



Education Department Resource

## From Denial to Denigration

### Understanding Institutionalized Heterosexism in Our Schools

See the *GLSEN teaching/training guide for undoing institutionalized heterosexism in schools in the “Staff Development” section of GLSEN’s “Resource Center”* at <http://www.glsen.org/templates/resources/record.html?section=18&record=1313>

*Homophobia*, a term coined by psychologist George Weinberg in 1972, refers to a fear or hatred of homosexuality,

#### ho-mo-pho-bia

Pronunciation: "hO-m&-fO-bE-&

Function: *noun*

Date: 1969

: irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals

- **ho-mo-pho-bic** /-fO-bik/ *adjective*

(From Merriam Webster Online:

<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary.htm>)

especially in others, but also in oneself (internalized homophobia).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, transphobia is the fear or loathing of people whose actual or perceived gender identity/expression does not reflect society’s expectations based upon their birth-assigned sex. Though commonly used to express the full range of anti-LGBT thought and behavior, homophobia and transphobia are problematic terms.

A phobia is an irrational fear that causes one to avoid contact with that which is feared. Expressions of hatred toward LGBT people, however, are seldom irrational or inexplicable, and often result in targeting rather than avoiding behavior. Anti-LGBT bigotry, like other forms of prejudice, is a learned and deliberate condition.

Framing it as a phobia rationalizes this condition and removes responsibility from the oppressors for altering their attitudes and behavior.

Moreover, homophobia and transphobia are most often equated with individual bigotry or acts of violence—a homophobic football coach, for example, or a transphobic attack in the park—that are disconnected from most people’s experiences or images of themselves. The use of these terms rarely inspires us to reflect upon the more subtle forms of anti-LGBT prejudice for which we are all culpable, or anti-LGBT oppression as a shared societal problem rooted in social values and institutions.

When describing incidents of discrimination or harassment against LGBT people, then, it may be more precise to use the terms *anti-LGBT bias* or *hate acts*. And when discussing the belief, held by so many, that homosexuality is “wrong” or “less than,” it may be more accurate to use *heterosexism*, which can be understood as an overt or tacit bias against non-heterosexuals based on a belief in the superiority or, sometimes, the omnipresence of heterosexuality<sup>2</sup> and the notion that homosexuality is psychologically, spiritually, or morally wrong. Since this type of intolerance is frequently leveled against those *perceived* to be lesbian or gay due to gender expression that transgresses societal norms, heterosexism can also be understood as the assumption that a dual gender role system based on birth-assigned sex is natural and desirable. Heterosexism—though not a replacement for homophobia—is a broader term that does not imply the loathing the latter term suggests, and which can describe seemingly benign attitudes and behavior based on the belief that heterosexuality and a binary gender structure are the norm.<sup>3</sup>

Heterosexism, as a cognitive construct, highlights important parallels between anti-LGBT sentiment and other forms of prejudice, such as racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism, which all represent ideological systems that deny, denigrate, and stigmatize people based on their behavior, identity, relationships, or community.<sup>4</sup> These interconnected forces,

<sup>1</sup> Weinberg, George (1972). *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

<sup>2</sup> Hogan, Steve & Hudson, Lee (1998). *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Herek, G. M. (1990). The Context of Anti-Gay Violence: Notes on Cultural and Psychological Heterosexism. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5, 316-333.

together with cultural norms around sexuality, gender and family, conspire to perpetuate heterosexist belief systems that are experienced and enforced in diverse ways across race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, and other groups. A lesbian from Yemen, for example, might feel coerced into heterosexual marriage in order to fulfill familial expectations while a Baptist from Mississippi might be forced to cut family ties in order to live openly with his partner. A Latino police officer might report that anti-LGBT “jokes” and derision keep him from moving ahead on the job while a Black, lesbian lawyer might indicate that the “glass ceiling” is her primary barrier.

While individual experiences of heterosexism may vary considerably, though, there are characteristics that underlie them all. Heterosexism and other isms limit the power and privilege available to those who fall outside mainstream notions of gender and sexuality, while conferring an abundance of advantage upon those who conform. Denials surrounding the idea of opportunities that heterosexual people enjoy at the expense of LGBT protections—including family rights, job opportunities, access to safe schools, and more—keep heterosexual privilege from being fully acknowledged, understood and diminished.<sup>5</sup> All the while, heterosexism is sustained through a dual system of denial and denigration—communities collude to suppress the existence of LGBT people and to cast aspersions upon them when they become visible.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to dismantling heterosexism is getting people to recognize its unseen dimensions and how they have bearing upon the ways in which even the best intentioned of us operate upon the world. Most individuals don’t engage in overt forms of prejudice and certainly wouldn’t describe themselves as “colluding” to “denigrate” anyone. Yet anti-LGBT bias endures. This is because heterosexism, like racism and classism, is most insidious not as an expression of individual hatred, but as a pervasive part of societal laws, customs and institutions.

