

# THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF HOMOPHOBIA: TOWARD A PRACTICAL THEORY

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Any good political activist knows that bringing about social change requires both theory and practice. The struggle for lesbian and gay rights is no exception. We need a theory, a plan for where we are going, and we must keep revising that plan as we deal with the world's realities. With Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and the continuing influence of the New Right, this need is more pressing than ever before. For one important part of our campaign — eliminating homophobia — I think we already have some plans and theories about the sources of homophobia and how we can confront them. But these theories are largely unarticulated and, therefore, not easily subjected to critical analysis.

Why are people homophobic? Ask this question in a group of lesbians and gay men, and someone inevitably responds with a variation on the following theme: people are homophobic either because they fear their own latent homosexuality or because they are insecure in their own masculinity or femininity. This answer represents one of the most popular “commonsense” explanations for homophobia. It is a theory that guides our practice.

Another theory is evident in many gay rights campaigns, where there is an effort to let voters “get to know” lesbians and gay men through canvassing and “pressing the flesh.” This tactic reflects the theory that homophobia stems from ignorance: that heterosexuals who meet gay people will learn that they are just nice folks, and that reducing ignorance in this way will reduce prejudice. But this approach does not fit well with the first theory — that homophobia results from insecurities with one's own masculinity or femininity. People who are insecure about their sexuality and feel threatened by lesbians or gay men probably prefer to remain as ignorant as they possibly can and thereby avoid the whole issue.

These two theories offer conflicting strategies. We could cite other examples, all of which point out the need for careful theorizing about homophobia, coupled with hands-on, real-world efforts to eliminate it. To borrow from an old song, like a horse and carriage, our theory and practice really do go together — we cannot have one without the other.

In this paper, I will sketch a theory that I have found useful for understanding the social psychology of homophobia, *i.e.*, how heterosexual individuals' social interactions and personal experiences shape their reactions to

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lesbians and gay men. The gist of the theory is this: people in American society today react to lesbians and gay men in many different ways and for many different reasons. If we hope to minimize the negative reactions and foster the positive, we must understand this very complicated process. Homophobia is not a monolithic, unified phenomenon. Changing individual attitudes and societal institutions requires recognition that there are homophobias.

## I

### HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM

Before I describe some of the forms taken by prejudice against lesbians and gay men, it is important to clarify some basic terms. The first is *homophobia*, which is an unfortunate term for many reasons. Technically, it means fear of sameness, *not* fear of people whose primary affectional and erotic orientation is to others of the same gender. We could easily live with this imprecision if it were the word's only shortcoming. But a more serious problem is the suffix, "*-phobia*."

For psychologists, *phobia* has a very specific meaning. It refers to an intense fear response to some specific object or category of objects.<sup>1</sup> It is a fear response that is irrational, not objectively appropriate. If someone points a loaded gun at you and threatens convincingly to shoot, you are likely to have an intense, appropriate fear response. That is not phobic. But if you have the same response because there is a small spider in the same room as you, it is inappropriate. It interferes with your life because you must go to great lengths to avoid spider situations. It is phobic.

When we use the term *homophobia*, we are implicitly classifying reactions to gay men and lesbians as this sort of fear response. Indeed, homophobia often is defined as an intense and irrational fear of lesbians and gay men.<sup>2</sup> This definition constitutes a theory of prejudice, one that is likely to influence our political strategies. Consequently, its underlying assumptions must be critically examined.

First, is homophobia always a fear? Perhaps there is an element of fear in most prejudice — fear of the unknown or that which is unusual. Or, returning to the theory of the homophobe-as-sexually-insecure, there is fear of one's own unconscious desires. But people like Anita Bryant, Jerry Falwell, and even Eddie Murphy (and their followers and fans) are not afraid of gay people in the way that a claustrophobic is afraid of enclosed spaces, or an arachnophobic is afraid of spiders. If all homophobes manifested this sort of intense fear reaction, lesbians and gay men would be a much more powerful minority group, and perhaps a much more vigorously persecuted one as well. Fortunately or unfortunately, homophobia does not manifest itself as an intense fear reaction for most people.

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1. See, e.g., G.C. DAVISON & J.M. NEALE, *ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY* 115 (1986).

