

## **Hot Topic: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Themes** **Alexandra and Emetchi**

### 1. What was your topic?

Our topic was talking about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered realities and the interface with the larger Heterosexual population. We took on the challenge, knowing that two people only can certainly not represent the diversity of the LGBT Community. So, we invited from the start any lesbians, gay men, bisexuals or transgendered folks, or people with different opinions, to represent their views. We welcomed different views as that is the accurate reflection of the community we are a part of. We then spoke of the privilege we both feel in being able to speak publicly about this topic - how this ease of talking has been earned over time and how heterosexism and homophobia are so persistent and damaging that we have both had to step out of our comfort zones and become more public figures about what is primarily considered a sexual issue. We also spoke of how our friendship makes doing this a fun adventure as we are friends as well as colleagues who love and trust one another.

We chose to focus on 'How Homophobia Hurts Us All', because the issue of homophobia is an issue that affects ALL, not only LGBT folks. It is often the case that people who are LGBT do not realize that the whole community suffers, not only themselves. And also the community needs to understand how homophobia limits all people in their interactions, not only LGBT folks.

We chose to focus on the 'Riddle Homophobia Scale' because it is often the case that people think of homophobia only in the context of active dislike towards LGBT folks, and they do not realize the breadth of the spectrum of attitudes (from negative to positive) that they can have.

We chose to focus on 'Understanding Heterosexism', because it is important to bring awareness to the misconceptions around this theme.

### 2. Main ideas etc that you presented?

Source:

<http://web.missouri.edu/~umcstudentlifelgbt/resources/homophobiahurtseveryone.pdf>

What is Homophobia?

Homophobia: an intense, irrational fear of lesbians and gay men, and the hatred, disgust, and prejudice fostered by that fear. The term is widely used to describe any belief or behaviour that indicates fear or hatred of lesbians and gay men.

Homophobia can be experienced at several levels:

- the fear or hatred of persons who are lesbian or gay
- the fear of being perceived as lesbian or gay
- the fear or hatred of one's own attraction to members of the same gender (which is referred to as internalized homophobia)

The fear and hatred which comprise homophobia can be expressed through a variety of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions, such as:

- indicating discomfort or disgust toward individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay
- denying equal treatment to individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay
- harassing or engaging in violence against individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay

#### Examples of Homophobia:

- ☐ Making assumptions about a person being lesbian or gay based on dress, behavior, or personality
- ☐ Feeling repulsed by displays of affection between same-gender couples, but accepting affectionate displays between different-gender couples.
- ☐ Thinking of people who are lesbian and gay only in terms of their sexuality, rather than as whole, complex persons.
- ☐ Being afraid of social or physical interactions with people who are lesbian or gay.
- ☐ Avoiding social situations or activities where you might be perceived as lesbian or gay.
- ☐ Assuming that lesbians and gay men will be attracted to everyone of the same gender.

#### How Homophobia Hurts Everyone

You do not have to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or know someone who is, to be negatively affected by homophobia. Though homophobia actively oppresses lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, it also hurts heterosexuals.

1. Homophobia inhibits the ability of heterosexuals to form close, intimate relationships with members of their own gender for fear of being perceived as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
2. Homophobia locks people into rigid gender-based roles that restrict creativity and self-expression.
3. Homophobia pushes heterosexual men to constantly prove their masculinity,
4. Homophobia results in "lesbian baiting" (an accusatory charge of lesbianism) being used to control women's autonomy and to question their femininity.
5. Homophobia is often used to stigmatize heterosexuals who are perceived by others as lesbian, gay, or bisexual or who are a friend or relative of someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
6. Homophobia compromises human integrity by pressuring people to treat others badly, actions that serve to diminish their basic humanity.
7. Homophobia, combined with sexual taboos, results in the invisibility or erasure of the lives and sexuality of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in school-based sex education discussions, keeping vital information from students. Such erasures can contribute to the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.
8. Homophobia deters individuals from taking part in certain social activities. People who are heterosexual are discouraged from participating in lesbian and gay identified activities for fear of being labelled.
9. Homophobia pressures young people to become heterosexually active to prove to themselves and others that they are "normal". This premature sexual involvement can result in emotional distress, as well as increasing the chance of teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.
10. Homophobia prevents some lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals from developing an authentic self-identity and adds to the pressure to many. This can be traumatic not only for themselves, but also for their heterosexual spouses and children, should they feel compelled to get married.
11. Homophobia inhibits appreciation of other types of diversity, making it unsafe for everyone, because each person has unique traits not considered mainstream or

