



**Homophobia
in
Straight Men**

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Table of Contents

[Homophobia in Straight Men](#)

[Homophobia in Everyday Life](#)

[Al's Dream](#)

[On Being Turned Into a Woman](#)

[Psychotherapy and Homophobia](#)

[Some Social Implications](#)

[Straights and Gays](#)

[References](#)

Homophobia in Straight Men

A few years ago I toured a high-security prison in the Midwest as an expert witness in litigation concerning the effects of prison conditions on prisoners' mental health. When I stepped into the main entry area of the prison, I saw a woman milling around with the men a short distance down one of the halls. She was blond, slim, very feminine—or so I thought on first glance. Actually, “she” was a young man, perhaps 21, dressed as a woman. Blond, blue-eyed, slight and sensuous, he played the part very well. He wore a flowing red gown that reached the floor, had a shawl draped across his chest in a way that did not permit one to assess the size of his breasts, wore make-up, and sported a very seductive female pose. I was surprised to see an attractive woman roaming around in a men's prison. One of the attorneys accompanying me on the tour told me with a wink that “she” was a he, and asked if I would like to talk to him.

The inmate told me he was not really gay, and certainly did not believe he would dress as a woman again after he was released, but on “the inside” it's the only way for him to survive unless he “locks up”; that is, asks for protective custody in a segregated section of the prison where inmates who do not feel safe on the “mainline” are housed, including those identified as “snitches” and child molesters. When this man arrived at the prison at 19 he was beat up and raped a number of times, and on several other occasions

prison toughs fought with each other for the opportunity to use him sexually. He learned that it was safer to become the “woman” of a tough prisoner, that way he would not be beaten nor be the object of rivalries between prison toughs. He would become the passive sexual partner of one dominant man.

Later that day I met with a group of security officers. One mentioned the young man. I said I had met him. The officer asked if I’d like to hear the bit of advice he would have given that slight and fair young man if he had seen him when he entered the prison. Before I had a chance to answer, he blurted out:

“What you want to do is the first time you go out on the yard you break off a metal bed post and shove it down your trouser leg. Then, when a big guy comes up and pinches your ass or makes a lewd remark, you pull out the metal stick and smack him as hard as you can across the face. You’ll both get thrown in the hole for ten days. Then, when you get out, everyone will respect you as a ‘crazy’ and no one will hassle you for sex any more.”

In prison, “butt-fucking” is the symbol of dominance. The strong do it, the weak must submit. Homosexual rape is a constant threat for those who cannot prove they are “man enough.” According to Tom Cahill (1990), a survivor of prison rape: “We are victims of a system in which those who are dominated and humiliated come to dominate and humiliate others” (p. 33). Perhaps this explains why prisoners do so much body-building.

Free men do a lot of toughening, too. If it is not the physique it's the mind, or it's the reputation or the financial empire, but men are always building something that they believe will keep them off the bottom of the heap, out of range of those who would "shaft" them. This is not a complete explanation of men's competitiveness and defensiveness—competition is built into our social relations—but men's subjective dread of "being shafted" plays a part in sustaining those competitive social relations. The prison drama reverberates in the male psyche. It is as if men do not want to appear incapable of defending themselves against rape at any time. We stiffen our bodies when approached by other men who want to touch or hug and we keep men at a certain distance—where we can watch them and be certain that closeness and dependency will not make us too vulnerable.

Homophobia in Everyday Life

Weinberg (1972) defines homophobia: "The dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals." Pharr (1988) defines it as: "Societal hatred, rejection, or fear of gay and lesbian people." According to Cabaj (1985), the definition should also include hatred of the idea of homosexuality, hatred of the expression of affection between two members of the same sex, the motivation behind attacks on gays ("gay-bashing"), and a form of self-hatred among gay people. Weeks (1981) and Duroche (1991) uncover the roots of homophobia in the nineteenth century when "deep male bonding began to be

perceived as a threat, to the individual as well as to the social order” (Duroche, 1991, p. 3). Morin and Garfinkle (1978a) studied the personality correlates of homophobia in men and concluded that they tend to be authoritarian, rigid, intolerant of ambiguity, concerned about status, conflicted about their sexual impulses, and distancing with others. Malyon (1982) discusses “internalized homophobia” in gay men, but I will restrict this discussion to homophobia in straight men.