2. See, e.g., G. WEINBERG, *SOCIETY AND THE HEALTHY HOMOSEXUAL* (1972).

There is another problem with "homophobia." Recall that a phobia is not only intense but also irrational, a fear with no basis in objective reality. A common household spider does not pose a danger to an arachnophobic; yet, the spider evokes an intense response. But what would we say about people from a culture where, for various reasons, spiders of all sorts were universally feared, perhaps associated with spiritual contamination or evil? Would we call it irrational when a member of that culture is frightened by a spider? Probably not.

For similar reasons, we should not be so quick to label as irrational the hostility toward gay people that permeates contemporary American culture. When people are taught all of their lives not to like spiders, it is not irrational for them to dislike spiders as adults. Similarly, if people are taught all of their lives that: 1) for every boy there's a girl and for every girl there's a boy; 2) when you meet the right boy or girl, you'll get married and have babies; and 3) all of this is natural, taken-for-granted, and part of God's plan, then it is not surprising that they dislike homosexuals. Homosexual persons represent a challenge to these beliefs; therefore, there must be something wrong with them. They must be unnatural and maybe even anti-God.<sup>3</sup>

Given that the term "homophobia" is not correct linguistically, that it unjustifiably narrows our understanding of anti-lesbian and anti-gay prejudice to a single dimension of fear, and that it presumes such prejudice to be irrational, why do we still use it? Because "homophobia" is short and easy to say and it has caught on among members of the general public. Until we think of a better word, we are stuck with it. However, we must continually remind ourselves of the term's limitations. Those limitations are serious because our terminology can influence our theories and our strategies for fighting prejudice.

A term with perhaps fewer limitations is *heterosexism*. It does not carry much of the excess baggage that is associated with "homophobia." Neither has it entered the vernacular to the same extent. We can use heterosexism as a complement to homophobia in order to clarify the nature of prejudice against lesbians and gay men.

I define heterosexism as a world-view, a value-system that prizes heterosexuality, assumes it is the only appropriate manifestation of love and sexuality, and devalues homosexuality and all that is not heterosexual. Heterosexism is related to but different from homophobia. While homophobia involves active fear and loathing of homosexuality, heterosexism wishes away lesbian and gay people or assumes that they never really existed. Thus, homophobia is a "sin of commission," while heterosexism is a "sin of omission." For example, I would label as heterosexist the ideology I described earlier that says for every girl there's a boy, and so on. It makes lesbians and gay men invisible. A more concrete example is a New York Times obituary

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3. For further comments on homophobia as a phobia, see L. NUNGESSER, *HOMOSEXUAL ACTS, ACTORS AND IDENTITY* (1983).

for a man who died of AIDS. The man was a performer, and the article quoted his longtime "manager and dresser" regarding his illness. The article closed with the statement that the man had no survivors.<sup>4</sup> I do not know if the "manager and dresser" was the deceased man's lover, but did the New York Times even consider this possibility in saying there were no survivors? Probably not.<sup>5</sup> It is this sort of assumption that I refer to as heterosexism.

Homophobia, ironically, affirms the reality of lesbians and gay men, because you cannot hate and fear something that does not exist. The person who tells fag jokes or goes out to beat up dykes and queers or who campaigns against a local gay rights ordinance is acknowledging gay people by attacking them.

Homophobia and heterosexism exist at both the cultural and personal levels. Laws that prohibit consensual sexual activity between two adults of the same sex,<sup>6</sup> or a law that requires dismissal of teachers who speak out in favor of homosexual rights, are examples of institutional homophobia.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the bulk of institutional oppression results from heterosexism: from ignoring the existence of lesbian and gay people in insurance policies and wills; in hospital visiting rules allowing "immediate family only"; in mass media that have historically portrayed the world as entirely heterosexual, and elsewhere.

These distinctions are important because different strategies are required for attacking prejudice at each level. Cultural homophobia and heterosexism will be overcome by changing institutions, including laws and organizational policies. Eliminating personal homophobia and heterosexism requires changing individuals. Obviously, this distinction is not absolute. In practice, confronting institutional prejudice usually requires confronting the attitudes of individuals within the institution. And one of the most effective ways of combatting personal prejudice is to change the institutions within which people live much of their lives. However, separating institutions from individuals—and homophobia from heterosexism—facilitates the development of a theory to guide the practice.

## II

### THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS OF HOMOPHOBIA

Most of the papers in this symposium have focused on homophobia and heterosexism at the institutional level. For the remainder of this paper, therefore, I will concentrate on the individual level. My own research has focused

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4. N.Y. Times, Jan. 14, 1985, at A16, col.1.

