

"YOU CAN TELL JUST BY LOOKING"

addressed, many women and men were now coming out, and there were more images of gay people in films and on television. Bryant and Briggs used the rhetoric of child molestation, but their real concern was that young people might decide for themselves, in part due to the increase in "gay rights" and gay visibility, to come out as homosexual. Since they could not admit that some young people may actually be homosexual, they elaborated more and more on the myth that gay people molested children to make them homosexual. Intensely politicizing the situation, they resorted to war metaphors. Describing gay activists as "militant homosexuals," they accused them of recruiting children to their ranks. Bryant famously said, "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children."⁴

Since that time, the idea that lesbians and gay men recruit, seduce, lure, or trick young people into becoming homosexual has become more widespread and a hallmark of anti-LGBT rhetoric. The very concept of convincing or forcing young people to be gay against their nature is predicated on the idea that same-sex desire is inherently bad, as well as irresistible. For the people who make this argument, any sexual desire in children is a bad thing because it can overpower the person who experiences it.

The belief that heterosexuality is the only natural form of sexual attraction has led to the stigmatization of same-sex attraction as a particularly pernicious desire that somehow enters you from the world "out there." When people come out in their teens or younger, it is not only presumed that a gay person must have recruited, or abused, them, but that the very act of another person, especially an older person, saying, "I'm gay," has the force to make them gay as well. In addition to being absurd, this panicked logic diminishes the integrity and vibrancy of young people's sexuality and trivializes their ability to make healthy, informed, and pleasurable decisions about their own lives.

MYTH 5

MOST HOMOPHOBES ARE REPRESSED HOMOSEXUALS

"Oh, he is such a homophobe. He's probably really gay. That explains it." How often have you heard this? How often have you thought it? Ironically, appeals to common sense are usually made when logical explanations fail or when the explanation is just too confusing to make immediate sense. That is the case with this myth, and, perhaps, with the idea of homophobia itself. Society, culture, economics, power structures, family relationships, prejudices, religion, and so many other factors enter into the creation and maintenance of homophobia. Isolating any one factor, such as a person's supposed sexuality, and singling it out as the chief cause overlook this complexity. More important, with this myth, it also risks depoliticizing homophobia by turning it into a matter of one individual's warped psychology.

Furthermore, the word homophobia has become so broadly defined, and so broadly used, that it can refer to a staggeringly wide range of emotional states, from simple annoyance at the presence of homosexuals to murderous rage. There are enormous differences between these ends of the spectrum and everything in between. But one fact unites these emotional states: the wide application of homophobia to explain an entire gamut of negative reactions toward homosexuality is a direct result of the increasing visibility of social expressions of homosexuality.

The word "homophobia" is a recent invention. After the gay liberation movement began in the late 1960s, LGBT people and their allies needed some idea, and preferably one that matched their intuition, for how others could be so deeply repelled, and in so many different ways, by the increasing visibility of homosexuality. Psychologist George Weinberg coined "homophobia" in the late 1960s, and it was used intermittently by other writers until Weinberg popularized it in his 1972 book, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. Weinberg defined "homophobia" as the revulsion to, or fear of being in close contact with, a lesbian or gay man. Since that time it has become common usage—as well as generating similar terms such as biphobia and transphobia—and has decisively shaped the public discussion of how we think about emotions and actions that manifest animus against lesbians and gay men. Although "homophobia" may be a useful word in some instances, it is often immensely misleading in describing the hows and whys of people's feelings and actions. Nonetheless, many people made the connection that a fear of proximity to homosexuality somehow implicated a person in homosexuality.

This connection often feels intuitive. We have all experienced a situation when people hide something about which they feel ashamed, guilty, or nervous. They may begin to act defensively, or attempt to shift the blame, or shame, onto someone else. This is true of a five-year-old who is caught stealing a cookie from the kitchen after she should be in bed. Or of a co-worker who has not completed his assigned project on time and begins pointing fingers to shift the blame. It is easy to see how this reflexive emotional response might allow many people to think that when a person acts out or articulates a vivid homophobic response to a situation—say, reacting to the public presence of obviously gay men on a street by exclaiming loudly, "When did all the fags move into this neighborhood?"—that person might be hiding something about his own sexual desires. But maybe not. It is important to remember that the myth that most homophobes are repressed homosexuals is very

often a story to explain and negate straight-male aggression against gay men.

In *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, Weinberg argues, shockingly for the time, that homophobia is a common neurosis, or form of maladaptive, destructive behavior. Like other fears (*phobia* is the Greek word for fear)—such as those of being in tight spaces (claustrophobia), of being outside or in open spaces (agoraphobia), and of snakes (ophidiophobia; think of Indiana Jones)—homophobia is a mental imbalance and can severely limit personal interactions, as well as cause minor and major disruptions to an individual's experience of the world. (Obviously, homophobia also causes minor and major disruptions for the lesbians and gay men who are its victims.)