Homophobia is about fear and hatred of gays and lesbians, it is also about the stiffening and the distancing men do with other men, regardless of sexual orientation. Straight men fear close contact with each other and try to avoid doing anything that others might interpret as effeminate or unmanly. Homophobia can be subtle and unconscious. Fantasies as primitive as being “butt-fucked” usually remain unconscious until men explore their homophobia and discover the fantasies that lurk behind their fears. It is the subtle and unconscious forms of homophobia that constrict the lives and possibilities of sensitive heterosexual men.

Men do not enter my consulting room asking if I can help them overcome their homophobia. And most of the men I treat would never knowingly discriminate against gays and lesbians. Their homophobia is much more subtle. For instance, a male client speaks disparagingly about a gay colleague. I ask what the other man represents to him. He assures me he

would never support any kind of discrimination against gays in the workplace. Next he recalls his father jeering at him whenever he did not seem to be trying hard enough in sports to suit the older man: “What’s the matter, are you queer?” He realizes that the thing that bothers him most about his gay colleague is his lack of athletic prowess: “It’s not so much that he’s effeminate, though he is that, but he’s so flabby and uncoordinated, he looks like he’s never thrown a ball or run a race.” This client lifts weights daily and very consciously keeps his chest out and his stomach in at all times. He quickly sees the connection between this discussion—a discussion about homophobia even though we never use the term—and a complaint that was on his original list of reasons for seeking psychotherapy, his concern that he is “wound up tighter than the spring on a clothespin.” And he originally wanted me to help him “relax and be more playful.”

Men tell me they would like to have close male friends, then they add they do not want me to get the idea they are gay. In other words, homophobia plays a part in their isolation and inability to sustain meaningful same-sex intimacies. Other men want to quit coming to see me as soon as the symptoms that motivated them to seek therapy diminish a little. When we explore the reasons they might want to terminate so abruptly, we discover their fear of becoming dependent on another man, or their fear of the affection that is developing between us. Of course, their fears are not entirely a matter of homophobia. They have had very real experiences of betrayal and abuse at

the hands of men upon whom they were once dependent, beginning with their fathers. But homophobia is a relevant issue.

On several occasions when I have confronted male clients about their need to terminate therapy abruptly, we have discovered that they had sexual feelings toward me, or were afraid I had sexual feelings toward them. In cases where the client has been willing to continue in therapy and explore these fantasies, we have reached the conclusion that the wish to flee from psychotherapy is a defense against complicated and conflictual feelings about the expression of affection between two men and its connection to homosexuality. Homophobia is an important part of male psychology, even in men who would never knowingly support any kind of overt discrimination against gays and lesbians.

Al's Dream

Al had been in therapy with me for six months when he reported a dream. At the end of a romantic evening out, including dinner, a jazz club and not a few drinks, he tried to seduce his wife. She politely let him know she was not feeling very sexual, and when he fell asleep he had this dream: A group of escaped prisoners have broken into his house and taken him and his wife captive. He is stripped, bent over, and repeatedly raped. Then his wife is stripped and forced to the floor next to him. He is made to watch as the

largest intruder commences to rape her.

Al is frightened by the dream, but also reports he felt excited when he waked. We discuss its meaning. There is the prisoner who rapes his wife, expressing the rage he sometimes feels toward her, and perhaps the man's size reflects Al's belief that if he were "more of a man" she would be more "turned on" by him. The image of his wife being compelled to have sex puts him in touch with his wish to compel her, as well as the wish that she would be the one to compel him to have sex sometimes. And he tells me, with some embarrassment, that anal rape may represent the defeat and humiliation he feels every time his wife refuses his advances—he admits he often wonders if she might be having an affair while using her tiredness as a way to hide it from him. He begins to see the link between his feelings of inadequacy and his fear that weak men are at risk of rape at the hands of more dominant men.