5. In a more recent obituary, the Times acknowledged a deceased man's male "companion of 20 years." N.Y. Times, Feb. 27, 1986, at B12, col.3. This acknowledgement is an encouraging sign that heterosexism can be overcome.

6. See, e.g., *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 106 S. Ct. 2841 (1986).

7. Cf. *Board of Educ. v. National Gay Task Force*, 729 F.2d 1270 (10th Cir. 1984), *aff'd mem.*, 105 S. Ct. 1858 (1985) (affirming a ruling by the Tenth Circuit that an Oklahoma law allowing the dismissal of a teacher for "advocating" or "encouraging" homosexuality violated the free-speech provision of the first amendment).

on this level, especially on how individual homophobia develops, and how it can be overcome.<sup>8</sup>

In attacking this question, I have come to value a particular social psychological theory of attitudes and opinions.<sup>9</sup> This theory proposes that people hold their opinions because they get some psychological benefit from doing so. In other words, attitudes serve psychological functions. Two people can express the same opinion about lesbians and gay men for very different reasons: the same attitude serves different functions for each of them.<sup>10</sup>

My research suggests that there are two major categories of functions. These categories divide functions according to how they benefit the person holding the attitude. Some reactions to lesbians and gay men seem to be based principally on actual experiences with gay people. Heterosexuals whose experiences have been generally pleasant tend to express favorable opinions overall. If their experiences have been unpleasant, they express overall negative attitudes. In psychological terms, their attitudes help them to make sense of the world based on their past experiences. Those past experiences guide their future behavior. Not all attitudes, however, are based on cost-benefit analysis of this sort. Many people derive benefit from their attitudes toward gay people primarily through what happens as a consequence of *expressing* those opinions. Lesbians and gay men largely are symbols to these people.

The distinction between the two kinds of psychological functions which homophobia serves is crucial because different strategies are necessary for dealing with the different kinds of attitudes. I will discuss each of them in turn.

### A. *Experiential Attitudes*

We are continually experiencing the people and objects of the world. Sometimes the experiences are pleasant, sometimes unpleasant, sometimes both, often neither. When we have a nice experience with something, we usually are willing to try it again. If, for example, you have rather pleasant trips to the dentist from a very early age, you are likely to have a positive attitude toward seeing the dentist in the future. This may generalize to a positive attitude toward oral hygiene. But suppose you have had some very unpleasant experiences in the dentist's chair. This may lead you to avoid checkups,

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8. See Herek, *Beyond Homophobia: A Social Psychological Perspective on Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men*, 10 J. OF HOMOSEXUALITY 1-21 (1984).

9. In the language of social psychologists, *attitude* describes an individual's evaluative stance toward an object or category of objects. Prejudice refers to an attitude (usually negative) toward a socially-defined group of people. It is distinct from a stereotype (an overly general *belief* about members of a group that can be positive, negative, or neutral) and discrimination (unfair treatment of an individual who belongs to a particular group). In this paper, the terms attitude and opinion are used interchangeably.

10. See Herek, *The Instrumentality of Ideologies: Toward a Neofunctional Theory of Attitudes and Behavior*, JOURNAL OF SOCIAL ISSUES (forthcoming); Katz, *The Functional Approach to the Study of Attitudes*, 24 PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY 163-204 (1960); M.B. SMITH, J.S. BRUNER, R.W. WHITE, OPINIONS AND PERSONALITY (1956).

maybe to avoid caring for your teeth entirely. I describe this kind of attitude as serving an *experiential* function. Experiential attitudes help us to make sense of the world by categorizing reality according to our past experiences.

Rather than dentists, let us consider experiential attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Data from public opinion polls reveal two interesting facts. First, people who say they know at least one gay man or lesbian are more likely than others to have favorable attitudes toward gay people as a group. This holds only for people who say they know someone who is openly gay.<sup>11</sup> People do not change their attitudes when they only suspect that a friend might be gay. Second, only about 30% of the American public claims to know openly gay people.<sup>12</sup> If only 30% of adult Americans know of a friend or relative who is gay, only 30% could potentially have experiential attitudes because only 30% have had contact experiences. Of those 30%, most say that, on the whole, their interactions with that gay man or lesbian have been fairly positive, and they seem to extend their positive feelings to lesbians and gay men in general.

I mentioned earlier that one popular theory proposes that homophobia stems from ignorance; that many heterosexual people are hostile because, to the best of their knowledge, they simply have never interacted with a gay man or a lesbian; that meeting gay people will overcome homophobia. We can see now that there is some truth to this idea.

