

Understanding and Documenting Anti-Homosexual Sentiment

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Introduction

Anti-homosexual sentiment can encompass a range of individual, cultural, and institutional behaviours, practices and opinions that indicate a bias or prejudice against, and intolerance of homosexuality. An increasing amount of social research, legal commentary and grass roots activism has drawn attention to the manifestation of anti-homosexual sentiment within public spaces (Comstock 1991; GLAD 1994; Mason 1997a), work place environments (Chapman 1995; GLAD 1994; Kendall 1996; McNaught 1993) and legislative and judicial pronouncements (Chapman 1997; Fajer 1992; Henderson 1996; Johnston 1996). The common thread of this work is the recognition that there exists a general social, cultural, political and legal disapproval of homosexual desire, and animosity towards gay and lesbian identity, politics and lifestyle (Tomsen & Mason 1997).

The present commentary argues that anti-homosexual sentiment is a structural problem - rather than an individual one - relating to the heterosexist nature of our society. However such general abstraction has to recognise the reality that lesbian and gay experiences of anti-homosexual sentiment are diverse on a specific level. Correspondingly this understanding should be based upon a method of investigation that best accommodates the particularities of anti-homosexual sentiment, uncovering its manifestation and effects.

This article is divided into three disparate, but interrelated lines of discussion. First, an examination of the origin of anti-homosexual sentiment is presented; second, while anti-homosexual sentiment may have a universal causal source, it is experienced in a non-universal manner by lesbians and gay men; and third, an analysis of anti-homosexual sentiment is best achieved through qualitative research.

The Foundational Origin of Anti-Homosexual Sentiment

Due to the variability of anti-homosexual sentiment a number of definitions and concepts have been used to characterise the range of discrimination, violence, ambivalence and inequality directed towards, and experienced by, lesbians and gay men. These terms include *homophobia* (Blumenfeld 1992; MacDonald 1976; Weinburg 1972), *heterosexism* (Herek 1992a/b; Mason 1997a/b; Morin & Garfinkle 1978; Neisen 1990), *homo-hatred* (Ames 1996), *homonegative* (Hudson & Ricketts 1980; Ross 1996), *antihomosexuality* (Hacker 1971), *homosexual bias* (Fyfe 1983) and *homo-prejudice* (Logan 1996).

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Of the above terms the most widely popularised and recognised is homophobia, defined by Weinburg (1972:4) as 'the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals'. Subsequently MacDonald (1976:23) re-defined homophobia as the 'irrational persistent fear or intolerance of homosexuals', while Blumenfeld (1992) characterises it as a personal, inter-personal, institutional and cultural animosity towards sexual minorities. The concept quite accurately describes the fear and panic that some heterosexuals feel when confronted by visible gays and lesbians (Kinsman 1996; Kirk & Madsen 1989).

While the term homophobia has universal appeal and meaning for a number of social movements that address homosexual discrimination and prejudice (Jenness 1995; Kinsman 1996; Sears 1997) its use is regarded as problematic (Plummer 1981). Like many explanations of social problems it locates the source of anti-homosexual sentiment in pathological conditions, leaving unchallenged wider social structures (Jamrozik & Nocella 1998). Arguably the term tends to individualise gay and lesbian discrimination, and implies that homo-negative attitudes arise from the personal inadequacies of particular individuals suffering from a diagnosable and treatable disorder (Dollimore 1991; Herek 1986b; Kinsman 1996; Kitzinger 1996; Logan 1996). Several theorists and researchers have argued that homo-negative attitudes and actions cannot be categorised in a clinical manner, with attitudes towards homosexuality being informed by attitudes towards sexuality as a whole. This latter fact is dictated by more complex issues than a concept of a phobia can address (Herek 1992a; O'Donohue & Caselles 1993; Plasek & Allard 1984; Ruthchild 1997; Watney 1987).

