
Homophobia: The Fear Behind The Hatred

An essay on the origin and nature of homophobia.

A personal essay in hypertext by [Scott Bidstrup](#)

If you look up "homophobia" in the dictionary, it will probably tell you that it is the fear of homosexuals.

While many would take issue with that definition, it is nevertheless true that in many ways, it really *is* a fear of homosexuality or at least homosexuals, as we will see in this essay.

Homophobia is widespread in America, far more widespread than most heterosexuals realize, and it is far more subtle, too. The discrimination it inspires touches the lives of many Americans, not just gay Americans, but all Americans. And America pays a very dear price for it as we shall see.

The Effects of Homophobia On American Society

In 1994, during the campaign of Oliver North for the U.S. Senate, there were several of his supporters seen carrying signs along a Virginia freeway that read, "Homophobia Doesn't Kill." By announcing that belief, they were exposing their ignorance to the world, because homophobia *does* kill, and it kills with surprising frequency.

There are the obvious murders inspired by hatred. In the U.S., they number in the dozens every year. Abroad, the numbers run to the hundreds to thousands, no one knows the precise number for sure, as in many countries, the deaths of homosexuals are not considered worth recording as a separate category.

But there are other ways in which homophobia kills. There are countless suicides every year by gay men and lesbians, particularly youth, which mental health professionals tell us¹ are not the direct result of the victim's homosexuality, but is actually the result of how the homosexual is treated by society. When one lives with rejection day after day, and society discounts one's value constantly, it is difficult to maintain perspective and realize that the problem is *others'* perceptions, not one's own, which is why suicide is several times as common among gay men as it is among straight men.

Perhaps the highest price is paid by youth. The young person just emerging into adulthood who has begun to realize that he is different, and the difference is not approved of, finds acceptance of self particularly difficult. This is especially true when others perceive the young person as different, and persecute him as a result, with little effort made by authority figures to stop the torment. This is why gay youth commit suicide at a

rate of about seven times that of straight youth. Yet it is surprising how often homophobes actually try to prevent intervention by teachers in the schools!

The Reasons Homophobes Give For Their Hatred

It's not natural. Well, that's probably the weakest argument of all, since biologists frequently see homosexual behavior in other animal species, and in livestock ranching, homosexual behavior is so common it is considered a problem. Homosexual behaviors have been noted in every primate species so far studied, and in man's closest living relatives, the bonobo chimpanzees, bisexual behavior is universal.

Among humans, homosexuality is found in all cultures and with about the same frequency it is found in America. Cultural norms seem to have little influence on the incidence of homosexual behavior. So the claim that it isn't natural becomes rather difficult to support.

It's a perversion. This is really a variation of the "it's not natural" argument, and so there's no need to reiterate what has been said in the above paragraphs, other than to say that it is the 'natural' argument with a religious overtone. And being essentially a religious argument, it has little place in a society that believes in the separation of the powers of church and state.

It's against God's law. Well, of course this is a purely religious argument, and it presumes that the homosexual is or should be bound by the religious principles that are propounded here by the religionist.

The fact of the matter is that since this society and its government were founded on the notion of the separation of church and state, to encode in a secular law an idea that has purely religious purposes, is a clear violation of the principle of the separation of church and state. Until the religionist can come up with a sound reason why society benefits by the outlawing of homosexual activity, then there is no moral basis for such a law if one accepts the principle of religious freedom as encoded in the doctrine of the separation of church and state.

It's disgusting. Has the person who says that ever watched sausage being made? There are many things that go on in society that we would consider disgusting, but we don't outlaw them just because of that. In fact, many of these activities are quite essential to the functioning of a modern society, but we simply turn our minds to other matters and don't concern ourselves with them.

Heterosexuals need to remember that they themselves are 'disgusting' to many homosexuals; it will come as quite a surprise for them to discover that the feeling is mutual. Yet it would be ludicrous for the gay person to suggest that heterosexuality ought to be persecuted; why shouldn't it work just as well the other way around? Isn't respect and tolerance a two way street?

The Real Reasons Behind Their Hatred

Us versus them: It is the subconscious belief that if someone else is granted rights, those rights come at one's own expense. For example, one of the oft-quoted reasons why some oppose [gay marriage](#) is that it will somehow threaten the heterosexual institution of marriage. Just *how* that would happen is never explained, but those who agree with the notion don't have to explain; to them it seems a reasonable proposition, because they feel the threat, even if they can't put their finger on why.

Obviously, this reason is an emotional reaction rather than a reasoned argument. Yet the fact that it is simply an emotional reaction is not relevant to the bigot; he believes that since he believes it, it must be true. And that is good enough. No evidence is necessary.

Loss of control: It has been my experience that the more conservative an individual he is, the more concerned he is about being able to control his environment.

Someone who lives life in a manner quite different that oneself represents a threat to that individual. The threat is a threat to the ego in the sense that one's own choices may prove not to be optimal; it is also a subconscious threat to one's security in the sense that the other may prove to be more successful.

