

How Heterosexism, Homophobia, & Gender Roles Impact Gay Relationships

Definitions

Heterosexism: *The belief that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and thus more natural, normal, and legitimate.*

Homophobia: *The fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the fear, dread, or hatred of homosexuality. Heterosexism is an example of institutionalized homophobia.*

Oppression: *The condition of being dominated, pressed down, or overwhelmed. Heterosexism uses homophobia as a tool of oppression by marginalizing anyone (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual) who exhibits traits associated – accurately or inaccurately – with homosexuality.*

These factors create a cultural environment in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are treated as a social underclass who should be subservient to the prevailing power and rules of the dominant culture.

Internalized Oppression occurs when individuals or institutions incorporate into their self-identity – consciously or unconsciously – the values and biases of the “majority ethic.”

Internalized oppression may include negative beliefs, feelings of self-hatred, or participation in acts that devalue someone due to their identification with the minority. The more external oppression a person experiences, the more she or he will experience increased self-hatred.

When LGB individuals are fearful of their own homosexuality or embrace heterosexual norms and behaviors out of fear or compliance, they are acting from “**internalized homophobia.**”

All LGB relationships – no matter how privileged or insulated from overt manifestations of oppression - exist within the context of heterosexism & homophobia. This context impacts each individual and relationship differently due to the degree of negative social pressures, amount of positive social support, and each partner's degree of internalized homophobia. Such external and internal forces influence – and sometimes even undermine - the relationship-building efforts of many LGB individuals.

Oppression is poisonous because it overtaxes marginalized people – like LGB folk – and discourages them from acting from their hearts, punishing them even when they do their best. When we despair of acting from our hearts, we undermine the quality of our lives. Compromising our expectations is accepted as being the best we can hope to attain and we lose perspective about when our emotional experiences are normal or distorted. In the end, it is very difficult to live in an oppressive society without becoming demoralized. When we feel demoralized we settle for relationships that are grounded in survival, rather than reaching for companionship that nurtures us to thrive.

While many of the long-standing norms of heterosexism and homophobia are currently under attack or in flux, the undercurrent dynamics of cultural oppression against LGB individuals remain intact. This creates an environment in which most Americans (LGB or non-LGB) struggle with some degree of bias about LGB relationships. Identifying heterosexual privileges exposes the many ways in which these biases are normalized and incorporated into our lives and relationships.

Heterosexual Privilege: How LGB Relationships Are Unfairly Disadvantaged

-Heterosexual relationships are considered to be THE “social standard” vs. only one of many possibilities

- LGB individuals are raised to be heterosexual vs. equal exposure to the continuum of sexual orientations
- LGB individuals are denied the experience of learning how to date those to whom they are attracted
- Heterosexual relationships are constantly mentioned, celebrated, and nurtured vs. LGB relationships are excluded, denigrated, and attacked
- LGB individuals are denied the experience of a socially sanctioned commitment ceremony
- LGB committed relationships are perceived to be a threat to the heterosexual institution of marriage
- Forms usually ask for single, married, or divorced, leaving no space to validate an LGB partnership

-LGB individuals must maintain an “observing self” to monitor real or implied threats for their safety whereas heterosexuals do not have to expend energy looking over their shoulders for signs of danger

- Heterosexuals have no difficulty finding neighborhoods, places, or events where their relationships are accepted
- Public expressions of affection within LGB relationships trigger reactions of threat, punishment, or disgust
- LGB individuals may live with a fear that knowledge of their homosexuality may be used to blackmail them
- Internalized homophobia may create tensions within an LGB couple regarding degrees of openness

-Heterosexuals are free to express their sexual preference & relationship experiences openly whereas LGB individuals are encouraged to maintain a stance of secrecy & invisibility

- LGB individuals normalize the skill of “compartmentalizing” their homosexuality and relationships
- LGB individuals learn to “keep score” of who knows & how much information specific other people know about their dating or relationship life
- LGB individuals learn to deal with feelings about their relationship experiences internally or privately vs. expecting support/validation from others in their social/family network

-Heterosexual relationships are based on the cornerstone of “until death do us part” whereas LGB relationships carry an expectation of being short-term & are viewed thru the lens of “impending failure” (“Are you two still together?”)

