



## Introduction

# Expanding our Notions of Homophobia and Sexual Prejudice

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As managing editor of the journal, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC (SRSP)*, I have had an opportunity to work with the guest editors of this special issue on the topic of homophobia and sexual prejudice, Theo van Der Meer, a Dutch historian, and Gilbert Herdt, an American anthropologist who is also the journal's editor and director of the National Sexuality Research Center, as well as with each of the authors who have contributed to this outstanding collection of papers. The guest editors are leading scholars in the field of sexuality who have contributed their considerable expertise to the formulation of the idea for this special issue and to shepherding the initial papers that would become part of it. All of the authors have provided papers that are innovative and forward looking in their perspectives on the topic and thereby serve to further the ongoing mission of the journal in contributing to the field of sexuality studies.

The intellectual concept of *homophobia* is less than forty years old, yet in this short time it has helped to transform our understanding of sexuality in general and sexual orientation in particular by promoting a shift in the discourse about homosexuality from a primary focus on the individual with a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning orientation to a broader lens that also involves examination of the psychological and social reactions to alternative sexualities. In part because of this development, sexual orientation, like gender and sex, is no longer viewed solely as a fixed quality that resides within an

individual, but rather as a construct that is shaped as well by interactive social, political, and interpersonal factors. This paradigm shift represents a move away from the essentialist medical model of homosexuality, which arose in the nineteenth century and continued to be hegemonic during much of the twentieth century, toward a more inclusive understanding that considers complex individual and social contributions to the development of sexuality.

The simple yet critical accomplishment of George Weinberg's (1972) creation of the term homophobia (see Gregory Herek's article in this issue for a description of the history of this term) was to dislocate the study of homosexuality from its prior and almost exclusive focus on the presumed disease of nonheterosexual orientations to include examination as well of personal and societal attitudes about lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (lgbt) persons. This change predated by only a year the American Psychiatric Association's decision in December 1973 to depathologize homosexuality by removing it from its list of diagnoses of mental disorders (Bayer, 1987). The implicit demand contained in the concept of homophobia—that those who react negatively to homosexuality and lgbt persons should themselves become an object of inquiry and concern in the discourse about sexuality—together with the official declassification of homosexuality as a designated type of mental disorder helped to create the conditions that would lead to a revolution in intellectual, psychological, political, and religious perspectives on homosexuality.

Homophobia refers to negative attitudes about sexual minorities. Such attitudes are destructive and generally derive from adherence to regressive beliefs. However, the willingness and the capacity conveyed by use of the term to label those persons who hold such negative attitudes as potentially deviant or problematic were of great significance. Weinberg's invention was one outcome of a historical process that took place in the crucible of science and politics over the course of the previous century and that would lead to contemporary constructions of sexual minority identities and to new definitions of sexual rights (Herman, 1997). The papers in this issue of *SRSP* serve to further the critical study of homophobia by incorporating notions about stigma and sexual prejudice and by deepening the scholarly understanding of it through presentation of new psychological, historical, and sociological perspectives on the origins and manifestations of homophobia.

Gregory Herek's contribution, "Beyond 'Homophobia': Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century," provides a key description of the conceptual basis for the term homophobia, suggests innovative ways of understanding the phenomena associated with it, and presents new terminology to apply in future discourse and research about the topic. As one of the leading researchers in the field of sexual prejudice, Herek presents a thorough examination of Weinberg's intentions when he originally coined the term. In addition, he carefully outlines the disadvantages of continuing to employ a term that may narrow and even misrepresent what it purports to identify. While recognizing the historical and political contributions of the concept, his careful unpacking of the theoretical issues underlying sexual prejudice and stigma helps to lead us toward a truly twenty-first century understanding of the psychological and social factors that produce antigay feelings, beliefs, and behaviors.

Karen Franklin's paper, "Enacting Masculinity: Antigay Violence and Group Rape as Participatory Theater," demonstrates the links between antigay violence, aggression toward women—particularly as manifested in group rape—and enactments of hypermasculine performance. Franklin's examination of a specific example of group rape by older male

athletes of younger male athletes, the Mephram High School case, dramatically illustrates the parallels between gendered forms of violence directed against women and gay men. She concludes her paper by suggesting measures that might help to diminish the widespread violence that is normative in certain all male groups.

In "Paths to Homophobia," Mary Bernstein presents findings from her study of a police department about specific sociocultural factors that mediate antilesbian/gay attitudes. In her careful analysis of the results from this study, she expands the conceptualization of homophobia beyond its usual psychological frame to include consideration of the role of stereotypes and of group position in influencing homophobia. This study helps to locate understanding of the factors contributing to homophobia in the workplace, and by extension, into social settings in general. Bernstein concludes her paper by discussing the education and policy implications of her findings.

Thomas Linneman, in his paper, "Homophobia and Hostility: Christian Conservative Reactions to the Political and Cultural Progress of Lesbians and Gay Men," brings together a variety of data to argue that the perception by Christian conservatives in the United States—framed for purposes of Linneman's discussion as a countermovement to the gay and lesbian rights movement—of greater hostility on the part of the larger society toward them because of their negative views of homosexuality can help to explain the increasingly negative and focused homophobia expressed by the Christian right. Linneman also presents findings that demonstrate a greater prominence of homosexuality, in contrast to abortion and school prayer, as an object of concern for Christian conservatives. Linneman suggests that for the foreseeable future the disconnect and disagreement between Christian conservatives and the gay and lesbian rights movement is unlikely to diminish.

Finally, "Premodern Origins of Modern Homophobia and Masculinity," by Theo van der Meer, provides a fascinating historical analysis of perceptions of same-sex desires in eighteenth century Holland and outlines parallels between the underlying sexual ontologies in that society and in contemporary homophobic discourse employed by the religious right

in America. Van der Meer concludes his paper by suggesting that identification of the coexistence today in the United States of a premodern conceptualization of sexuality, such as that adhered to by many in the Christian right, and a modern paradigm of sexuality, like that accepted by gay and lesbian rights groups, helps to explain the barriers to communication between these two groups. He shows how comparable groups in other countries, such as the Netherlands, that are not divided in their allegiance to fundamental sexual discourses even while holding divergent beliefs, can still engage in dialogue about their differences.

While this special issue can only begin to address the topic of homophobia and sexual prejudice, it provides new knowledge and a new level of scholarship on the topic that can help researchers and policy makers move forward in understanding the factors that lead to such forms of prejudice and in developing approaches to countering the negative effects of this prejudice on individuals and society at large. Collectively, these articles document the unique position held by the U.S. in the world today as a result of the degree of polarization in the views of its citizens regarding homosexuality. Other countries may adhere to even more negative views of homosexuality and lgbt people, but few are challenged by the extreme dichotomization in beliefs represented by the Christian right on the one side and by the gay and lesbian rights movement on the other. The prominence of this divide in current American politics is out of proportion to its representation within the population and it must therefore be viewed as a struggle not only between competing groups but between fundamental cultural ideologies.

As American society confronts its future directions in relation to essential rights—such as the rights to marriage, parenting, and access to benefits like social security and health insurance—we hope that the findings and discourses regarding homophobia and sexual prejudice provided in the significant articles in this special issue of *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* will serve as valuable resources for understanding the roots and nature of sexual prejudice in contemporary America. We look forward to further dialogue and feedback in this journal about this critical topic. ♦

## References

- Bayer, R. (1987). *Homosexuality and American society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
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- Weinberg, G. (1972). *Society and the healthy homosexual*. New York: St. Martin's.