Homophobia, according to Weinberg, is a symptom of deeper prejudice that gains its meaning and power from the ways individuals fear people different from themselves. Weinberg locates the roots of homophobia in specific moral and political views about the world, including religious beliefs that homosexual acts are sinful and the idea that nonheterosexual behavior is a threat to traditional values. Racism is similarly influenced and constructed by a long, complicated history in the United States and is entwined with legal, social, and economic issues. Although Weinberg wrote that the fear of "being homosexual" was about much more than homosexuality per se, the connection between the fear of gay people and the fear of being gay yourself rang so true to readers that it became the main idea people took away from the book. And it quickly became ingrained in both LGBT and mainstream culture.

But Weinberg did not claim that the people who feared homosexuals most—and, again, he was writing almost entirely about men fearing other men—were repressed homosexuals. Human beings are capable of a wide range of erotic feelings. Heterosexuals can feel conflicted about their same-sex attractions, but so can people primarily attracted to the same sex. None of these internal conflicts would be extraordinary, since our culture—even now, which is far more accepting than in the past—does not encourage individuals to

understand, and be comfortable with, their sexual desires. We are taught not to explore or express them. In his 1948 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Alfred Kinsey and his team of researchers wrote, "The anatomy and functional capacities of male genitalia interest the younger boy to a degree that is not appreciated by older males who have become heterosexually conditioned and who are continuously on the defensive against reactions which might be interpreted as homosexual."¹ Weinberg noted a similar defense. Whether predominantly heterosexual or homosexual, people who are not comfortable with their same-sex attractions may try to negate these desires through what Weinberg calls "chronic self-denial." He also argued that people with deep unhappiness about this conflict may experience a "flight into guilt."² Both of these results might be described as "repressing" same-sex erotic attractions because they make these people feel uncomfortable, nervous, and even panicked when confronted with homosexual people of the same sex as themselves.

These psychological responses reflect some of the social and political realities with which we all live. Repression is not simply an internal process. Repression is a response to an entire social world. Homosexuality comes to have meaning, whether pleasant or uncomfortable, only because it is viewed and understood through that world. A person cannot repress "homosexuality" as such because it is not an entity with clear boundaries. It would be absurd to argue that all white racists secretly think they are black or want to be black. The "repression of homosexuality" is the repression of a whole string of associated ideas that for one person may connect to same-sex attraction. Another person may have different associations. We all repress, to some degree, aspects of our erotic desires, sometimes because they are culturally frowned upon, but also because they can be associated with feelings that make us uncomfortable. When something in this repressed chain is dredged up by a reminder of it in daily life, we need to get rid of the discomfort it causes. This is why it makes sense to people that acts of violent homophobia are due to the repression of homosexual tendencies.

Another persuasive aspect of this myth is that it reinforces the widespread cultural fantasy that heterosexual men are unfazed by the possibility of same-sex desire. In this fantasy "real" straight men are so secure in their heterosexuality that they would never need to act out against gay people and, especially, gay men. It is insecure straight men, and closeted gay men, who are the problem. Heterosexual men thus have no connection to, or blame for, homophobic violence.

Rather than homophobes repressing their homosexual feelings, it is more likely that they are avoiding the idea of homosexuality. In his 1946 foundational study of prejudice, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Jean-Paul Sartre, writing just after the Holocaust, boldly argues that anti-Semitism has less to do with Jews than with the fragile psyche and identity of the anti-Semite.

The anti-Semite has essentially created a fantastical idea of the Jew (which has nothing to do with actual people or culture) that "explains" everything that is wrong with both the society in which the anti-Semite lives as well as his own life. In the anti-Semite's fervid imagination, the mythical Jew has too much social power, controls the banks and national wealth, and controls cultural institutions such as universities. In its most extreme version, the anti-Semite imagines that "the Jew" conspires against Christians, molesting and murdering Christian children. This fantasy Jew, which Sartre called "the idea of the Jew," becomes the scapegoat for all that is wrong with the world. Sartre further argues that anti-Semitism is not an "opinion," that is, a view based upon facts, but a "passion," which is deeply believed despite all facts to the contrary. When the anti-Semite is even fleetingly reminded of this "Jew," he feels entitled to react, sometimes violently, with a strongly felt anti-Semitism, telling himself that he is only defending himself and his culture, not attacking another person or group.