- LGB relationships must “overachieve” to gain validation
- LGB individuals learn to keep their relationship difficulties private and not expect others to notice or attend to painful feelings that may occur during times of relationship problems or endings
- Internalized heterosexism may create confusion about when conflicts or unmet needs are normal vs. terminal

-Heterosexual couples have access to legal & social sanctions while most basic legal & social supports and protections are denied to LGB relationships. These benefits include

- paid leave from employment to attend to illness or death of a partner
- inheritance options from a partner
- joint coverage for insurance policies, which usually allows for reduced rates
- immediate access to a partner in case of accident or emergency
- joint custody of biological children
- adoption or foster parenting

-Sex is viewed as the defining feature of an LGB relationship whereas sex is viewed as one of many contributing factors that defines a heterosexual relationship

- Public expressions of affection (e.g., kissing, hugging, holding hands) are viewed as sexual behaviors when exhibited by LGB individuals but as romantic behaviors when exhibited by heterosexuals
- LGB individuals risk being identified with the prefix of their sexual identity – e.g., *gay* man, *lesbian* teacher, *gay* accountant, etc. – vs. heterosexuals who are generally not assigned these prefix labels
- Homophobia equates homosexuality with promiscuity & pedophilia, requiring LGB individuals to “prove” that they are not dangerous or threatening

How Gender Roles Impact Gay Male Relationships

Some problems within gay male relationships reflect the deficits inherent in the male gender role:

1. Some men have learned to be husbands who strive for **competition for power and differentiation**
 - a. To be goal-oriented (not relationship-oriented), be territorial, be self-reliant, want more power, and be sexually initiating
 - b. Performance anxiety can affect two people with **achievement-oriented self-images**, especially the quality of their sexual life
2. Some men are socialized to **equate their value** as a person with the power, prestige, and income of their work, and to see other men, at best, as worthy competitors and, at worst, as the enemy in this game of status and power.
3. Neither man in the relationship may be aware of how he is communicating either excess value or devaluation to his partner and himself based upon income and status criteria.
4. Power plays (subtle, obvious) will get acted out if not talked about, mainly through competition and negotiating tasks, duties, household, & finances
 - a. The one with the **lower status or lower income** occupation may be unconsciously expected to do more of the homemaking tasks that, in a heterosexual relationship, tend to dissolve to the woman irrespective of her occupational status.
 - b. The man with less income may feel that he has less rights to participate in plans for spending money as a couple because it is not his money, while being resented by the higher income partner for not taking equal part in the task of decision making.
5. Some men have been raised to be **thinkers** (instead of feelers, except anger). Some of us need help to learn how to talk about and express them.
6. Some men have been raised to be **critics/analyzers**, to pick apart and find fault with others/self/plan, so there are no loose ends or no mistakes.
 - a. However, what serves men well in career may not serve them in relationship
7. Some men have been raised to be **fixers** (instead of nurturers or soothers). Thus, they will deal with situations and stress by trying to solve the problem and not listen to emotions
8. Some men have been raised to be **in control** (of self and other). Thus, they will tell the other person in the relationship other what he should feel/think/be/do
9. Each may have skills for **initiating sexual contact and maintaining a superficial dating** relationships in which contact is structured, infrequent, and centered on exciting and interesting activities
10. Each may feel **embarrassed and at a loss of skills in the role of comforter** how to proceed with the emotional work of relationship maintenance.
 - a. Gay men may feel inadequate if they need to show or need nurturance and dependency
11. Some gay men have difficulty experiencing themselves as masculine and consequently see themselves as “the other” or feminine due to rigid delineations of what is masculine and feminine.
12. Some gay men who identify more with feminine traits may feel inadequate to masculine men
 - a. Some gay men may only seek out “straight-acting” men for these reasons
 - b. The same “sissy” qualities (being sensitive, not competitive, & nurturing) that we were rejected for are exactly what is required to develop relationships
13. Due to years of being rejected and fearing masculine men, some gay men may have problems with being intimate with and trusting men in general.
14. Both will have many strong feelings and needs to process and be emotionally close with one another, but few tools with which to accomplish these tasks.

Prepared By: Jim Struve, LCSW, & Lee Beckstead, PhD

(Adapted by *Counseling Same-sex Couples* by Laura Brown & *Permanent Partners* by Betty Berzon)