women, adult domination and persecution of young people, and demonization, marginalization, denial of rights, and extreme forms of oppression against minoritized sexualities and gender non-conformity, considering them anywhere from being creations of the Devil, to sinners and immoral, to being the embodiment of evil in the world, which, left unchecked, would result in the destruction of peoples and nations.

History has shown a symbiotic relationship between religious teachings concerning homosexuality, bisexuality, and gender non-conformity, and the secular, legal, and political policies against homosexuality, bisexuality, and gender non-conformity. Religious, philosophical, social, and political attitudes set the groundwork for restrictive laws enacted toward the latter stages of imperial Roman civilization; Roman law was used as a basis for Medieval Canon Law (the law of the Catholic Church); Canon Law along with Roman law has been used as the cornerstone for punitive civil laws of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and into the present day. Laws doling out punishments, such as denial of marriage and child custody benefits, restrictions on engaging in military service, constraints in gaining employment, housing, insurance, health benefits, and public accommodations, flogging, banishment, bodily mutilation, incarceration, and death of the accused have existed at various times in most countries. When we come to the contemporary United States, we must ask whether a society, founded on the guiding principle of the separation of religion and government, has the right to formulate and pass legislation based on religious tenets, which are not accepted by all—a question of great significance given the continuing religious sanctions supporting heterosexuality.

## “MEDICAL MODEL” SUPPORTS FOR HETEROSEXUALITY

One important rationale for heterosexuality and gender conformity is based upon the biological and psychological pathologizing of sexual and gender transgressive people. From the so-called “Eugenics Movement” of the mid-nineteenth century through the twentieth century <sup>CE</sup> and beyond, medical and psychological professions have often proposed and addressed, in starkly medical language, the alleged “deficiencies” of, for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as peoples of color, people who are differently-abled, youth, and elders.

Some members of the scientific community view people attracted to their own sex and to both males and females as constituting distinct biological or “racial” types—those who could be distinguished from “normal” people through anatomical markers. Rather than considering homosexuality and bisexuality merely as emotional and physical attractions along a broad spectrum of emotional and sexual possibilities, some sectors of the medical and psychological communities employ terms to continue to pathologize people with same-sex and both-sex attractions, and those who cross traditional constructions of gender identities and expression. This has resulted in lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, and those who transgress normative gender expression (often against their will) being hospitalized, committed to mental institutions, jailed, lobotomized, electroshocked, castrated, sterilized, and undergoing “aversion therapy,” “reparative therapy,” “Christian counseling,” and genetic counseling.

By deploying the “medical model” to investigate and pathologize the “other,” heteronormativity is perceived as unremarkable or “normal,” an unquestioned, hegemonic norm against which all others are judged. Heterosexual norms justify and explain away the otherwise unacceptable persecution and oppression of non-conforming sexual identity groups, while avoiding addressing issues of domination, privilege, subordination, and marginalization. This “medicalization” of homosexuality and bisexuality only serves to strengthen oppression and heterosexual privilege through its relative invisibility. Given this invisibility, issues of oppression and privilege are neither analyzed nor scrutinized, neither interrogated nor confronted.

We take the position that any problems with homosexuality and bisexuality are not with the sexual identity per se, not with who we are, but rather with the ways we are socially constructed and treated. Rather than projecting ourselves through the “medical model” as deficient, defective, diseased, disabled, criminal, inadequate, immature, functionally limited, troubled, many of us chose to project homosexuality and bisexuality through the “wellness model.” This approach fosters a positive social identity with a strong sense of culture and community, and envisions lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences as those of differences in the spectrum of human intimacy, relationships, emotions, and sexuality, and differences to be supported, cherished, and nurtured.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE MODEL OF LIBERATION

Since the early to mid-nineteenth century CE, a linear history of homosexuality and bisexuality, predominately in the West, begins with the formation of a homosexual “identity” and a sense of community brought about by the growth of industrialization, competitive capitalism and wage labor, and the rise of modern science, which provided people with more social and personal options outside the home (D’Emilio, 1983). Since then, many individuals and organizations have rejected the medical and religious rationales of homosexuality and bisexuality, while embracing a social justice model, which investigates and attempts to address the ways in which social structures promote and maintain issues of domination and subordination.

A brief chronology of the movements toward societal liberation in this arena follows. Throughout this history, young people have been on the front lines serving as energetic and inspirational pioneering change agents and integral to the development and success of progressive movement for social justice. The “Homosexual Emancipation Movement” began in Germany in the 1860s when Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a lawyer from Hanover, wrote on the topic of same-sex love. Karoly Maria Benkert (also known as Karl Maria Kertbeny) coined the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” in 1869 in an attempt to convince the religious, legal, and scientific communities that same-sex attractions, though not the norm, were widespread and therefore should not be legally penalized. Literary tradition in England in the nineteenth century CE celebrated same-sex relationships. The

first homosexual rights group in the United States, formed in 1924 in Chicago, was called the Society for Human Rights. It was founded by Henry Gerber, a German U.S.-American who had been influenced by the emancipation movement in Germany. The "Homophile Movement" in the United States began with such groups as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis (see section website for resources describing this history). Many historians and activists place the beginning of the modern movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender equality at the Stonewall Inn, a small bar frequented by young people including trans people, lesbians, bisexuals, gay males, street people, students, and others, located in New York City's Greenwich Village. In the early morning of June 28, 1969, when New York City police officers conducted a routine raid on the bar, the occupants fought back with bottles, rocks, bricks, trash cans, and parking meters used as battering rams.