Pre-eminent among these more complex issues is the hegemonic¹ nature of heterosexuality in our society. This has imposed a form of compulsory (hetero) sexuality, and has had a range of implications for any form of queer orientation. In particular it has given rise to a homo/hetero distinction (Sedgwick 1990; Tomsen 1997) and to social categorisations based upon sexual behaviour, preference and relationships (Herek 1992a; Plummer 1992). Heterosexuality has been endowed with an 'absence of remarkability' and thereby been privileged within a hierarchical sexual order where only the 'aberrant' (i.e. the homosexual) is commented upon (Mason 1997b).²

A hierarchy of sexualities occurs when a specific form of sexual interaction is 'normalised' and 'the allure of the opposite sex' is seen as representing all that is sexually normal and natural (Altman 1971; Herek 1986a; Law 1988). The essentialist assumption is made, that biological differences between men and women underpin all social behaviours concerning gender and all feelings regarding sexuality (Kinsman 1996; Robinson 1997; Stein 1997).³ 'Real men' are and should be attracted to women and 'real women' invite and enjoy

1 Hegemony refers to a dynamic by which one group claims and sustains a leading dominant position in social life. This cultural dominance is maintained through power differentials between dominant and subordinated groups e.g., men and women (Connell 1995). Hegemony theory has been used by a number of scholars to theorise the oppression of lesbians and gay men, e.g., see Connell (1995), Frank (1987), Kinsman (1996) and Kaplan (1997). The term hegemony is derived from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations (Connell 1995; Kinsman 1996). Also see Boggs (1976).

2 This can include physical and verbal violence, discrimination or forms of gender socialisation.

3 This position has been challenged by social constructionists and deconstructionists, the former arguing that sexuality is socially constructed and regulated (De Cecco & Elia 1993; Walker 1994), the latter highlighting the fact that much of social life is organised around binary oppositions of gender, race and sexuality (Seidman 1993; Stein 1997). Most sociologists accept that sex differences between men and women are given social meaning through gender. However this social identity is not determined by biological sex differences, rather it is found in the modes of dress and speech, behavioural patterns, emotions and skills which are normatively expected of those having a particular set of sex differences (Bilton et al 1996). The gender categories of feminine and masculine and the social expectations relating to these categories, affect how people conduct their lives (Blumenfeld & Raymond 1993).

that attraction (Law 1988). The hegemony of this view has been achieved and continues to be re-affirmed through historical, social and political contestations, and is fostered in a range of social institutions e.g., the church and the family (Kinsman 1996; Law 1988). The end result is that individuals who challenge these dominant beliefs⁴ are subordinated and stigmatised, labelled as inverts⁵ or threats to society (Altman 1971; Fajer 1992; Jung & Smith 1993; Law 1988; Seidman 1993).

The belief that attitudes towards homosexuality are informed by complex variables has led a number of scholars and researchers to prefer the term 'heterosexism' to homophobia e.g., Herek (1984; 1992a/b), Kinsman (1996), Mason (1997b), Neisen (1990), Plummer (1992) and Spaulding (1993). As initially conceptualised by Morin and Garfinkle (1978) heterosexism is as a belief system founded upon the assumption that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality. It has been further defined as 'the ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatises any non-heterosexual form of identity, relationship or community' (Herek 1992a: 89) and as 'a belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality evidenced in the exclusion, by omission or design, of non-heterosexual persons in policies, procedures, events or activities' (Sears 1997: 16). Herek (1992a/b) argues that heterosexism can be manifest in both institutional and cultural settings (e.g., the family, religion and the legal system). Such settings can foster anti-homosexual sentiment by passively and actively providing members with shared perceptions which form the backdrop for individual attitudes and actions. Such attitudes and actions can materialise as 'psychological heterosexism', and take the form of physical and verbal abuse, intimidation and ill-treatment.⁶

The term heterosexism, by clearly emphasising the *hetero* component (Mason 1997b:116), captures a more broader dynamic of cultural and institutional hostility directed towards gay and lesbian people, which itself stems from the hegemonic nature of heterosexuality. Heterosexism can be seen as a component of broader overlapping ideologies regarding sexuality and gender (Herek 1986a; 1991). Such ideologies link to other forms of prejudice such as sexism (Epstein 1997; Mason 1997b; Pharr 1988), that are based upon the subordination of one social group by another.