But social psychological research with racial and ethnic prejudice indicates that not just any kind of interaction will do. Rather, some kinds of contact with members of a minority group are much more likely than others to lead to greater acceptance and liking on the part of the majority. In order for hostility to decrease, it is important that: 1) the contact experience be intimate and ongoing rather than superficial and momentary; 2) the contact involve people who share many beliefs and values aside from those concerning sexuality; and 3) the contact occur under conditions that foster cooperation and shared goals rather than competition.<sup>13</sup> What kind of situation fits those criteria? Perhaps most obvious is the contact that occurs between close friends, co-workers, and family members. When lesbians and gay men come out to those people, they stand the greatest chance of significantly reducing homophobia. Coming out to one's friends and relatives is likely to have a positive effect, at least in the long run.

But interacting with lesbians and gay men will not immediately result in more positive attitudes for all heterosexuals. Some individuals are motivated to hang on to their homophobia. What is the source of this motivation? This

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11. See Schneider and Lewis, *The Straight Story on Homosexuality and Gay Rights*, 16-20 PUBLIC OPINION 59-60 (1984).

12. NEWSWEEK poll on homosexuality, NEWSWEEK, Aug. 8, 1983 at 33.

13. See Amir, *Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations*, 71(5) PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN 319-42 (1969).

question leads to the second major category of psychological functions that homophobia can serve.

### B. *Expressive Attitudes*

Recall that with attitudes that serve an experiential function, the focus is on lesbians and gay men. Have they been a source of good things in the past or bad things? This type of attitude is contingent to some extent on what specific lesbian and gay individuals do. But attitudes also can be contingent on what happens to heterosexuals when they *express the attitude*. In this case, lesbians and gay men cannot do a great deal to influence the attitude. They are primarily symbols for something else. Expressing the attitude becomes an end in itself because it helps a heterosexual person to reach other goals. These goals revolve around the human need for identity and self-esteem. Many people express homophobic attitudes because doing so helps them to say who they are, to receive support from people who are important to them, and to avoid anxiety associated with unacceptable parts of themselves. There are three *expressive* functions served by homophobia.

#### 1. *Value-Expressive Attitudes*

With the first kind of expressive attitude, lesbians and gay men symbolize some value that a heterosexual person holds and that is very important to her or his sense of self. The homophobic attitude provides a way of expressing the value and thereby affirming who one is. I call these *value-expressive* attitudes. Think, for example, of a fundamentalist Christian for whom being a Christian is a very important part of her identity. Consider the research participant who wrote this explanation for why she felt as she did about lesbians and gay men: "[I have generally negative attitudes because] in the Bible it clearly states that homosexuality is a SIN. I believe that no one can be a Christian if he/she is a homosexual. I believe the Bible is correct, and I follow its beliefs word for word. I am a Christian."<sup>14</sup> I think that being a Christian was much more important to this woman than being against homosexuality. A major part of her own sense of personal identity seemed to be tied up in being a devout Christian, which led her to hold and express homophobic attitudes. I doubt that even positive interactions with gay people would have made much difference to her as long as her Christianity remained important and she understood it to require condemnation of homosexuality.

The motivating force behind these attitudes is a need for personal identity. It is very important for people in our culture to have a sense of who we are as individuals. And identity is not a completely private affair. We form our sense of who we are from a very early age by seeing how other people react to us. We learn to look at ourselves from the perspective of others, and to evaluate ourselves partly in terms of the expectations, values, and goals of

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14. Herek, *Can Functions be Measured: A New Perspective on the Functional Approach to Attitudes* (unpublished manuscript in author's possession).

other people (which we modify and synthesize into a new unique whole). We keep those images of others — people like our family, friends, people whose opinions we respect, famous people we admire but have never met, even historical figures — and when we express our important values we are often, at some level, playing for them as an audience.

Thus, strangely enough, when a person expresses attitudes toward lesbians and gay men that are serving this value-expressive function, the attitudes really have little to do with lesbians and gay men. Rather, they have to do with the person's sense of identity. Being confronted with the reality that gay people are not wicked, child-molesting monsters will not necessarily change the attitude because it does not change the identity needs from which the attitude derives.

