10-26-2015

# Homophobia and heterosexism

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Abstract
"Homophobia" is a widely understood term referring to antihomosexual attitudes and practices, but terms such as "homophobia," "heterosexism," and "heteronormativity" point to different ideas of what "homosexual" means, and where opposition to same-sex relations originates. Gayle Rubin, relying on structural anthropology, proposes that it arises as a disciplinary mechanism used by men to exercise control over women's reproductive power in families. Gender panic theory focuses particularly on how defensiveness against losing male status and privilege generates homophobia. Sociohistorical theories examine how homophobia increases or decreases according to the symbolic placement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the social status system. In the early twenty-first century, contradictory trends have led to improved citizenship rights for LGBT people in some countries, while others have reinforced or increased state and social violence against their LGBT populations.

Keywords
homosexuality; queer theory; sociology of sexuality

"Homophobia" is a widely understood term referring to antihomosexual attitudes and practices, but comparison of terms such as "homophobia," "heterosexism," and "heteronormativity" reveals how they rely on different ideas of what "homosexual" means, and where opposition to same-sex relations originates. "Homophobia" typically denotes an irrational fear or a set of mistaken ideas held by prejudiced individuals; therefore, its alleviation is most likely to come through therapy or education. Popularized through George Weinberg's 1973 book, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, homophobia is a concept with strong roots in psychology. Its use tends to focus attention on individuals, to locate its origins in childhood socialization, and to conceive of it as a prejudice directed against homosexual persons. "Heterosexism" offers a more sociological notion that shifts analysis to the ways in which the social institutions of government, workplace, religion, family, and media are organized in ways that exclude or disadvantage same-sex relations. Resolving heterosexism means reforming or reorganizing social institutions in ways that allow and support same-sex bonding

and sexuality. Finally, "heteronormativity" arises from analysis of how distinctions like heterosexual/homosexual are reproduced. For queer theory, the issue is not one of appealing for tolerance or acceptance of a quasiethnic community of lesbians and gay men, but of shaking up the entire heterosexual/homosexual binary that fuels the distinction in the first place.

There are several leading theories that lend credence to each of these conceptions. Gayle Rubin's influential essay on "The traffic in women" built on Claude Lévi-Strauss's work on how heterosexuality is recreated in each generation through a system of fraternal interest groups that exercise control over women's reproductive power in families. Because homosexuality among men transgresses this fundamental social "game plan," it comes to be identified with the betrayal of masculinity and the inability to assert male domination over women. Lesbianism, as Monique Wittig (1992) argues in "The straight mind," amounts to a "revolt of the trade goods" in the "traffic in women." Adrienne Rich (1980) also characterizes lesbianism as an assertion of women's subjectivity and self-determination, and a direct challenge to patriarchy. Antilesbianism for Rich is a variant of misogyny, a means of enforcing "compulsory heterosexuality," and a system of keeping women subservient to male domination. Gender panic theory focuses particularly on homophobia as an effect of gender. Masculinity, this theory contends, is an achieved and insecure status. Defensiveness against losing male status and privilege generates homophobia. Psychological research shows how homophobia appears to be particularly strong among gender conservatives intent on upholding gender differences, and among adolescent males who feel insecure in their access to masculine status. The queer theory of Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1990) relies on, and extends, gender panic theory, contending that heterosexual masculinity builds itself on the simultaneous exploitation and denial of homosexuality. Since heterosexual masculinity can never constitute itself as secure and unassailable, and homosexuality is a default subject location against which heterosexuality defines itself, then homosexual possibilities can never be fully repressed and indeed remain necessary for the masculine self. While gender panic theory offers a strong explanation for homophobia in western and other patriarchal societies, it does not work for societies where same-sex bonding is itself regarded as masculine, and makes up a part of the socialization process to masculinize youths.

Sociohistorical theories are particularly interested in the social factors that fuel, or diminish, homophobia. These theories focus on the variability of homophobia by investigating why campaigns of persecution against homosexual relations break out at certain places and times and among particular social constituencies. Homophobia in western societies is associated with the roles

nonheterosexual peoples have been assigned in history and the symbolic value of disenfranchised and "upstart" social groups. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and North America, the adherents of antihomosexual worldviews have typically come from a range of social groups disturbed or threatened by modernity – usually traditional elites fearful of change and declining social classes resentful of groups on the rise. Status defense theories note that people fearful of declining living standards are especially susceptible to a politics of resentment, and have a tendency to strike out against those they see as "undeserving." Antigay persecution often runs parallel to campaigns of persecution directed against other disenfranchised groups. Perhaps the most egregious example is fascism, which swept up a range of people symbolizing modernity into the Holocaust, such as Jews, Roma, communists, and disabled and racialized peoples, along with gay men and lesbians, when Nazism moved to re-establish the dominance of traditionally privileged social groups. Smaller scale and less intense campaigns have mobilized similar constituencies in the United States, from McCarthyism in the 1950s to repeated referendum campaigns to repeal human rights legislation since the 1970s.

Despite important gains in human rights legislation protecting the equality rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people in many countries, homophobic attitudes and practices remain widespread. Organizations such as the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and Amnesty International now monitor violence directed against LGBT people around the world. In the early twenty-first century, primarily countries in the European Union, North and South America, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand have taken steps to remove legislative inequalities imposed on LGBT people by including *sexual orientation* in human rights legislation, recognizing same-sex relationships and curbing homophobic violence in the form of legislation against hate crimes or prohibitions against incitement to hatred. Nevertheless, high school bullying, violence, and limitations on full citizenship endure in many places. In other countries, state violence flows from laws that continue to criminalize homosexuality, particularly in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean – many of whose governments are still enforcing British colonial laws that have been abandoned by the United Kingdom itself – and Islamic countries of the Arab world, southwest Asia, Malaysia, and Brunei. In a few instances, state-sponsored homophobia has been on the rise in recent years with passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Bill in Nigeria, the banning of "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" in Russia, and the reimposition of the British colonial sodomy law by the Supreme Court of India after the law had

been struck down four years earlier by a lower court. In Uganda, Nigeria, and Russia, the immediate aftermath of these legislative changes was waves of attacks by state agents and street mobs on (suspected) LGBT individuals and the suppression of basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech and right of assembly.

Homophobia and heterosexism, then, tend to be rooted in rigid kinship and gender systems and may be institutionalized in state and social institutions. Still, it must be noted that antihomosexuality is not the inevitable consequence of kinship organization. In many societies around the world, same-sex bonding is accepted and valued by becoming integrated into and defined by kinship codes. Same-sex connections may take "berdache," "two-spirited," or transgendered form in societies with weak fraternal interest groups where gender fluidity, gender mixing, or gender migration appear to be possible for some men and a few women. Where male sexual bonding appears in societies with strong fraternal interest groups, it typically takes the form of hierarchical, military, age graded, and mentor–acolyte relationships. In the contemporary world, both allies and opponents have come to identify LGBT people with the changing gender and kinship expectations associated with modernity, taking their cues from a symbolic landscape that links them to notions of either progress or transgression of tradition.

SEE ALSO: Compulsory Heterosexuality; Gay and Lesbian Movement; Hate Crimes; Queer Theory

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