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Homophobia: Definitions, context and intersectionality

Introduction

The liberalization of attitudes toward homosexuality in the U.S. that has occurred in the previous few decades has been one of the most profound attitudinal changes in U.S. culture (e.g. Baunach 2012; Keleher and Smith 2012; Loftus 2001). This has been shown to have had a significant positive effect on the lives of sexual minority youth (Anderson and McCormack in press; Riley 2010; Savin-Williams 2005). It has also had a significant effect on the lives of heterosexual men as well (e.g. Anderson 2009; Dean 2013; Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik 2012). As much of our focus in this article is on the U.S., all empirical studies use U.S. samples unless otherwise noted.

It was the positive impact of decreasing homophobia on heterosexual men that formed the empirical base for our Feminist Forum article (McCormack and Anderson 2014). Over the previous decade, there has been a significant improvement in the lives of heterosexual men (Adams 2011; Anderson 2009), particularly among younger generations (those called ‘millennials’). Whereas older research has shown that men adopted behaviors that were homophobic, aggressive and stoic (e.g. Derlega et al 1989; Floyd 2000; Pollack 1999), resulting in men being physically alienated from each other (Field 1999), contemporary research shows a rejection of these behaviors for softer and more inclusive gender embodiment (Adams 2011; Anderson 2014; Luttrell 2012).

In our original article (McCormack and Anderson 2014), we discussed six key ways that heterosexual men’s gendered behaviors had expanded. These were: 1) the social inclusion of gay male peers; 2) the embrace of once-feminized artifacts; 3) increased emotional intimacy; 4) increased physical tactility; 5) erosion of the one-time rule of homosexuality; 6) eschewing violence. We advanced homophobia to explain these changes, and also explored how the concept might be applied in other ways.

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the commentaries in this Feminist Forum. We are encouraged by the four papers, and now take the opportunity to use the commentaries and some of their primary critiques to further articulate and refine homophobia as a concept.

Motivation for Homophobia

The concept homophobia was originally developed as part of inclusive masculinity theory—a theory that provides a way of understanding the stratification of masculinities in contemporary U.S. and U.K. cultures (Anderson 2009). We highlight that the ‘inclusive’ nomenclature of the theory relates to inclusivity of homosexuality among heterosexual men. It recognizes that social power is located within heterosexuality, and changing levels of homophobia can be understood as shifting formations of power (see also Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985)—it pertains primarily to inclusion of homosexuality, and will not necessarily speak to issues of race, trans issues and other variables (Anderson 2014).

The theory was also developed to explicate a historical account of decreasing homophobia since the second industrial revolution (Anderson 2009). There has often been a misplaced belief that decreasing homophobia (social progress) is linear—yet as Parent, Batura and Crooks (henceforth Parent et al.) (2014) highlight, this is not the case. Rather, as Loftus (2001) demonstrated, attitudinal homophobia peaked in 1987 in the U.S., and the contemporary decline is since that date. Before that time, there were cultural peaks and troughs alongside a great deal of local variability (Miller 1995).

While there was recognition of the variability of homophobia in the literature (e.g. Ruel and Campbell 2006), there was little understanding of how these levels of homophobia influenced heterosexual men’s behaviors differently at different times in U.S. history. For example, homophobia did not seem to have a significant regulatory effect on heterosexual

men's gender in the early 20th century (Ibson 2002). In other words, while U.S. culture was homophobic at that time, men engaged in hugging, cuddling and homosocial intimacy—as evidenced in Ibson's (2002) analysis of thousands of pictures from that time. However, homophobia was highly effective in policing masculinities in the 1980s (e.g. Floyd 2000; Pollack 1999)—where research documents males avoiding behaviors that could be socially perceived as feminine or gay in order to avoid homophobia (Floyd 2000). More recently, the decrease in homophobia since the millennium has had a significant positive effect on heterosexual men, who are now able to emote with friends and engage in a broader range of gendered behaviors (Anderson 2014).

The lack of theoretical understanding of why homophobia influences men's gendered behaviors differently at different times may be attributable to the emergence of critical studies of men in the 1980s—the most homohysterical time in U.S. history (Anderson 2009). This resulted in homophobia being central to definitions of masculinity at the time (e.g. Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985; Kimmel 1996).

Anderson (2009) developed homophobia as a term to develop understanding of the importance that the level of homophobia has on men's gendered behaviors. Homophobia adds to the literature because it makes sense of the variegated impact of homophobia on heterosexual men, and provides a historical argument for why the effects of homophobia on heterosexual men have changed. In other words, homophobia conceptualizes the nature and effects of prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities (McCormack and Anderson 2014), and homophobia conceptualizes the contexts when homophobia effects (or is used to police) heterosexual men's gendered behaviors.