How do we change this sort of attitude? Here I must retrench on my statement that contact with lesbians and gay men does not have any effect. Sometimes it can. When a close friend or relative comes out, it may set up a psychological conflict for a fundamentalist Christian. Suddenly that person is confronted with a set of beliefs that dictates a negative stance toward homosexuality on the one hand, and a set of beliefs about this friend or relative's basic goodness and humanity on the other. People are remarkably creative at dealing with inconsistencies and conflicts of this sort, so the person just might be able to hang on to the two contradictory sets of beliefs through some careful mental juggling. She may, for example, agree to disagree with the friend in terms of sexual orientation and gay rights.<sup>15</sup> Or the fundamentalist may redefine her stance on homosexuality to something along the lines of "it is wrong for me, but I cannot judge other people."

In lieu of contact, confronting such a person with two conflicting sets of beliefs and values may change her attitudes. If, for example, the fundamentalist is a strong believer in the U.S. Constitution and the right of people to be left alone by the government, she may separate the moral condemnation of homosexuality from the application of that philosophy to the secular world. Christian fundamentalism, after all, has been around much longer than the New Right preachers who have recently turned it into a political movement. Attitude change also may be fostered by hearing respected authorities — such as ministers and biblical scholars — offer new interpretations of the Bible that do not include condemnation of homosexuality. And the person's sense of self may change: true believers sometimes change what they believe in, or at least become less zealous with time. As this happens, a person's religious fervor may be less often directed at lesbians and gay men.

## 2. *Social-Expressive Attitudes*

An important component of value-expressive attitudes is the reaction of

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15. Consistent with REVIEW OF LAW AND SOCIAL CHANGE policy, the female pronoun is used for the third person singular when the pronoun is used generically. The reader should note that this discussion of attitude change refers to both men and women.



others to one's assertion of self. How other people react (or are expected to react) has important implications for one's self-concept. For some people, the need for acceptance by others is even stronger than the need to express personal values. In such instances, attitudes serve a *social-expressive* function: they help a person to meet her needs for affiliation, for being liked by others. With social-expressive attitudes, the homophobic person has not independently arrived at a strong opinion about lesbians and gay men but perceives that the others around her have done so. Sensitivity to those others leads the person to adopt homophobic attitudes as a way of conforming, fitting in, and being liked and accepted.

Homophobic attitudes that serve a social-expressive function can be changed by altering the heterosexual's perceptions of social norms. If significant others are perceived as approving of lesbians and gay men, more accepting attitudes will flourish. If one's friendship group actually comes to include open lesbians and gay men, the norms are similarly changed. (Here then is another situation in which lesbians and gay men can combat homophobia by coming out.)

### 3. *Defensive Attitudes*

There is one more kind of function that attitudes can serve: I call it a *defensive* function. This function is summarized by the commonsense theory of homophobia that I described earlier — that homophobia stems from fear of one's own latent homosexuality, or insecurity about one's sense of identity as a man or woman. Similar to the value-expressive function, defensive attitudes involve personal identity; there is, however, a difference. With the self-expressive function, people are building — constructing their view of who they are and who they want to be. Psychologically speaking, this is a positive effort. With defense, people are not building. They are hiding things from themselves, and thereby avoiding confrontation with the person they think they are. Defense is a negative process, an attempt to ward off anxiety. To explain fully how it works would require a long excursion into psychoanalytic theory, from whence the notion of defense originates.

It is sufficient to say that people can experience intense conflicts between who they think they *should be* and who they think they *are*. Sometimes these conflicts are based on having homosexual desires that one cannot accept. Sometimes the conflict involves feelings that one is not measuring up to one's gender role; that a man does not feel like he is a "real man" or a woman that she is a "real woman." These conflicts cause anxiety, a very unpleasant feeling that people try to avoid. One strategy for avoiding anxiety is to deny that the unacceptable feeling or characteristic is part of oneself, and to project it outward onto some convenient person or object in the environment. The person can then hate or fear that external object (which symbolizes some part of the self) without hating or fearing herself. Most importantly, all of this occurs at

an unconscious level. The individual is consciously aware only of what seems to be a healthy feeling of disgust at "perverts."

A tragic example from Randy Shilts' *The Mayor of Castro Street*<sup>16</sup> illustrates this process. In 1977, Robert Hillsborough, a young gay man who lived in the Castro in San Francisco, was brutally murdered by a group of young men. One of the men convicted of the murder, 19-year-old John Cordova, stabbed Robert Hillsborough 15 times while shouting "Faggot, faggot."<sup>17</sup> What makes this story a possible example of defensive attitudes is the fact that John Cordova himself had homosexual feelings which he could not accept. According to Shilts, Cordova was sexually involved with a male construction contractor, who said that Cordova "never wanted to act like he knew what he was doing" during their sexual encounters.<sup>18</sup> Cordova would always wake up in a daze, insisting he had no idea what had happened the night before.<sup>19</sup> When he stabbed Hillsborough over and over, Cordova may have been unconsciously attacking and striking out at his own homosexual desires.