It is incorrect to assume that anti-homosexual sentiment is a aberration of dysfunctional individuals. As it ignores the fact that anti-homosexual sentiment arises from the hegemonic nature of heterosexuality in cultural and social life, giving rise to the presumption of heterosexuality. The conscious awareness of the assumed nature of heterosexuality - that sees homosexuality subordinated - provides a cognate basis upon which lesbians and gay men must negotiate their public and private lives. Hence when they experience anti-homo-

4 Fajer (1992) and Law (1988) argue that gay lives challenge dominant beliefs regarding gender role norms, with society socialising heterosexual individuals who enter into relationships with gender expectations about their appropriate roles for themselves and their mates. There is a strong assumption about who will do what based upon gender. However gay couples have to operate without gender based expectations and while they may adhere closely to traditional norms (Blumenfeld & Raymond 1993; Marecek, Finn & Cardell 1982), they can create new rules and roles for themselves that are not based upon gender stereotypes (Fajer 1992; Kaplan 1997).

5 This is evident through the pervasive stereotype that gay men manifest characteristics that are culturally defined as feminine and lesbians are widely believed to manifest masculine characteristics (Herek 1991; Taylor 1983).

6 However while cultural heterosexism is critical in defining lesbians and gay men as suitable targets for individual animosity (Herek 1991; 1992b), it is incorrect to assume that it purely determines individual acts, because cultural and psychological heterosexism act upon each other similar to a feedback loop, reinforcing one another through the process of communication (Yep 1997).

sexual sentiment lesbians and gay men are witnessing the dominant heterosexist value system at work. The term heterosexism by employing a broad framework of analysis provides insight into the deeper structural origins of anti-homosexual sentiment.

The Universality and Asymmetry of Anti-Homosexual Sentiment.

The preceding section has employed a somewhat general or universal theoretical framework. It has appealed to the existence of foundational facts that provide insight into the origin of anti-homosexual sentiment.

However such an approach is problematic when one considers the influence of post-modern analysis in what has been termed queer theory - a form of contemporary theorising about gay and lesbian experience. Post-modern thought rejects universal or totalising views of external reality. It questions the notion of objective reality, emphasising that social reality is inherently subjective, fragmented, and relative. Hence any explanation of social phenomena cannot be reduced to one reconcilable view (Jamrozik & Nocella 1998). Queer theory objects to narratives that present identity constructs as fixed, stable and unitary, arguing that identities are always multiple or at best composites with literally infinite numbers of 'identity components' (e.g., sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, gender, age and disability) intersecting and combining to produce particular realities and experiences (Kaplan 1997; Seidman 1996).

The implications for the present proposition is that while anti-homosexual sentiment has been presented as universally originating in the heterosexist nature of our society, it is important to recognise that on a specific level its experiential reality will differ between lesbians and gay men, and be quite diverse. For example, lesbians tend to experience forms of physical and verbal abuse, harassment and discrimination in the home, workplace or in more public areas which have more in common with women as a whole than with gay men. Likewise the levels of violence directed towards gay men in the public domain may have more in common with men as a whole, than with gay women (GLAD 1994; Garnets, Herek & Levy 1992; Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project 1992; Mason 1997a/b). Moreover research on the sexual harassment of lesbians indicates that the dual identity components of gender and sexuality magnifying and transform the risks they face (Epstein 1997).

Furthermore while the assumption of heterosexuality provides a cognate basis for the 'coming out' of lesbians and gay men (Fajer 1992; Law 1988; Rust 1996),⁷ it does not mean that they will negotiate or experience it in the same manner (De Monteflores & Schultz 1978; Radonsky & Borders 1995; Rust 1996). For example it has been consistently argued that women's social position as sexual subordinates can have greater impact upon the lives of lesbians than their sexual identity (Healy 1993; Spaulding 1993), which inturn mediates the way they 'come out' (Robinson 1997; Spaulding 1993).