dominant. We are all diminished when any one of us is demeaned. By challenging homophobia, people are not only fighting the oppression of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, but are also striving for a society that accepts and celebrates the differences in all of us.

Adapted from Warren J. Blumenfeld, Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price (Boston: Beacon Press. 1992)

### Riddle Homophobia Scale

source: <http://web.missouri.edu/~umcstudentlifelgbt/resources/riddlehomophobiascale.pdf>

In a clinical sense, homophobia is defined as an intense, irrational fear of same-gender relationships that becomes overwhelming to the person. In common usage, homophobia is the fear of intimate relationships with people of the same gender. Listed below are four negative and four positive "levels of attitude" toward lesbians and gay men. The scale was developed by Dr. Dorothy Riddle, a psychologist from Tucson, Arizona.

#### Homophobic Levels of Attitude

1. Repulsion: Same-gender sexuality is seen as a 'crime against nature.' Lesbians and gay men are sick, crazy, immoral, sinful, wicked, etc. Anything is justified to change them: imprisonment, hospitalization, aversion therapy, electroshock, etc.
2. Pity: Heterosexual chauvinism. Heterosexuality is seen as preferable. Any possibility of "becoming straight" should be reinforced, and those who seem to be "born that way" should be pitied.
3. Tolerance: Same-gender sexuality is considered just a phase of adolescent development that many people go through and most people "grow out of." Thus, lesbians and gay men are less mature than heterosexuals and should be treated with the protectiveness and indulgence one uses with a child. Lesbians and gay men should not be given positions of authority because they are still working through their adolescent behaviour.
4. Acceptance: Still implies that there is something to accept. It is characterized by such statements as "You're not a lesbian to me, you're a person!", "What you do in bed is your own business," or "That's fine with me as long as you don't flaunt it!"

#### Positive Levels of Attitude

1. Support: The basic civil liberties position. People at this level may be uncomfortable themselves, but they are aware that homophobia is wrong and work to safeguard the rights of lesbians and gay men.
2. Admiration: Acknowledge that being lesbian and gay in our society takes strength. People at this level are willing to truly examine their homophobic attitudes, values, and behaviours.
3. Appreciation: Value the diversity of individuals and see lesbians and gay men as a valid part of that diversity. People at this level are willing to combat homophobia in themselves and others.
4. Nurturance: Assume that lesbians and gay men are indispensable in our society. People at this level view lesbians and gay men with genuine affection and delight and are willing to be allies and advocates.

### Understanding Heterosexism – breaking down misconceptions

source: [http://www.amsa.org/lgbt/heterosexism\\_answ.pdf](http://www.amsa.org/lgbt/heterosexism_answ.pdf)

1. Do you assume that everyone you meet is heterosexual?
2. Do you try to guess which is the 'man' or 'woman' in a same-sex couple?

3. Do you look at an LGBT person and automatically think of his or her sexuality rather than seeing him as a whole, complex person?
  4. Do you fail to confront a homophobic remark for fear of being identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender?
  5. Do you think that if a LGBT person touches you he or she is making sexual advances?
  6. Do you think you can "spot one"?
  7. Do you think that LGBT people are too outspoken when they ask for LGBT rights?
  8. Do you feel that a gay or lesbian person is just a man or woman who couldn't find a mate of the opposite sex?
  9. Do you use the term "gay" or "lesbian" as an accusation?
  10. Do you (or would you) avoid mentioning to friends that you are involved with a LGBT student organization because you are afraid they will think you are gay?
3. If it is relevant, why did you choose this particular theme?