Indeed, in a forthcoming monograph on bisexual men (Anderson and McCormack in press), we argue that the gendered behaviors of men in the US in the 20th and 21st centuries can be categorized into three epochs related to homophobia. Drawing on Ibson's (2002)

evidence of thousands of photos of men in cuddling and hugging from the early 1900s, we develop a stage model of how awareness of homosexuality co-existed alongside homophobia in the U.S. since the start of the 20th century. We discuss it here to highlight the importance of changing levels of homophobia to the concept.

Stage 1: Homoerasure

With the medicalization of same-sex behaviors in the late 19th century (Greenberg 1988), homosexuality was established in cultural understandings as an enduring sexual orientation exemplified by gender atypical men (Greenberg 1988). Yet while U.S. culture was aware that homosexuality existed, same-sex desire was greatly stigmatized and the general population rejected the notion that same-sex sexual identities were legitimate (Johnson 2004). These were thus cultures of *erasure*, where homophobia was so extreme that social and legal persecution forced sexual minorities to conceal their sexual desires and identities (Johnson 2004). This prevented identity politics from occurring and led to the false notion that homosexuality was only located in flamboyant men, and only those outside of one's own social networks (Anderson 2009).

In this stage of erasure, it is very unlikely that how a person acts will result in them being socially perceived as gay. This means that men's gendered behaviors were not regulated by homophobia (Ibson 2002). Thus, an expanded set of legitimate gendered behaviors are available to men within cultures of erasure. Evidencing the erasure of homosexuality in the U.S. during this epoch, Allen's (1954) research on antifemininity in men presumed heterosexuality in all his participants; homosexuality was not mentioned. It was only in the 1980s that U.S. culture entered a phase of *hysteria* about homosexuality and the belief that one of their friends or family members could be gay (Anderson 2014).

Stage 2: Homohysteria

In the mid-1980s, there was a significant rise in homophobic attitudes (Loftus 2001). This was due to: 1) the AIDS epidemic (Ruel and Campbell 2006); 2) Fundamentalist Christianity (Marsiglio 1993); and 3) the politicization of moral values within the Republican Party (Wood and Bartowski 2004). Femininity in men was particularly problematic in this culture because it was seen to be evidence of homosexuality (Bird 1996). A wealth of research from this period shows that males thus had to distance themselves from homosexuality, socially and attitudinally (e.g. Derlega et al. 1989). Males thus aligned their gendered behaviors with idealized and narrowing definitions of masculinity (Connell 1995).

Stage 3: Inclusivity

While HIV/AIDs partially led to the hysteria of the 1980s it also was a catalyst for more inclusive attitudes in the future (Anderson 2009). The disease, and the political response to it, resulted in a resurgent gay rights politics (Aggleton et al. 1992). Given the power of social contact in improving social attitudes, the increased numbers of openly gay males led to improved attitudes among heterosexual communities (Smith, Axelton and Saucier 2009). Then, as homophobia decreased, so did the hysteria (Anderson 2009); over the next few decades homophobia became less effective in policing gendered behaviors—this is something McCormack (2012, p. 63) describes as a “virtuous circle of decreasing homophobia.”

We describe a culture where people with positive attitudes toward homosexuality are in the majority, and where there is widespread recognition of homosexuality as a sexual identity, as one of *inclusivity* (Anderson and McCormack in press). Though we recognize other forms of prejudice and discrimination will persist, including heteronormativity (Ripley et al 2012), in this stage, males progressively cease to police their gendered behaviors in order to avoid being socially perceived as gay (e.g. Adams 2011; Baker and Hotek 2011). In

a culture of inclusivity, it is also likely that there is an expansion of sexual identities (Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanski 2012).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this stage model. The ‘attitudes toward homosexuality’ line is drawn from General Social Survey data and the ‘awareness of homosexuality’ line is a theoretical conceptualization of how likely it is that one believed that their friends or family members could be gay (see Anderson and McCormack in press for further discussion of this). It is based in the cultural resonance of the socially perceived existence of homosexuality as something other than a statistical aberration, and is drawn from historical accounts of homosexuality of sexual minorities throughout the previous dozen decades (Chauncy 1994; Greenberg 1988; Spencer 1995).

Insert figure 1 here

Engaging with the Feminist Forum Commentaries

If homophobia is to be of utility in the social sciences, further empirical support is required. In their paper, Parent et al. (2014) offer three areas that they think need to be addressed in developing the concept. They call for 1) clarity of definition; 2) recognition of the diversity of sexuality; and 3) incorporation of an intersectional and international approach that extends the concept beyond heterosexual men in the U.S. In the rest of this response, we engage with these issues.