Most individuals were horrified, for instance, by the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, yet a hate crimes law inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression has never been passed either in the state of Wyoming or by the federal government.<sup>6</sup> Polls indicate that over 80% of Americans support equal rights for lesbians and gays in the workplace<sup>7</sup>, yet there is no national legislation protecting the rights of all LGBT workers.<sup>8</sup> Recent data suggests that 83% of parents support LGBT-inclusive anti-harassment and nondiscrimination policies in schools<sup>9</sup>, yet 44 states offer no protections for LGBT youth in their education law.<sup>10</sup> Who is to blame for such travesties of justice? No one and everyone—and therein lies the problem.

*Institutionalized heterosexism* is not the fault of any one individual or group, yet it nonetheless confers privilege and dominance on heterosexuals and those who match society’s expectations with regard to gender. Such systems are taken for granted by many and too often assumed to be right by virtue of their longstanding existence. Others may recognize their inherent inequities, but feel powerless to change deeply embedded cultural and institutional practice.

Institutionalized heterosexism exists at every level of society—from family roles to federal policy—and works to transmit inflexible cultural norms to a populace that unconsciously integrates them. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) policy, for example, excludes all gay men who have “engaged in any homosexual behavior since 1977” from giving blood<sup>11</sup> and the community instinctively assumes that such guidelines are in our best interest. Religious doctrine instructs followers to “love the sinner, but hate the sin” and flocks of parishioners unquestioningly accept that homosexuality is inherently depraved. Pentagon policy<sup>12</sup> assures us that not asking or telling is the best way to deal with our LGBT service members and the public takes for granted that silence is golden (while cases of anti-LGBT harassment in the armed services rose 23% to 1,075 documented incidents in 2001).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> McIntosh, Peggy (1988). *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies*. Working Paper Series No. 189. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

<sup>6</sup> National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (June 26, 2001). *Hate Crimes Map*: <http://www.nglftf.org/issues/maps.cfm?issueID=12>

<sup>7</sup> Burrell, Cassandra (December 14, 1996). *Gays Remain Hopeful Congress Will Pass Bill Outlawing Job Discrimination*. *Associated Press*. and Leland, John (March 20, 2000). *Shades of Gay*. *Newsweek*.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Campaign. *The Employment Non-Discrimination Act*: [http://www.hrc.org/issues/federal\\_leg/enda/index.asp](http://www.hrc.org/issues/federal_leg/enda/index.asp)

<sup>9</sup> Lake Snell Perry and Associates (2001). *Addressing LGBT Student Harassment and Sexual Orientation in America’s Schools*.

<sup>10</sup> Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund & GLSEN (2001). *A Guide to Effective Statewide Laws/Policies: Preventing Discrimination Against LGBT Students*.

<sup>11</sup> Dornin, Rusty (January 13, 2000). *FDA Ban on Blood Donations from Gay Men Challenged*. CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/2000/US/01/13/gay.blood.donors/>

<sup>12</sup> Robert Crown Law Library at Stanford Law School. *Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue Database*: <http://dont.stanford.edu/>

<sup>13</sup> Marquis, Christopher (March 14, 2002). *Discharges of Gay Troops Rise, and So Do Bias Incidents*. *New York Times*.

Taken together, the myriad forms of institutionalized heterosexism that saturate our society result in damagingly narrow conceptions of humanity, minimize individual accountability for bigotry, and leave little room for personal values that come into conflict with those of family, community, or society.

When it comes to the school, institutionalized heterosexism presents a special problem. The school can be characterized as a custodial setting, which, in addition to imparting academic knowledge, is marked by guardianship and given to watching over, defending, and nurturing the young people in its charge. For LGBT youth—many of whom lack support systems at home, in their places of worship, and in the community at large—school may be the only hope for a safe haven. When that refuge is marred by prejudicial practice, our educational system cannot fulfill its promise of protection; and the prevailing youth-adult hierarchy and power structure may leave its victims powerless to change conditions and vulnerable to further oppression.

Furthermore and despite those who would like education to focus solely on scholastic aptitude, schools have always been places where societal values are transmitted and prejudices of all kinds routinely addressed. Where heterosexism causes uneven social and learning opportunities—and it does everywhere—it stands to reason that schools would want to squarely face the issue and level this imbalance. Few do, however. Sometimes this negligence is due to overt bigotry or the taboo that surrounds LGBT issues in our society. Frequently, though, this inattention reflects complacency with longstanding practice or the blind spot many of us possess when it comes to inequities that don't impact the majority or most powerful in our communities.

The first step toward dismantling institutionalized heterosexism in our schools, then, is naming it and offering alternatives to traditional practices with which we have grown too comfortable. Only then will schools meet their mandate to safeguard and nurture the rights of all children.