As therapists we work with all sexualities but, as many LGBT folk want and need to work on their experiences of being queer in a safe and knowing context, we believe it is really important to discuss these issues at such an international gathering. It is of deep concern to us to work with the dynamics of both outer pathologising, oppressive forces wherever they come from, as well as the process of internalising homophobia by self pathologising because we know the damage this does.

We are invested in the processes of healing change and making the world friendlier to the diversity of sexual orientations that humans naturally have. We made a point of stressing how important having heterosexual allies is and warmly thanked those who fill this role. We talked about how homophobia hurts everybody not just queers - we share the same field. We spoke of the fear young men have of being called gay, how it's a put down and how this freezes interactions and personal freedom.

Audience members from other cultures spoke of similar incidents. We used that to illustrate how homophobia is a social disease that affects everybody. 'We spoke about Gay marriage, and Emetchi mentioned that she had been married, annulled and domestically partnered all with the same individual! Humour was used to illustrate how volatile this issue is in the USA just now. We differentiated between those who want to be married in a church and those that don't and how that's an individual choice; but what is common ground is the desire to have full civil rights - to have access to the same 1001+ privileges that are built into heterosexual marriage: (e.g to visit ill or dying partner in hospital, property rights, custody rights for gay parents, etc).

We spoke of how the marriage/domestic partnership issue varies from country to country and canvassed the audience for information about where this issue is at in their home countries or wherever they are living.

4. Anything interesting, unexpected that happened - related to the themes, before or during the presentation? Were there any questions that added / complemented to what you presented? Did the hot topic session bring any observations, insights or new learning to you? Any moving moments?

There were many folks in the audience who were quite a bit younger than us. We were very grateful that there are now many wonderful younger queers doing great work as change agents and using the latest technologies to do so. It was interesting to have this age continuum reflected back by the range of age groups in the room and the bulk of young people interested in this topic. We were touched, humbled and very grateful - it was like experiencing that some of what we have been doing for so long is having positive effects and gives immense hope that we, the queer tribe, are not alone in this struggle for equal civil rights. And that maybe the day will come in our lifetime when forums such as this one are no longer needed - a high dream that we have and we are also very sober about it. Getting 'drunk' on hope that the dominant heterosexual community worldwide will be able to change enough to recognise, respect, implement, protect and foster equal civil rights for Queer folk is dangerous both personally and politically. We imbibe this high dream but do not these days get drunk on as it can become too damn painful.

An observation we made was that there was a good vibe in the room. I think this had something to do with the friendly, personal and playful manner in which we hosted this event. Having Jan Dworkin introduce us, and the lovely way she did it, helped set the tone. There was a sweet absence of polarisation. We (Jan, Emetchi and Alexandra) are comfortable with each other and this made a huge difference to the quality of the interactions and our openness to whatever arose from those in the room. We did not put down the role of the one-sided social activist as it is needed in certain circumstances and we underlined how each of us has a part to play in this great drama, wherever we are at in our lives. Change comes from interpersonal contact as well as through legal, religious/spiritual and political channels.

5. Comments for the future?

For future LGBT forums /hot topics it would be wonderful if there were time to differentiate between the components of the Queer tribe. There would be opportunity for more depth if, say, there was a particular focus on Trans issues or gay men or bisexuals or lesbian realities, as there are considerable differences amongst the LGBT community, even though they shoulder the same source of oppression. Another idea would be a forum of longer time that represents all manifestations of the LGBT tribe being on the stage at the same time - that would be a trip! And we would have to factor in a party afterwards! I say this because, as we share the same source of oppression, we also share the same need to celebrate ourselves and each other and enjoy Life while we have it and while we can.