In reality, even before these historic events at the Stonewall Inn, a little-known action preceded the Stonewall Inn demonstrations by nearly three years, and should more likely be considered as the founding event for the modern LGBT movement. In August 1966, at Gene Compton's Cafeteria, in what is known as the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, trans people and gay sex workers joined in fighting police harassment and oppression. Police, conducting one of their numerous raids, entered Compton's and began physically harassing the clientele. This time, however, people fought back by hurling coffee at the officers and heaving cups, dishes, and trays around the cafeteria. Police retreated outside as customers smashed windows. Over the course of the next night, people gathered to picket the cafeteria, which refused to allow trans people back inside.

Out of the actions at Gene Compton's Cafeteria and the Stonewall Inn, people, primarily young, formed a number of groups, for example, the Gay Liberation Front, Gay Activists Alliance, Radicalesbians, and others. The Christopher Street Liberation Day Umbrella Committee formed in New York City to plan activities and a march on Sunday, June 28, 1970, up Sixth Avenue. From that first march grew others throughout the world. June each year is now reserved for local "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride" events.

Bisexuals, who had since the beginning been alongside gay, lesbian, and transgender activists, began to organize for the rights of bisexuals in the mid to late 1970s. For a number of reasons, neither the gay and lesbian rights movements nor mainstream political movements initially responded to the needs of bisexuals. At first, bisexual women organized themselves in same-sex groups for support and consciousness-raising; bisexual men later followed this example.

By 1972, parents and friends were organizing support groups for themselves and their loved ones. Today, a national network of local chapters of the organization Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (or P-FLAG) offers support and is on the front lines in helping to defeat heterosexism.

Founded to fight governmental and societal inaction, in 1986, the intergenerational direct-action group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) formed in New York City. A network of local chapters quickly grew in over 120 cities throughout the world under the theme "Silence = Death" beneath an inverted pink triangle. In addition, the youth-oriented group Queer Nation formed in 1990 with independent chapters soon appearing in local communities around the country. Chanting, "We're here. We're queer. We're fabulous. Get used to it," Queer Nation members stressed "queer visibility" and an end to heterosexual privilege and heterosexism.

And on the cutting edge in the movement for equality and pride are transgender people who are coming out of another closet in large numbers, and are making the links in our understanding of transgender oppression (also referred to as cissexism, genderism, or binarism), heterosexism, and sexism (see Section 7). Young people are "coming out of the closet" with pride earlier than ever before, and organizing school and community-based groups (such as Gay/Straight Alliances) in middle schools and high schools, colleges, and communities throughout the country and the world. A growing number of LGBT people are raising children, proving that love is

what it takes to make a family. Some activists are pushing for the right for same-sex couples to marry on a state and on a national level, while others successfully defeated the ban, the so-called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, which until 2011 prevented LGBT<sup>4</sup> service members from serving openly in the U.S. military. Others are working tirelessly to eliminate the harassment, bullying, and violence directed against anyone who appears “different” that continue to plague our schools and society, and to end the bullying- and larger societal-related suicides, which harms and literally kills so many each year.

Originally meaning “different” or “outside the norm,” the term “queer” has often been used as a derogatory term. Some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, however, have turned the term around by using it in an inclusive way and as a term of empowerment. First, young people adopted the term as a non-label to deconstruct sexual and gender categories as a form of resistance. It is used now at times to denote a person who is not heterosexual or not gender-normative. Following the lead of young people, what has come to be referred to as “Queer Theory” and “Queer Studies,” with such notable writers as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, among many others, is now having enormous impact on college and university campuses as a bona fide academic discipline (see website for further resources).

### READING SELECTIONS IN THIS SECTION

This section begins with a number of essays conveying key historical and social contexts of heterosexism. Warren J. Blumenfeld’s “How Homophobia Hurts Everyone” (selection 77) provides a conceptual framework by discussing what homophobia is and how it affects everyone regardless of their actual or perceived sexual identity. “The InterSEXion: A Vision for a Queer Progressive Agenda” (selection 78), by Deepali Gokhale, cuts to the core of heterosexism by looking at the economic systems that support oppression. Devon W. Carbado’s essay, “Privilege” (selection 79), provides an expanded and nuanced investigation of the concept of dominant group privilege. Pat Griffin, in “Sport: Where Men Are Men and Women Are Trespassers” (selection 80), addresses issues of heterosexism and, specifically, anti-female oppression in organized sports.

To begin the Voices part, in “Real Men and Pink Suits” (selection 81), Charles M. Blow uses recent public violence-inspiring statements from media commentators as a “teachable moment” to advance the dialogue in challenging the notion of a narrowly defined definition of “masculinity.” Anna Quindlen’s “The Loving Decision” (selection 82) connects the cause for the legalization of marriage for same-sex couples with past battles for interracial marriage. Daniel E. Solís y Martínez, in “*Mestiza/o* Gender: Notes towards a Transformative Masculinity” (selection 83), crosses cultural, gender, and sexuality borders to negotiate a personal vision of identity.

In the Next Steps part, Nancy J. Evans and Jaime Washington, in “Becoming An Ally: A New Examination” (selection 84), provide both a theoretical and practical foundation on the ways in which heterosexually identified people can become allies to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. President Barack Obama took a historic move on May 9, 2012 in an interview with ABC TV “Good Morning America” host, Robin Roberts, when he “came out” for marriage equality asserting that “Same-sex couples should be able to get married.” Prior to his announcement, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a moving and historic address to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, December 2011 on International Human Rights Day, in which she declared that LGBT rights are human rights. We conclude the “Heterosexism” section with her stirring speech (selection 85).

This section represents heterosexism from multiple perspectives, emphasizing the more overt forms of this type of oppression. Other selections that convey the joyful and day-to-day lived experiences and illustrate the diverse and multifaceted historical and cultural aspects of LGB people appear among the Further Resources section on the heterosexism section website.