Definitional Clarity

Parent et al. (2014) argue that definitional clarity and falsifiability are necessary for theoretical utility. Adopting a sociological perspective, and contrasting it with Parent et al, we highlight that concepts and theories do not need to be *precisely* measurable in order to be useful tools for macro-cultural analysis. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, for example,

has been critiqued for its lack of definitional determinacy (McCormack 2012) but few would argue it has not been helpful in understanding the stratifications of masculinities. Similarly, patriarchy has been a powerful way of understanding inequality between the genders (Walby 1990), despite no unified definition or instrument to measure it. Accordingly, answering the question “what is the level at which awareness of male homosexuality is widespread enough to active a homohysteria culture” (Parent et al. 2014, this issue) is not required for the concept to be falsifiable. Even so, the question is an interesting one, although we suspect the precise level will vary across cultures and time-periods.

We are also doubtful that the etymology of homohysteria is significant for the utility of the concept. Plummer (2014, this issue) questions the appropriateness of incorporating words that have once been used to describe “individual psychopathological syndromes,” highlighting that because homophobia can imply “phobia,” homohysteria can similarly imply “hysteria.” We argue, however, that just as few understand homophobia to be a literal fear of homosexuality (instead of an antipathy toward sexual minorities), few will understand homohysteria as a hysterical, personal reaction (instead of a cultural fear). Trying to find an etymologically appropriate word to describe homohysteria would likely be as fruitless as trying to find one for homophobia. Instead of being distracted by the root of the word to describe the concept, what is important is the concept itself.

We also reject Negy’s (2014, this issue) assertion that homohysteria is the “splitting of hairs.” Negy provides a race analogy to argue that differentiation between “degrees or motives” of prejudice is not a worthy endeavor. This is flawed for two reasons. First, the analogy is not appropriate because the importance of the closet in understanding dynamics of sexuality (Seidman 2002) has no similar relation in dynamics of race, making the comparison erroneous. More significantly, we reject the notion that degrees and motives are not important. Plummer (2014, this issue) articulates this powerfully, writing: “reference to a

homophobic murder seems disturbingly meaningful, whereas I am yet to hear anybody describe a murder as heterosexist.” Fundamentally, Negy (2014) has misread our original article as he conceives homophobia to be about the impact of changing homophobia on gay men’s lives rather than heterosexual men.

Recognition of the Diversity of Sexuality

Parent et al.’s (2014) second critique is that homophobia does not account for the diversity of sexual identities in understanding how homophobia influences heterosexual men’s gendered behaviors. First, they contend that bisexuality is a particularly significant omission in the theorizing, arguing that homophobia needs to be better grounded in the lives of LGBT individuals if it is to have utility. However, this critique is a category error because according to how homophobia is conceptualized, it is heterosexual men’s *perceptions* of gay men that influences their heterosexual gendered behaviors and not the reality of sexual minorities’ lives. Given the one-time rule of homosexuality (see McCormack and Anderson 2014), bisexuality has traditionally been erased by heterosexual men as a viable sexual identity in US culture. This is because in a highly homophobic culture any same-sex desire was seen as evidence of homosexuality (see also Klein 1993). Thus, the diversity of sexual orientations is less important than how the dominant (heterosexual) culture has perceived these identities.

While we are doubtful that considering LGBT lives in greater detail would influence the central tenets of homophobia on heterosexual men’s gender as explicated in our original article, such consideration may usefully extend the concept. Homophobia may affect sexual minorities, and not just heterosexual men. In our forthcoming monograph (Anderson and McCormack in press), we document a generational cohort effect in bisexual men’s gendered behaviors that is directly related to the level of homophobia in the broader culture of their adolescence.

The value of diversifying the demographic groups pertaining to homophobia is also evidenced by Worthen's (2014) commentary in this issue. She shows that homophobia is a useful tool for understanding the impact of heterosexual women's attitudes about lesbians on their gendered behaviors. She writes: "...from a historical perspective, the homophobic fear of being viewed as a lesbian has had many impacts on heterosexual women's gendered behaviors" (this issue). The expectations of what it meant to be not-lesbian were onerous and detrimental on the lives of heterosexual women in a similar manner to what we have described for the lives of heterosexual men. We find particular resonance with her idea that 'party-time' sexuality (straight women kissing other women) is more exploitative than research finds on straight men kissing other straight men (Anderson, Adams, Rivers 2012).

Parent et al. (2014) also contend that homophobia is not grounded adequately in the history of homosexuality because it does not account for the diversity of sexual minority men in U.S. history. This focus on the lives of "queer" (this issue) men is problematic because the central concern is the perceptions of homosexuality in broader society. As Parent et al. (2014, this issue) write, "Before World War II, the flamboyant and effeminate homosexual was the most visible representation of homosexual males to the straight world." It is precisely this representation that matters to social stereotypes of gay men, as held by heterosexuals, and the reality of the diversity of sexual minorities' gendered expressions is less important to the study of homophobia than the perceptions that heterosexuals maintained of gay men.