It is not easy for Al to examine his unconscious associations to this dream, he is horrified that he is capable of imagining such bestiality. Every image and feeling contradicts his view of himself as a strong, sensitive man. Meanwhile, he complains of chronic tiredness and lack of interest in anything. Obviously an aim of Al's therapy will be to help him channel some of the dream's aggressive and erotic energy into the areas of his life where currently he feels a lack of passion. But first he must confront his deep feelings of inadequacy, and the concerns he has about his own manliness that get stirred

up whenever his wife refuses his advances.

On Being Turned Into a Woman

Plenty of very homophobic men vicariously enjoy the explicit depiction of sex between women in pornographic magazines and videos. Seeing two women involved in sexual acts is not threatening, perhaps because one can fantasize entering both women. What the homophobic man fears is not sex between people of the same gender, but rather passive sex, wherein the male is penetrated anally. A man can respect a woman, protect her from abuse by others, and appreciate her femaleness, but to be *like her* is a totally revolting thought, especially in regard to penetration by a man. John Ross (1986) links men's fears of intimacy with women as well as their ambivalence about fatherhood with an underlying dread of being turned into a woman.

Men insult each other in telling ways—"You have no balls," "You cry like a woman," "Don't be a w-o-o-s-s," "What a pussy"—in other words, the worst thing a man can call another is a woman. Men remember the schoolyard scenario where the guy who wins the fight is lauded while the guy who "chickens out" or gets "his ass whipped" is devalued, the worst humiliation being when others call him a girl. This is why the prison scenario reverberates with such intensity in the male psyche. Jean Genet (1966) reports that he learned how to be a prison tough while still at Mettray reform

school: “Bulkaen, on the other hand, was a little man whom Mettray had turned into a girl for the use of the big shots, and all his gestures were the sign of nostalgia for his plundered, destroyed virility” (p. 144).

Forstein (1988) locates the problem of homophobia in the need on the part of straight men to compensate for their insecurities: “Those who are truly heterosexually oriented, but insecure and uncomfortable with the orientation and the implied role, may exaggerate what they perceive to be evidence that they are indeed heterosexual. These individuals may manifest homophobic attitudes in an attempt to confirm their heterosexuality to themselves and others” (p. 34).

Peggy Reeves Sanday’s (1990) study of fraternity gang rape uncovers blatant homophobia among the fraternity members who participate. Coeds who are insecure about their popularity are invited to the frat house, plied with drinks and drugs, and then seduced by a fraternity brother. Other brothers, who may have been watching the initial sexual encounter, then enter the room and proceed to have serial sex with the coed, who is too inebriated to know what is happening, much less to protest. Sanday interviews fraternity members at two different universities who have participated in what they call “pulling train,” and found that most believe the women gave their implicit consent by being at the frat house and accepting the booze and drugs, and these young men do not think they have done

anything wrong. Sanday comments:

Men entice one another into the act of “pulling train” by implying that those who do not participate are unmanly or homosexual. This behavior is full of contradictions because the homoeroticism of “pulling train” seems obvious. A group of men watch each other having sex with a woman who may be unconscious. One might well ask why the woman is even necessary for the sexual acts these men stage for one another. As fraternity practices described in this book suggest, the answer seems to lie in homophobia. One can suggest that in the act of “pulling train” the polymorphous sexuality of homophobic men is given a strictly heterosexual form. (p. 12)

When a man considers wearing a colorful or flamboyant article of clothing, has the impulse to hug or kiss another man in public, toys with the idea of donning an unusual hair style, or wants to take a ballet class—all things women do with abandon—he must consider what others will think. Will they think I am too effeminate? Maybe they will think I am gay. The thought stops us. Here is another of those lines a man is not supposed to cross. Weinberg (1972) includes in his list of reasons for men’s homophobia the repressed envy straight men feel toward gays because of the freedom ascribed to gays. In other words, straight men despise homosexuals because they envy gay men’s freedom from traditional gender roles. Few men admit they feel this kind of envy, but I believe it plays a part in homophobia. A male client tells me his wife is developing a close friendship with a gay man:

“I don’t mind, really. I’m not jealous or anything. It’s just that, when they spend time together they laugh and get silly, then they cry together about

another friend who's got AIDS, and they just seem to get into this emotional space with each other. She and I haven't had that kind of emotional contact in years. I envy his ability to get into that space with her. I guess I am a little jealous."

