

Getting “Straight” about Male Homophobia: Rejecting the Reaction Formation Theory in Favor of Socialized Male Peer Acceptance

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Abstract

The predominant explanation of male homophobia, for lay persons and professionals alike, is a Freudian reaction formation against one’s own repressed or suppressed homoerotic desires. Instead, the primary motivation for homophobic behavior by men and boys is avoiding social shaming and maintaining social acceptance. In short, men and boys display homophobic behavior not because they fear that they are homosexual, but because they fear that other males might think that they are homosexual.

Male homophobia and the common explanation

Behavior and comments indicative of homophobia occur frequently in individual and group therapy with male adolescents and adults. The dictionary definition of homophobia is “an unreasonable fear of homosexuals or homosexuality.” For the practitioner, this “unreasonable fear” is an internal state that must be inferred from verbal and overt behavior that can be observed in the session. Some of these indicators are more obvious, such as derogative slurs, anti-gay jokes, and explicit mockery or condemnation of homosexuals as perverse, immoral, repugnant, or weak. Some indicators may be more subtle, such as avoidance of perceived homosexuals, aversion to bodily contact with other males, evasion of the issue, and non-verbal expressions of disgust, hostility, or aversion to gays. Other indicators are exaggerated displays of masculinity by an individual to prove his heterosexuality. This would include male demonstrations of physical strength, bravado, bragging of sexual prowess with women, and verbal or physical assaults on real or imagined homosexuals or anyone who publicly questions the individual’s virility. In terms of severity, homophobic behavior can range from mild unease, to moderate prejudice, to strident hostility

that can culminate in violent assault. There is a distinguishable array of behaviors and verbalizations that are frequently observed in therapy, which are inferred to indicate “homophobia.” In other words, therapists largely agree that there is a recognizable phenomenon, which is often labeled as “homophobia”.

The big problem is the misguided theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. By far, the most common explanation, for clinicians and lay persons alike, is fundamentally Freudian. Homophobia is seen as a reaction formation in which anti-gay remarks and behavior are efforts by an individual to repress, suppress or conceal his own homo-erotic desires or tendencies. The individual reverses his true homosexual desires into the very opposite – disgust for homosexuality and exaggerated displays of his heterosexuality.

Male homophobia as fear of social disapproval

It is time to get rid of the reaction formation as the leading explanation for homophobia. The vast majority of so-called “homophobic” behavior is not an expression of repressed or suppressed homosexuality at all. Rather, this common phenom-

enon should be more accurately seen as “humiliation-phobia.” The primary motivation for such homophobic behavior by men and boys is avoiding humiliation in the eyes of male peers. Men and boys act in homophobic ways not because they fear that they are homosexual, but because they fear that other males might THINK that they are homosexual. In other words, homophobia is about gaining and protecting male social acceptance and esteem.

This fundamental male fear of humiliation originates in, and is reinforced by, traditional male socialization: “In the Spartan curriculum of male sex-role training, homosexuality is deemed the most abominable weakness because it encompasses all fashion of unacceptableness when contrasted to rigid masculine ideals. Young boys recoil from the insult ‘fag’ long before they understand its sexual meaning [1].

Males know, from the earliest age, what they should be: strong, virile, competent. And they are acutely aware of what they should not be: “sissy,” “queer,” “fag.” Homosexuality is seen as the opposite of the fundamental tenets of masculine identity and threatens social acceptance by male peers. Clearly, on the proving ground of male socialization, boys play with boys and boy toys. They do not play with girls and girl toys.

“In the very male domain of boyhood, the contingencies of social humiliation are sharp and piercing, and the need for male peer acceptance is keen. In craving acceptance, the fear of negative social evaluation by other males is pre-eminent. One need only to observe boys on a typical playground to appreciate the potency of acceptance, rejection and humiliation in the male socialization process” [1].