Likewise, Parent et al are correct in asserting that homosocial behaviors between men are not only based in modern times. Ibsen's (2002) pictorial history of masculinity at the turn of the 19th and 20th century highlights precisely what homophobia explains – how and why an increasing awareness of homosexuality policed men's gendered behaviors in different historical contexts in the U.S.—as discussed in our stage model of homophobia. It is our

contention that homophobia is a tool that enables understanding of how homophobia and homosociality are related differently in different historical and social contexts.

Incorporation of an Intersectional and International Approach

Parent et al. (2014) also call for the development of an intersectional and international approach to the study of homophobia. We have already discussed the power of homophobia for understanding bisexual men's lives, as well as Worthen's (2014) contribution to the concept by explicating the lives of heterosexual women in relation to homophobia; and we also called for further research on intersections with race (McCormack and Anderson 2014). The international component, however, remains an important point. In this section we highlight the value it has in understanding the operation of homophobia in an international context.

Our original feminist forum piece was based on empirical work solely from the U.S., as requested by the editor. There are two key components of Parent et al's (2014) call for an international perspective on homophobia: i) supporting evidence from other countries; ii) an explanation of countries with high levels of homophobia, such as Russia (Soboleva and Bakhmet'ev 2014). Regarding the former, a significant body of research highlights the conceptual value of homophobia in the U.K. (McCormack 2012, 2014), Canada (Cavalier 2011) and Australia (Drummond et al. 2014). For example, McCormack's (2012) ethnographic work has shown that the erasure of homophobia in three U.K. schools resulted in a transformation of masculinity among adolescents. Here, McCormack documents heterosexual men exhibiting five of the six traits of the expansion of heterosexual boundaries: 1) the social inclusion of gay male peers; 2) the embrace of once-feminized artefacts; 3) increased emotional intimacy; 4) increased physical tactility; and 5) eschewing violence. There is similar supporting evidence from the UK (e.g. Jarvis 2013; Roberts 2013).

Regarding the issue of cross-cultural variability, and as discussed in our original article (this issue), it is our contention that homohysteria has great potential to understand these issues. The genesis of homohysteria emerged from the critique of softening masculinities that the presence of homosocial tactility among straight men does not speak to a reduction in homophobia because other cultures (e.g. Iran) combined extreme homophobia with tactile behaviors (Afary 2009). Using our stage model of homohysteria, we hypothesize that Iran and similar countries are currently in homoerasure but, given the current political climate, may be transitioning to homohysteria (Karimi in press).

Parent et al. (2014) are correct to assert that detailed study of other international contexts are lacking. It is our contention, however, that this is mostly attributable to the preponderance of masculinities and sexualities scholars existing in U.S. and U.K. universities. We welcome research in other cultural contexts, contending that homohysteria is a falsifiable theory which likely explains the interactional dynamics of homophobia, awareness of homosexuality and men's and women's gendered behaviors in these countries.

Shifting Homophobias

Finally, it is important to recognize that decreasing homophobia is not inevitable and that, as we see in the current international context, some countries are witnessing an intensification of homophobic attitudes and behaviors (Plummer 2014). Homohysteria provides a model for understanding increasing homophobia as well as its decline. While we suggest that it is less likely for a culture to return to that of erasure once awareness of homosexuality exists, it is conceivable that a culture can move between homohysteria and inclusivity. It appears to be the case that many African and Middle Eastern countries are in homoerasure (Bruce-Jones and Itaborahy 2011), other countries, including Russia, Uganda, Jamaica, are increasingly

homohysteria (Makofane et al. 2014; Soboleva and Bakhmet'ev 2014; West and Cowell 2014), while the U.S. and Western Europe are inclusive (Anderson 2014; Weeks 2007).

Concerning the Western world, Plummer (2014) offers a rich and detailed analysis of the relationship between gender and homophobia. He suggests that as gender shifts, so might homophobia, writing, “The proposition that homophobia is a constructed multilayered manifestation of gender taboos also raises another possibility: that homosexuality can be delinked from masculine taboos as a consequence of masculinity being remodelled as gender arrangements shift” (this issue). Worthen (2014) also highlights that sexual minority experiences are in a “state of flux” (this issue) and that future research is needed to investigate “a constellation of other sociological variables” (this issue). We concur, and hope this Feminist Forum is a spur to undertake critical social science research that examines these phenomena. Plummer (2014) may well be correct to state that homohysteria is like its famous older cousin, homophobia, which has spent more than forty years as an extremely useful misnomer on a mission to find a better theory. Gaining traction among younger scholars whose empirical research does not align with the consensus of older research into the relationship between masculinity, homophobia and gender performance, it is indeed our belief that homohysteria does give us this better theorizing.

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Figure 1