But envy is not the most significant reason for homophobia.

In the heterosexual male imagination, the thought of homosexuality is closely associated with the threat of violence—involuntary sodomy by a more powerful male. The link is usually unconscious, but not very far beneath the surface. Of course, if a straight man does not wish to be penetrated anally, the only way it can happen is violently—and no "real man" would ever let that occur without putting up a ferocious fight. Fantasies of domination and submission are enacted with particular fury in prison. Men watching Tom Selleck play a falsely imprisoned middle class man who murders a tough black inmate in *An Innocent Man* are very ready to believe that a man is justified in committing murder to avoid anal rape. When straight men think of being penetrated, they think of violence. There is no other way.

The inability to acknowledge any homosexual impulses in oneself causes men to project all homosexual desires outward, onto gay men. Since the only way a straight man can conceive of having sex with a man is rape, and since gay men are the only ones who have an urge to make love with

another man, the anxious straight concludes that only a gay man would be a threat. Thus the gay-basher aims to beat up or kill gay men in order to lessen the likelihood he will ever be forced to engage in sex with a man. On this issue Freud was correct, one can protest too much, latent homosexuality is at the core of homophobia. Freud erred only when his own homophobia led him to pathologize homosexuality.

Outside of prison, the fear of anal rape is linked to men's obsession with the question who is on top, the man dreading the loss of a battle and the fall to the bottom of the heap. Boys are taught the link between homosexuality and violence on the schoolyard, where "weakling," "loser," "chicken," "girl," and "queer" are all synonymous. The link lasts for life. We always stand ready to fight like a man. Of course, most men move on from the fist fights of the schoolyard to more adult forms of competition, be that a ferocious legal battle, a romantic rivalry or an effort to beat the competition and clinch the deal or the promotion. Men's fantasies do not entirely explain competition, but in a society where competition is the name of the game they serve to motivate men to continue competing. In the straight male imagination, anal rape is the penalty for losing and being dominated. The imagined disgrace intensifies the drive to move upward in every hierarchy.

The presence of gay men is a constant reminder to anxious straights that "butt-fucking" remains a possibility. Just as rape is more an expression of

violent hatred against women than it is a form of sexual desire, homophobia is more about the dread of being violently thrown to the bottom of the heap and disgraced than it is about sexual preference. Homosexuality is not really about rape and violence, it is about desire, eroticism, tenderness and affection between men. The exception is a segment of the gay community where the hypermasculine image reigns, but even here the AIDS epidemic and the need for the gay community to take care of its ill members is causing big changes.

Jeff Beane (1990) writes: "As we continue to evolve and redefine positive identities as gay and bi men, we are freeing ourselves from the restrictive and dysfunctional aspects of male gender role training" (p. 161). Meanwhile the homophobe (and the homophobic part of every man, no matter how subtle and well-contained), intent on denying his craving for affection from other men, projects the sexual desire as well as the violent impulses. Gays are the most available objects of scorn, and there is the added advantage that, in hating gays, the homophobe proves he is not guilty of excessive fondness for men.

Psychotherapy and Homophobia

Psychotherapists are not immune to homophobia, and when they are unaware of their own homophobia it can cause them to be biased in their treatment of men who are conflicted about their gender identity and sexual

preference. James Coleman (1973) writes about his disappointment in the two therapists he saw over a span of several years. Both denied they were biased about homosexuality, but then proved otherwise when he talked about his conflicts:

Twice while in therapy, I met homosexual acquaintances with whom the possibility of a real relationship existed, and shunned them. A therapist might usefully have explored why I was so guilty, even urged me to overcome this guilt; instead, these occurrences became evidence that I did not really want to be homosexual (which we already knew) and since my not wanting to be gay was implicitly a sign (perhaps my only sign) of health, these occurrences were not examined critically. Similarly, my therapists spent much time trying to discover why my relationships with straight friends were so passionate—rather than asking me why I formed these passionate relationships with straights. Similarly, after the homosexual affair which lost me my teaching job—a very warm relationship which continues, intermittently, to this day—I brought to my next therapist the datum that while in bed with my lover, I felt completely harmonious and “natural,” not “sick” at all and not even guilty. Although this contradicted the very basis of the feeling which led me to psychotherapy, my therapist never took the initiative in exploring this contradiction, (pp. 500-501)

If Coleman’s report is accurate, his therapists are not trying to help him work through his inner conflicts so that he can uncover his deepest desires regarding sexual preference, but rather are trying to impose their own moral stance, a stance grounded in unconscious homophobia. These therapists, while claiming to have no biases, selectively attempt to help him work through the blocks he encounters in heterosexual relationships while offering no help in his attempts to make homosexual relationships work. Even if

Coleman's therapists are not fairly described, his description does capture a familiar moment experienced by other clients with other therapists (Morin & Garfinkel, 1978b).

Even though the American Psychiatric Association was forced by gay and lesbian critics to remove homosexuality from the official list of categories of mental illness in 1973, traditional psychoanalysts and psychotherapists continue to pathologize homosexuality. For instance, Reuben Fine (1988) believes that a certain degree of bisexuality is normal and can lead to homosexual experimentation during adolescence, but when overt homosexual behavior continues into adulthood it is a sign of significant emotional disturbance, usually reflecting overinvolvement with a seductive and castrating mother. Basing their interventions on this formulation, traditional therapists focus selectively on the neurotic conflicts that underlie homosexual object choice and ignore the homophobia that constricts men's options and stifles their passion. Can a male client really explore his full range of options with a therapist who is this biased about what constitutes "normal" male inclinations? The psychoanalytic establishment's approach to homosexuality has been criticized for its homophobic biases and lack of social and historical perspective (Bayer, 1981; Marmor, 1980; Murphy, 1984; Friedman, 1986).

Alfred Adler's (1912) theory of "masculine protest" helps us understand

the psychological roots of homophobia. According to Adler, the child develops a sense of inferiority because of his or her “familial organic constitution.” A twitch, left-handedness, incoordination, weakness, deafness or bed-wetting—depending on how the child’s “organ inferiority” is handled in the family—might develop, in the neurotic, “into a deeply-felt sense of inferiority.” The neurotic-to-be both accepts passively the family’s attribution of inferiority and actively rebels against the attribution, developing a compensatory striving toward power and domination—“the masculine protest.” “The neurotic’s worldly projects are doomed to continually reenact the drama of a struggle between the masculine (powerful) and feminine (weak, inferior) parts of the psyche, at the expense of real creativity and happiness.” Adler did not mention homophobia, but he certainly described its psychological roots.

By 1927 Adler had integrated this psychological formulation with a social analysis:

All our institutions, our traditional attitudes, our laws, our morals, our customs, give evidence of the fact that they are determined and maintained by privileged males for the glory of male domination. It is very difficult to make it clear to a child that a mother who is engaged in household duties is as valuable as a father. (Adler, 1927, cited in Miller, 1973, p. 40)

Is it any wonder that Freud and Adler parted ways in 1912, mostly because Adler would not accept Freud’s phallogocentric theories? Still, Adler’s concept of “masculine protest” is echoed in the work of other psychoanalysts,

for instance, F. Boehm's (1932) idea that hypermasculinity is a defense against a man's unconscious female identification.

Feminists, including Nancy Chodorow (1978), Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976), and Lillian Rubin (1985), further our understanding of homophobia by offering an alternative to the traditional psychoanalytic formulation of the Oedipal phase of development. During that phase the male child "disidentifies" with his mother and begins to relate more to his father (Greenson, 1968). Disidentification does not occur in an instant, the boy deciding he will no longer look or be like his mother in any noticeable regard. Rather, he begins in earnest the process of learning the postures and practices of men, ways to conduct himself more like a man than a woman—a process that will take years and contain many false starts and hairpin turns.