Again, the threat here is an emotional one, not a real, tangible threat. And again, there's no real-world evidence to support it. But emotion is what drives the bigot.

The reason for the emotion is actually a primal instinct. When one examines the dominance-submission behaviors in other species, they often have sexual overtones, especially in other primate species. If a dominant male wants the food or mate possessed by a subordinate, he'll often bite the subordinate, causing him to yelp in pain and drop the food or the female, and then present his rump.

It is the presentation of the rump that is key here. It's saying to the dominant male and the rest of the troupe that the subordinant male is submissive and that the dominant male can have his way with him, regardless of the extent that may take. It's essentially a submission to rape, should the dominant male desire to do so.

It is that instinctual fear of rape that drives much of homophobia. Straight men often instinctually see gay men as a threat, and they instinctively fear that threat. It's a fear of a loss of control, of dominance, of status.

The threat is very real - in some rare, isolated circumstances. This instinctive means of asserting dominance is the source of prison rape. It's why men, who on the inside of prisons rape other men with brutal frequency become promiscuous heterosexuals on the outside. Such men almost never have sex with other men as a means of emotional sharing, it's rather a violent act, intended to control, assert dominance and force other men into a subordinate position.

Well, straight men, you can relax. The vast majority of us gay men don't want our way with you. We have sex for the same reason that most of you do - as a part of the expression of love, caring, concern and commitment. Since we're not likely to get it from you, you're not attractive to us and you have nothing to fear from us.

The small minority (and it's a very small minority) of gay men who actually do enjoy seducing straight men invariably do so with understanding and respect for the straight man's concerns and fears. Such encounters are conducted in an atmosphere of equality of the shared emotional experience, and a recognition and respect for the straight man's need for parity and discretion.

Threat to one's world-view: When someone has held to the same ideas and has staunchly advocated them all of his life, someone else who says he's wrong can be rather threatening.

The notion that "that old time religion is good enough for me" is one that is a lot more than just an old song, it represents a fundamental attitude towards one's roots that make it difficult to accept that one has been wrong all of one's life.

If a gay person comes along and says, "hey, look at me, I'm a productive, contributing member of society with values and ideals that make me little different than you," that

person is a threat to someone who has believed all his life what he may have been told since he was young; that gay people are somehow perverted, miserable, lonely people who live short, desperate lives. Yet to the amazement of many, as the AIDS epidemic has forced thousands of gay people out of the closet, these gay people have proved not to be the stereotypes people had believed; but rather ordinary folks like themselves.

Another unsupported emotional reaction, not a real threat. Again, not worthy of consideration as a real reason for being the basis of public policy. **Fear of rape:** This is probably the most emotional and irrational of all of the homophobe's fears, but is probably the most universal. It is the origin of the old saw about 'covering your butt' and numerous other similar admonitions.

Yet the fact is that there are very, very few gay men who would prefer to have sex with heterosexual men, particularly those who would not be willing to cooperate. Why go to the trouble? Only a narcissist would believe that forced sex with himself would be preferable to cooperative and appreciated sex with someone else. Yet it is amazing to me how many heterosexual men actually, subconsciously, at least, feel this way. Maybe this says something about the universality of narcissism!

This is obviously an emotional reaction. Again, there are very few incidents of homosexual rape of heterosexuals, and the chances of becoming a victim are far less than being struck by lightning. But that doesn't assuage the fear.

Fear that one may actually be homosexual himself: Homosexuality is, by even the most conservative estimates, far more common than the number of open homosexuals would imply. And with the realization that bisexuality is actually fairly common, particularly among women, there is a genuine fear among the more conservative that they, themselves, may be homosexual, particularly if they have had a homosexual experience in their past which they actually enjoyed. And since surveys indicate that approximately 64% of adult males in the United States have, there are lots of candidates out there for that fear. Compounding this can be religion-based guilt, often promoted by televangelists who have made a career of promoting homophobia.

The fear leads to a subconscious reaction: hate and/or kill the queer and you're not like him, because you've distanced yourself from him. Irrational, isn't it? Yet that's the subconscious logic involved.

One robin does not a summer make and one homosexual experience does not a queer make. It's really that simple. For me, being gay means that I prefer relationships with men. I've had them with women, but I prefer them with men. Both sexually and emotionally. That's what qualifies me as being gay. So all you heterosexual men who've experimented at some time in your youth: relax. Just because you have, even if you enjoyed it, it doesn't mean you're gay.

Even if you are, isn't it important to know yourself? Why are people so afraid of accepting themselves as they really are? Doing so is the Buddhist path to nirvana; knowing and accepting yourself is one of the greatest achievements of life. Why fight it? Fear? If fear is the reason, what does this say about the person who's allowing his life to be governed by it? Isn't that the definition of 'coward?' Personally, I'd be much more concerned about being a coward than being gay.

How We All Pay The Price

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Most social conservatives fail to consider the effects of homophobia. The "special rights" argument wouldn't be applied to religious minorities, but is liberally applied to the one group it is still acceptable for them to hate. This Steve Sack cartoon commented on the murder of Matthew Shepard, a crime which shocked the world with its brutality and callousness. It was inspired by homophobia.