The above qualification does not undermine or weaken the aetiological proposition that has been presented. This relates to the fact that there is a need to declare certain facts as

7 The term to 'come out' - short for 'coming out of the closet' - refers to the process of a self identified lesbian and gay man disclosing their sexual orientation (Chekola 1994; Marcus 1993). Fajer (1992), Law (1988) and Rust (1996) argue that this process is made necessary by a heterosexist culture in which individuals are assumed heterosexual unless there is evidence to contrary. With heterosexuality presumed, gays and lesbians are accorded this identity by default. The process of coming out involves the replacement of this default identity.

foundational in order to identify problems (Lea 1998; Snider 1998). For as long as heterosexuality is privileged and assumed, gay men and women will experience prejudice, fear rejection if they 'come out' and find security in self censorship (Altman 1997). However any observation that proclaims to understand the foundational facts of a social problem, has to be reconciled by the fact that its experiential manifestation will differ between members of the corresponding population that is confronted by its adverse consequences.

Documenting Anti-Homosexual Sentiment.

The preceding proposition has attempted to investigate at an aetiological level the oppression of lesbians and gay men. As has been indicated at a general level the origin of anti-homosexual sentiment can be regarded as universally defining. However at a specific or individual level its experiential reality can be diverse.

Accommodating both the general and the specific is a real challenge for social scientific research, particularly when it comes to reconciling theoretical abstraction with the inherently relative nature of real life experience. A method by which this can be achieved - in the context of gay and lesbian experience - is through the use of qualitative research methods.

Qualitative research strategies are concerned with understanding behaviour and experience in the context of the meaning systems employed by particular groups (Bryman 1984). In contrast with the empirical orientation of quantitative techniques, qualitative research aims to discover - rather than measure - social experience. It does not work with numbers or statistics, but rather with words, observations and themes.

While quantitative research can yield a high quantity of factual information, it can often obscure and misrepresent the complexity of social reality by forcing a subject's response into fixed categories selected by the researcher (Bryman 1994; Healy 1993; Warren 1977). This is not to say that the quantitative method is an inferior technique, but rather that the qualitative approach is the most appropriate form of data collection in the context of investigating both the generality and specificity of anti-homosexual sentiment. It can more accurately capture the lived reality of anti-homosexual sentiment by allowing gay men and women to explain how they come to experience, understand, respond to, account for and manage its manifestation. This complexity would not be captured on a questionnaire (Berg 1989; Buhrke 1996; Mason 1997a/b; Healy 1993; Robinson 1997). From this specific level one can build a more general theory by identifying common themes across interview data or field observations.

Research in this vein - unlike quantitative strategies - cannot provide an average account. Rather its utility lies in illustrating the complexity, ambiguity and constant nature of oppression in the lives of lesbians and gay men. This approach can best take the form of open ended questions administered in a semi-structured format that allows lesbians and gay men to define and express the significance of various experiences (Berg 1989; Robinson 1997).

When it comes to investigating gay and lesbian experience - particularly relating to anti-homosexual sentiment - there are distinct methodological limitations. The process of sample selection is crucial in influencing the accuracy by which one's findings and conclusions can be generalised or inferred to the target population (Jupp 1989; Neuman 1994). However typical orthodox testing procedures are predicated upon the basis that one is able to easily identify and access the target population. In the context of researching anti-homosexual sentiment this is problematic. This difficulty arises from the very nature of the subject matter under investigation.