Is it any surprise that many males believe that they must cast aside every feminine trait in order to thoroughly disidentify with mother, for instance no longer permitting their mothers to hug them? After all, boys are taught to think that males do not require very much display of affection—as if clinging to the thought will prevent a boy's missing his mother's arms. It does seem a throwback to this Oedipal dilemma when men, in a burst of insecurity about their masculinity, wonder whether they are too womanly, in other words too much like their mothers. The adult tendency to disidentify strongly with gays has roots in the Oedipal boy's need to disidentify with his mother—

the devaluation of women and the expression of hatred toward gays being signs of a “real man.”

The search for a strong male identity reappears in force during early adolescence. Boys are especially careful to be unlike girls, even while constantly grooming themselves and eagerly searching for clues to what it is that attracts girls to boys. Boys tend to do cruel things during this period. They humiliate other boys who seem unmanly or “queer,” and they devalue girls, for instance, bragging about their sexual conquests. The disidentification is with all females and all feminine traits. Boys are led to believe that if they can only exaggerate the differences between themselves and those men who are willing to be used as women, they can discover the secret to being a man.

It is no accident that Freud pathologized homosexuality as well as womanhood. As Jean Baker Miller (1976) points out, the dominant group always defines the characteristics of subordinate groups as inferior, and in our psychological age, this means the inclinations of subordinate groups are pathologized. Where once psychoanalysts diagnosed penis envy in ambitious women and considered homosexuality a form of mental illness, today’s clinicians diagnose late luteal phase dysphoric disorder in women and “psychosexual disorders” in gays and lesbians. The categories change but the potential for gender-bias remains.

Some Social Implications

Homophobia is socially reinforced and solidifies the current social arrangements, including the male theme of top dog and fallen subordinate. Suzanne Pharr (1988) courageously asserts that homophobia is not a peripheral issue in the struggle against sexism—it is not just a matter of protecting the rights of gays and lesbians—rather, homophobia is at the core of sexism and must be routed out if gender relations are to improve significantly. She writes:

When gay men break ranks with male roles through bonding and affection outside the arenas of war and sports, they are perceived as not being “real men,” that is, as being identified with women, the weaker sex that must be dominated and that over the centuries has been the object of male hatred and abuse. Misogyny gets transferred to gay men with a vengeance and is increased by the fear that their sexual identity and behavior will bring down the entire system of male dominance and compulsory heterosexuality, (p. 19)

Pharr proceeds to examine the role of homophobia in the battering of women.

Homophobia marks a line of demarcation and helps maintain a narrow, traditional definition of masculinity. I often have the urge to put my arm around a male friend’s waist as we walk, only to find myself wondering if others will think we are gay. Once I went to a movie with a male friend, and on the way out of the theater saw a male client waiting in line. In the midst of

a lively discussion, my friend and I have the habit of touching each other while making points. The client seemed very uncomfortable in our encounter, and called the next day to say he wanted to terminate psychotherapy. Though he denied his decision had anything to do with our meeting at the theater, I was left to wonder whether he had concluded I was gay. I thought about calling him back and asking if my perception was accurate and that he was cutting off contact with me for fear I was gay, but decided against that course of action. What would I have said if he had validated my perception? Of course, I reviewed the incident and tried to decide if I had acted inappropriately, for instance in demonstrating affection toward my friend in public. This is a complicated question for a psychotherapist who comes from a psychoanalytic tradition. I decided I would not act differently in the future; I just do not believe it is inappropriate for men to show their affection toward one another.

I told a gay friend about the incident and he pointed out that while I suffered some discomfort, a gay man who is perceived as gay in the wrong place always has to fear being beaten or killed. As Franklin Abbott (1990) writes about his experience in high school: "If you were ever labelled queer that was it. Your life would be pure hell until you graduated or killed yourself" (p. 232).