Masculine identity is hammered into males on the anvil of traditional male socialization – well before puberty thrusts gender-targeted erotic desire to the forefront of teen life. The fear of social rejection and desire for approval is the essential motivation behind the behaviors and bravado that are observed, and often interpreted, as “homophobic.” It is not a Freudian reaction formation to repress homosexual tendencies. True, some boys and men may struggle with their sexual orientation and identity. Some may have and fear homosexual urges. But even here, where the Freudian explanation might appear to have merit, the essential motivation remains one of protecting male social acceptance. Boys and men want to escape the severe consequences of being perceived as socially unacceptable (i.e., homosexual). In the words of one practitioner, “I have seen cases where men who actually elicited sex with other men became hostile and aggressive when they feared being ‘found out.’ I guess I knew what it was, but didn’t have the words for it.”

By the same token, female homosexuality is certainly not a source of homophobic concern for males. On the contrary, males will boast of their erotic interest in lesbian sex, which can double (sic) the demonstration of their heterosexual machismo before the imaginary jury of male peers.

Application to group and individual therapy

In terms of simple parsimony, it is unnecessary to posit Freudian reaction formations or unconscious dynamics that presume an individual is beset by undesired homo-erotic tendencies. Rather, “homophobia” is a social comparative process by male individuals who are accurately, often acutely, aware of the anti-homosexual values of the society we live in. Seen in this light, it follows that this male phenomenon may be accentuated

in therapy with male adolescents, college males, young male adults, male survivors of sexual abuse, male-only treatment groups, and other male populations. In fact, homophobia may be especially pronounced in therapy with adolescent males where the developmental sensitivities about peer acceptance and male self-esteem are excruciating in importance.

It is imperative, then, that therapists understand the common phenomenon of homophobia for what it usually is (humiliation phobia) and what it usually is not (a Freudian reaction formation). Only then, can we direct our interventions effectively. The prevalent reaction-formation theory leads practitioners to over-diagnose homo-erotic problems in what is more likely to be normative male behavior. When a burst of homophobic insults and bravado break out in an individual or group session, it is not because something has threatened to expose the male’s true homosexual identity. For example, in a male group therapy context, the therapist should be looking at the interpersonal events and relationships that preceded the homophobic outburst to guide his/her interventions [2]. For example, is the group afraid that David’s expression of compassion for Adam may have appeared too “gay?” Is John afraid that the revelation of his own victimization by a male sexual abuser will expose him to ridicule? Did the sudden bravado follow a moment of genuine male-male intimacy in the group? Did Fred’s unprovoked diatribe against “fags” follow Mike’s yearning for a father? How does Paul use the perceived humiliation of Rick’s homosexual experiences to manipulate and control him?

The humiliation-phobia theory also explains why so many males are isolated and lack meaningful male relationships. There is strong evidence for the salience of insecure paternal attachment, rather than maternal attachment, in sexual aggression [3,4]. In the related field of domestic violence, Jennings and Murphy (2000) argue that treatment and research has been “barking up the wrong tree” by focusing almost exclusively on male-female factors and missing the abuser’s crucial need for male-male bonds.

Without an accurate understanding of the esteem-protective purpose of so-called male “homophobia,” therapists may not only miss the mark, but they may trigger an intensification of defensiveness, hostility and overt intolerance that hinders treatment. This is the reason that Jennings and Sawyer (2021) [8] have emphasized the fundamental importance of facilitating male-male relating and male-specific esteem in coercive group-based treatment programs. For decades, the most common and primary modality of treatment for sexual abuse, domestic violence, and anger/aggression management has been coercive, male-exclusive psychoeducational groups [5,6,7]. Recognizing that most treatment takes place in groups of male peers, they created a motivational client workbook that actually prepares men and adolescents for a treatment experience that will take place in a male group. Featuring a modality on masculinity and self-esteem, their *Getting the Most from Group* workbook helps men to manage their fears of negative social judgement and peer humiliation, which averts early drop-out and enables them to engage in treatment sooner and more meaningfully.

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