As already indicated, anti-homosexual sentiment leads to the stigmatisation of lesbians and gay men. This creates for them a set of consequences that are distinctive, because unlike other groups such as racial or ethnic minorities, sexuality is a status whose disclosure is optional (Chapman 1995; Mondimore 1996).⁸ This means that lesbians and gay men must choose between unsatisfactory options (Radonsky & Borders 1995), because self censorship (i.e., being closeted) and self disclosure (i.e., coming out) have personal risks (Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales 1982; GLAD 1994; Harry 1993; Mondimore 1996). Decisions to self censure or remain closeted means that lesbians and gay men must manage the access of information about themselves in both public and private interactions. In consequence it is not easy to identify and access lesbians and gay men for research purposes.

A number of sampling procedures have been designed to ensure that the selected sampling element - whether person, group, organisation or social action - is not biased or skewed towards one particular variable e.g., gender or age. These procedures can be based upon two principles. One that involves random selection derived from probability theory, or one that entails the purposive selection of cases in a non-probable manner (Jupp 1989). The former is regarded as wielding the most accurate representative samples because it operates according to a random method, and hence does not follow any set pattern. This allows each sample element to have equal probability of being selected (Neuman 1994). However the ability to proceed by way of random selection is limited, if not impossible in capturing a representative sample of the gay and lesbian population. As discussed above the consequence of anti-homosexual sentiment is that lesbians and gay men are in effect a hidden population. This makes it impossible to randomly select lesbians and gay men within a given social setting (Mason 1997b; Warren 1977; Weinberg 1970).

The purposive approach while considered less precise than the probability method, offers greater potential in selecting subjects from hidden, difficult to access populations. However its major weakness is that it can easily skew one's sample. This fact is salient when conducting gay and lesbian research, because lesbians and gay men who are more 'out' and in contact with the gay and lesbian community, organisations, social groups and entertainment venues are easier to access and identify. Hence those who are 'closeted' will often be excluded from the selected sample (Mason 1997b; Otis & Skinner 1996; Robinson 1997).⁹

While the above limitations can make generalisations difficult, they do not totally invalidate research results derived from qualitative methodology and purposive sampling. Such results can be indicative of the degree or diversity of experiences rather than the average experience (Buhrke 1996; Mason 1997b), with diverse accounts creating an enriched understanding of people's lives.

One final argument in favour of qualitative research strategies is that they make gay and lesbian lives visible. Since opinions about lesbians and gay men are shaped within a heter-

8 Goffman (1963) referred to 'discredited' and 'discreditable' identities - the former referring to a visible discredited identity component e.g., skin colour or gender, the latter only being potentially discredited depending upon the extent to which it is known. Sexual orientation which is not generally approved can be seen as a classical example of a 'discreditable identity'. The consequence is that many gays and lesbians 'closet' themselves - hiding their sexual orientation from others e.g., family members or work colleagues - and 'pass' as heterosexuals (Herek 1991).

9 This problem is particularly salient in research that collects data from self-selected volunteers (Eldridge & Gilbert 1990).

osexist context, making their lives visible is one of the most important ways of breaking down heterosexism (Bridgewater 1997; Fajer 1992; Johnston 1996). It replaces unsubstantiated myths about the unknown other who engages in homosexual activity with a human reality.

Conclusion

This discussion has presented three disparate but interrelated issues relating to the analysis of anti-homosexual sentiment. Rather than viewing anti-homosexual sentiment as a problem of intolerant dysfunctional individuals, it should be regarded as related to the hegemonic nature of heterosexuality.

When experiencing anti-homosexual sentiment, lesbians and gay men are subjected to a heterosexist value system that stigmatises and subordinates their identity. The term heterosexism is a useful concept because it expands one's framework of analysis to incorporate these wider structural issues. However when one moves from such general abstraction to the individual or specific level, the fact is that lesbian and gay experiences of anti-homosexual sentiment will be diverse.

Qualitative research strategies and purposive sampling methods offer a useful methodology by which to expose the experiential reality of anti-homosexual sentiment. While such methodologies are not without their limitations, they are appropriate techniques considering the problem under investigation. Qualitative strategies can also contribute to combating heterosexist practises and opinions, because they give anti-homosexual sentiment a human reality.

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