There is a homophobic part in every man; socialization is never a total

failure. Homophobia is like racism and sexism in this regard. It is impossible to grow up in a culture where homophobia, sexism, and racism are rampant and not internalize a tendency to discriminate to some extent. And the lessons from the struggle to end racism and sexism can be applied in the struggle against homophobia. For instance, W. J. Cash, in *The Mind of the South* (1941), asks a critical question: Why do poor white Southerners ally with plantation owners in racist organizations like the KKK instead of allying with poor blacks to demand their fair share of the economic pie from the wealthy whites who exploit the poor of both races? Cash concludes that, by allying with plantation owners poor whites are able to identify with their power and thus convince themselves they are not really at the bottom of the heap—at least they are not “niggers.” As in the case of the poor white Southerner who joins a racist group, overtly homophobic men are saying:

“I may feel inadequate in many ways, but at least I’m not gay, at least I don’t have to bend over and be sodomized by another man.”

If one grew up as a white male in this society, remnants of racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes will remain in the psyche forever. All we can say for certain is that we are men who are trying to rid ourselves of homophobia, just as we are trying to rid ourselves of all vestiges of racism and sexism.

Straights and Gays

Straight men discover it is not easy to associate closely with gays and lesbians; people might get ideas. The problem is exaggerated among straight, image-conscious adolescents, who tend to ostracize gays. A separation of gays and straights occurs, a separation that leads to a lifelong alienation between the groups. The distancing encourages projections, particularly negative ones. This is why some straight men are gullible enough to believe that all gays are pedarasts and should not be permitted to teach young children, or that all gays are alike and actually fit the stereotypes straights have manufactured.

Of course, men who want to move beyond this stereotype must join the struggle to end homophobia in the public arena: the struggle to end discrimination against gays and lesbians at work and in the eyes of the law, to end gay-bashing, to make available adequate resources to fight AIDS, and so forth. This is an important part of the battle against sexism. By keeping straights and gays separate, and by stigmatizing gays, homophobia serves to consolidate the grip of traditional masculinity over the great majority of American men. Homophobia is about the rigidities and closings that are woven into the male psychic structure by a lifetime of admonitions not to be a “weakling,” a “loser,” a “sissy,” or a “queer.”

Before the term “homosexual” was invented, Edward Carpenter wrote about “intermediate types,” and the possibility they “might fulfill a positive and useful function” (quoted in Thompson, 1987, p. 152). According to

Carpenter (1916):

The Uranian (homosexual, gay) temperament in man closely resembles the normal temperament of women in this respect—that in both, love, in some form or other, is the main object of life. In the normal man, ambition, moneymaking, business, adventure, et cetera, play their part—love is, as a rule, a secondary matter, (cited in Thompson, 1987, p. 157)

Whether or not Carpenter’s generalizations are valid today, he opened the discussion of a positive social role for gay men. Harry Hay, “generally acknowledged as the father of gay liberation” (Thompson, 1987, p. 265), founded the Mattachine Society in the early ‘fifties and posed to its gay members three questions: “Who are we gay people?”; “Where have we been throughout the ages?”; and “What might we be for?”

Many men today are attempting to stop posturing as if they were warding off penetration at every turn. These men are seeking a third alternative to the either/or top dog/fallen subordinate schema. But for the homophobe, and the homophobic part in every straight man, there is no third alternative. In fact, homophobia is one big reason many men feel a need to keep fighting their way to the top in every situation. I believe straight men have much to learn from gays, and vice versa. Consider the male theme of top and bottom. What is the position of gay men? To be brutally concrete, when two men make love there is no assumption that one will be on top and active while the other is on the bottom and passive, as there is, on the average, when

a man and woman make love. These things remain to be negotiated in each instance. How are men to negotiate who will be on top? Could the lessons of sex carry over to the conduct of commerce and politics? Does someone have to “get shafted” in order for someone else to succeed and feel good? Straight men have much to learn from gays, if only because the latter are forced to challenge the reigning gender sensibility if they are to find a tenable role for themselves in the social drama (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1987).

Women and gay men have been talking about gender issues for a long time. They have been forced to, since it is on account of their gender or their sexual preference that they are oppressed. Straight men have done much less talking. Of course, it is not the job of women and gays to show straight men the way to break free. But a free and open exchange between men and women, straight and gay, would offer a golden opportunity to examine our gender relations and move forward together.

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