In the opening paragraphs, I talked about the obvious costs of homophobia, and how the heterosexual community is unaware of the price *it* is paying. The fact is that there are many more costs, many of them very subtle.

Consider that the outright fear of homosexuality skews how our culture deals with sex, sexuality, relations with strangers, co-workers and others, dealing with public health issues, and the untold opportunities it presents unscrupulous religionists with the opportunity to appeal to prejudice and call it religion.

The cost to society is enormous. In the simple matter of sex, the fear of homosexuality among heterosexuals, particularly heterosexual men fearing that they themselves may be gay, has been the cause of a great deal of sexual dysfunction. Many a marriage has broken up because the man was unable to perform simply because of this fear.

Businessmen face the problem of sexual harassment and intimidation against their gay workers, and the resulting loss of productivity costs business an enormous amount of money every year. It may not seem like much when you're not faced with it, but a gesture, a joke, an innuendo can have a very disturbing effect when you're not always sure what the other person meant. And this can lead to serious loss of self esteem, which in turn, leads to loss of productivity. Intimidated employees are less likely to try to be innovative and forward thinking in problem solving; someone suffering from self esteem problems will be more conservative and unwilling to risk being innovative. So business loses.

The U.S. military spends about \$30 million a year hunting down and expelling homosexuals from its ranks, in a clear and open defiance of the "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" law, even though its own studies, from the 1950's to the present, have shown time and time again that they do not represent the threat to "unit cohesion" that is the reason usually given for expelling them.²

In spite of the military's insistence that unit cohesion is a problem, the fact remains that during times of war, expelling homosexuals from the ranks goes way down (and was practically halted during the Gulf War), when unit cohesion is actually of greatest importance. If unit cohesion were really the motivator, why do they quit expelling that 'threat' when the need for cohesion is greatest? No one at the Pentagon has ever answered that question. The answer is obvious to any thinking person: it's institutionalized homophobia. And this is a case where homophobia directly costs the taxpayers \$30 million each and every year it is allowed to govern military policy. And that doesn't count the cost in thousands of destroyed lives caused by the *illegally issued* general discharges that sully the reputations of these honorable men and women.

The AIDS epidemic has cost tens of thousands of Americans their lives. Millions of Americans have lost someone they know, often a close and loved family member, to this terrible scourge. Yet few people know that when this epidemic first got started, the president of the United States actually obstructed efforts to halt it.³ Because of the narrow-mindedness of one politician, now hundreds of thousands have

suffered and died, many of them not even gay, and millions have known grievous personal loss. And the frightening thing is that the homophobia of one politician is responsible. The reason that the famous gay "ghettos" of San Francisco, West Hollywood, Provincetown, Massachusetts and others have come into existence is simply that gay people have felt much more safe and secure among their own kind. This is the same reason that for centuries, Jews, Native Americans, blacks, Latinos, Chinese and many other minorities have gathered together in their own "ghettos." The cost of this ghettoization has been high -- families are torn apart, talented people end up chronically underemployed, friendships lost and loneliness and a sense of rejection become lifelong companions. But it need not be this way. The "gay ghettos" wouldn't exist if gay people felt at home in a heterosexual world. And that would be possible, if the fears that drive heterosexuals to reject homosexuals, didn't exist.

Conclusions

The cost to society is enormous, not just to the gay person, but to his family, his acquaintances, his employers, and to society as a whole.

Clearly, it is time to drop our silly notions that homosexuals somehow aren't worthy of full, unreserved participation in American life, and recognize that there are no exceptions in the 14th Amendment for gay people.

Resources

Books I recommend (which, if you wish, you can buy from Amazon.com by pursuing the links here):

[Homophobia: How We All Pay The Price](#) is Warren Blumenfeld's analysis of this problem and why everyone concerned with the decline of civility in America needs to be concerned about it.

[Created Equal: Why Gay Rights Matter to America](#) by Michael Nava and Robert Dawidoff is an excellent analysis of why homophobia is a costly problem and how America in general, not just the gay community, would benefit by ending it.

[And The Band Played On](#) by Randy Shilts is one of the great classics of investigative journalism, showing how the AIDS epidemic could have easily been halted in its early days if the politics of homophobia hadn't been allowed to prevent the Center for Disease Control from doing its job.

[Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military](#) by Randy Shilts. His last book and one of lasting importance to the debate over gays in the military. Shows conclusively why the opposition to allowing gays to serve openly in the military is really based on the homophobia of the Pentagon brass.

References

¹[The American Psychological Association's Statement on Homosexuality](#)

²"Conduct Unbecoming," by Randy Shilts (p. 280). Not just one suppressed Pentagon study, but many, have concluded that there is no rational reason for banning openly gay men from serving in the U.S. military.

³"And the Band Played On" by Randy Shilts, describes in great detail how President Reagan, falsely believing that AIDS was a disease only of homosexuals, obstructed every attempt by the Center for Disease Control to halt the AIDS epidemic early on, when it was still feasible to do so.

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