Sartre's ideas strike home today. Homophobic passion, impervious to facts, is spouted by many evangelical Christians. Does this mean that televangelists such as Pat Robertson or the late Jerry Falwell, whose pronouncements about homosexuality are extreme

and do great damage, are closeted homosexuals? Their homophobic diatribes can be so sexually explicit a listener might think these men were intimately familiar with homosexuality. It is tempting to say that this familiarity indicates that they are secretly gay. But it makes more sense to say that their relationship to homosexuality is complicated, and like Sartre's anti-Semite, makes sense of their world. Robertson has used homosexuality to explain earthquakes and Hurricane Katrina. This is completely illogical, but passion is not logical. It is possible that homophobes may be envious of the pleasure they deny themselves. This pleasure is then projected onto the sinful homosexual. A recurrent theme in most antigay jeremiads is that gay men are wildly promiscuous and engage in outré sexual acts. Here the idea of the homosexual, not actual homosexuals, represents forbidden pleasures. Just as Jews historically are associated with money, homosexuals have become associated with sex. Wild, out-of-control sex becomes the very meaning of homosexuality. In a culture that does not deal honestly with pleasure, and in which sex is sometimes depicted as a biological force that leads to social anarchy if not properly controlled, the fantasy of the sex-crazed homosexual can generate intense social and personal antagonism.

Many homophobes trumpet family values that explicitly exclude gay and lesbian people. This rhetoric is a continuation of the fantasy world of the post-World War II suburban American Dream. It was during this time that the increasing visibility of homosexuals in US culture began to lead to increased social tensions around sexuality. Many women and men came home from the war and moved to cities to live openly homosexual lives. This instigated widespread fears that homosexuals were a subversive danger to a productive society and national security. The promotion of traditional models of behavior, such as the heterosexual nuclear family with clearly defined gender roles, was a response to this threat. There was also a political response to the homosexual threat. Anticommunist witch hunts, like those organized by Senator Joseph McCarthy, defini-

tively associated communism with homosexuality. As a result, thousands of gay men and lesbians were fired from their government jobs because they were believed to be security risks who could be blackmailed for whatever secrets they held. The witch-hunting homophobe was part of, in historian Richard Hofstadter's phrase, "the paranoid style in American politics."

Recent scientific studies have attempted to prove the connection between homophobic attitudes and repressed homosexuality. One study, "Is Homophobia Associated with Homosexual Arousal?" (1996), assessed the level of homophobia in white, heterosexually identified, male college students through questionnaires, and then tested whether they were aroused by gay porn by attaching a plethysmograph to measure the engorgement of their penis. The men who had been identified as homophobic were twice as likely to have a penile response to the gay porn, yet were also either unaware of their physiological response or denied it. Media reports trumpeted the study as proving that repressed same-sex attraction caused homophobia. But this was a serious misreading. The study did not prove that these "homophobic" males were secretly turned on by male homosexuality. Or that they were homosexual themselves. All this study demonstrated was that their homosexual arousal could occur as a result of the very anxiety around its possibility. Whether they were already attracted to the same sex is a different question.

A 2012 series of studies of 164 students from the United States and Germany also identified homophobia through a series of questions. But these studies used answers to additional questions, rather than physiological changes, to assess arousal in response to both sexual and nonsexual images. The studies concluded that "homophobia is more pronounced in individuals with an unacknowledged attraction to the same sex and who grew up with authoritarian parents who forbade such desires." What the series actually demonstrates, however, is that homophobic responses are never just psychological or personal, but also always cultural, social, and maybe political.

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These homophobia studies received a huge amount of media attention when they were published. The press release for the second string of studies claimed that it

sheds light on high profile cases in which anti-gay public figures are caught engaging in same-sex sexual acts [including that of] Ted Haggard, the evangelical preacher who opposed gay marriage but was exposed in a gay sex scandal in 2006, and Glenn Murphy, Jr., former chairman of the Young Republican National Federation and vocal opponent of gay marriage, who was accused of sexually assaulting a 22-year-old man in 2007.⁵

Such extrapolations are absurd. No one explanation of homophobia, whether it is a political position or a scientific measurement, can be fully accurate if it denies its connections to the many other frames through which we see the world.

Whatever the complications of each individual psyche, we all live in a world that influences us every day in myriad ways. Homophobia, in all of its forms, expresses real social anxieties over how something will fit in or disrupt the world "as it is." But that world is seen differently by every individual in it. That's its trouble and its promise.

MYTH 6 TRANSGENDER PEOPLE ARE MENTALLY ILL

Like lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, transgender people have long struggled under the burden of being labeled mentally disordered or diseased. The simple answer to the question of whether transgender people suffer from a mental disorder is, no, they do not. But the reality of living as a transgender person is not simple, and there are some transgender activists and allies who believe there is an ongoing utility to labeling transgender as a medical disorder of some kind.

There are different theories, but no scientific consensus, about what causes people to feel that their gender identity does not fit with the sex they were assigned at birth. Some scientists stress biological factors, arguing that hormonal fluctuations in utero may play a role. Other explanations have focused on "psychogenic" factors, such as how familial and psychological dynamics shape gender identity. Increasingly, physicians and psychiatrists understand transgenderism to be a normal variation in the way some people experience their bodies and their selves as gendered individuals. From this perspective, transgenderism is not a condition that needs to be cured. And it is certainly not—as terms such as "mental disorder" suggest—a pathology. Rather, it is an identity or just a sense of felt experience that requires acceptance and support.