In taking this sort of psychodynamic perspective, one must remember that it is our cultural ideology of gender and sexuality that makes homosexual desires so forbidden, and violation of the gender rules so taboo. Children seem to develop their understanding of masculinity and femininity early in life, along with a notion of their place in the gender scheme. Their perceptions tend to reflect the ideas of the larger society and become an important part of their identity. The fact that John Cordova could hate his own homosexual desires so much that he would kill someone who symbolized those desires reveals a great deal about how society evaluates any deviation from heterosexual "normalcy."

Defensive attitudes are, perhaps, the most difficult to influence. Well-developed defenses work so efficiently that the person remains unaware of them. Any effort to change them is likely to arouse anxiety which, in turn, gives rise to more defenses. It may be possible to short-circuit these defenses by bringing the person to understand that homophobia can be an expression of one's own insecurity. Casting suspicion on those who protest too much may prevent the defense from working adequately and cause the person to turn to some new defense, which we hope would not be another type of homophobia. Ideally, we might teach defensive people new meanings for masculinity and femininity. Then defensive men might come to understand that they can still be men, and defensive women that they can still be women, even if they tolerate some violations of the traditional rules for gender. But this would be a long and difficult task. Based on my limited studies, I think that the proportion of homophobic people who are primarily defensive is rather small. So we

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16. R. SHILTS, *THE MAYOR OF CASTRO STREET: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HARVEY MILK* (1982).

17. *Id.* at 163.

18. *Id.* at 168.

19. *Id.*

may want to focus our attention elsewhere for now. We should remember, however, that when homophobia has a defensive origin, personal contact with gay people (especially of one's own gender) probably will not help to change it. In fact, contact may arouse the person's anxiety level to such an extent that she will become even more hostile.

### III

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To summarize, individual homophobia serves a variety of psychological functions. Some people hold attitudes that are based on their personal experiences with gay men and lesbians. These are the experiential attitudes. They help people to make sense of the world based on past experiences. With other attitudes, lesbians and gay men serve as means to an end; homophobia is a way of saying who one is, a way of being accepted by others, or a way of avoiding anxiety from unconscious conflicts. We must use different strategies to change these different kinds of attitudes. We must determine what benefit people receive from their homophobia, and use that information in order to know how to influence them.

Overcoming individual homophobia, of course, is not our only goal. While heterosexuals must stop hating and fearing lesbians and gay men, they must also stop ignoring them. Heterosexuals must recognize that gay people truly are everywhere, and that the world cannot be defined in exclusively heterosexual terms. And heterosexism and homophobia must be overcome not only at the individual level, but also in the institutions of our society.

I believe that the most effective way to bring about these changes is for lesbians and gay men to come out, to disclose their sexual orientation to close friends, to the people they love, the people with whom they live, work, and play. Coming out is likely to reduce individual homophobia that serves an experiential, value-expressive, or social-expressive function. Further, it overcomes heterosexism. Homophobic and non-homophobic people alike will be less likely to define the world entirely in heterosexual terms when they are aware of significant others who are gay.

Coming out will not always be easy, and it will not always have positive results. Coming out makes lesbians and gay men visible and consequently more vulnerable to homophobic attacks of all kinds. This means that lesbians and gay men must not only come out as individuals but also must create an environment in which others can be open about their sexual orientation. Legislation and policies must be enacted that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. Lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual women and men must establish supportive atmospheres for people who are trying to come out.

This is the theory that I propose for fighting individual homophobia and heterosexism. Ultimately it will help to eliminate those evils at the institutional level as well. It is a theory that is both complex and simple. On the complex side, it proposes that homophobia must be viewed as serving a variety

of psychological functions. More simply, it offers one principal recommendation to lesbians and gay men: come out. The amazing accomplishments of the last 15 years have been possible only because openly lesbian and gay people were willing to confront bigotry, stereotypes, and discrimination. There is much more ground to cover. The AIDS crisis has made this work even more critical. But we should be optimistic. More gay people are coming out all the time, and more heterosexual people are responding positively. As a consequence, the lesbian and gay movement is getting stronger and smarter and bigger every day.