

ESSAY

Is it Homophobia or Something Else?

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Until a generation ago, three social institutions in the U.S.A. and Canada were unanimous in judging non-heterosexuality as problematic, and stigmatizing LGBTQI individuals. The legal system condemned them as criminals, the religious system rebuked them as immoral, and the medical system classified them as mentally ill. Most notably, the American Psychiatric Association included all forms of non-heterosexuality in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), and the World Health Organization included homosexuality in its International Classification of Diseases.

In a fascinating case of social change, remarkable for its relatively rapid reversal of social norms, today same-sex marriage is legal, Christians are deeply divided by the issue of sexual orientation, and, if the diagnosis of homophobia is taken literally, those who object to homosexuality are now the ones suffering from mental infirmity. May 17, 2016 was the 12th annual International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, celebrated in over 120 countries.

A phobia is simply an irrational fear, or as Merriam-Webster puts it, “an extremely strong dislike or fear of someone or something; an exaggerated, usually inexplicable, and illogical fear of a particular object.” More clinically, the *DSM 5* lists phobia as an anxiety disorder. “Fear is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas anxiety is anticipation of future threat... Individuals with specific phobia are fearful or anxious about or avoidant of circumscribed objects or situations” (p.189).

As such, the term homophobia is very likely unfair to most of those so labelled in and by the public, despite its air of medical authority. Islamophobia, in contrast, is a more plausible assessment, though it too is usually employed to signify offense more than malady, to express accusation more than diagnosis. Indeed, Amanda Hess of the *New York Times* recently traced “How ‘-Phobic’ Became a Weapon in the Identity Wars” (January 26, 2016) on other cultural issues as well.

Perhaps some people do have a genuine fear of homosexuality, and the term remains suitable in rare cases. After all, psychotherapist George Weinberg’s original formulation of the concept (*Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, 1972) included not only irrational fear of homosexuality in others, but fear of homosexual feelings in oneself, or self-loathing because of one’s own acknowledged homosexuality. But most persons in the Western societies of the global north today who disapprove of non-heterosexuality probably do not fear or hate LGBTQI people, so it is equally unjust to deem them all pathetically scared “haters.”

Their disapproval is moral and/or religious, and coming to the cognitive conclusion of moral disapproval does not necessarily elicit the emotion of fear or the sentiment of hate. To disapprove morally of whatever one defines as sin does not necessarily cause one to fear or hate those thereby defined as sinners. True, in the case of sexual orientation, it is not just the behaviour of the other that is censured, but the very essence of their sexual being, whether their core desires are expressed behaviourally or not. Yet even that does not add up to fear or hate.

Use of the term homophobia to describe the “disorder” of disapproval and homophobic to describe the “disordered,” is not only unfair, it is counterproductive. Tossed about as loosely as they are today, these terms are not only erroneous, but provocatively confrontational and adversarial. They reduce discourse about sexual orientation to a shouting match straining for the most inflammatory labels possible. As Hess put it, “fostering reflective dialogue is one way to go about advancing an agenda. Shaming your ideological opponents into silence is another,” though it impedes progress rather than facilitating it. For level-headed, even-handed fairmindedness to be exercised both ways, these neologisms need to be replaced with something more accurately descriptive and less judgmental.

Already in 2004, in a paper published in *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, Gregory Herek called for abandoning homophobia. In 2012, The Associated Press banned all social and political “-phobia” constructions as too charged for use in objective reporting. In 2014, California banished homophobic or “gay panic” defenses in court for criminal assaults of LGBTQI persons. Bringing more clarity to the character of the culture war over sexuality after the legalization of same-sex marriage, recent legislation in multiple American states has asserted the right to discriminate as a matter of religious freedom. It is “the right not to serve, or care for, or sell to, or buy from, or employ anyone who isn't behaving like a confirmed heterosexual” (Neil Macdonald, “Looking to Reframe LGBT Fight” *CBC News*, April 20, 2016).

In the late 1970s, Weinberg had already suggested “heterosexism” as an alternative term, and in 2004 Herek suggested “sexual prejudice,” both terms more befitting a civil rights agenda. But neither term, nor other suggestions such as homonegativity or heteronormativity, have successfully supplanted homophobia in popular parlance. What they have done is shift the focus from the individual to society, politicizing disapproval instead of psychologizing it, and reframing disapproval as prejudicial attitude and discriminatory action. As with sexism, racism, ageism, and ableism, these suggested new terms assume the superiority, normativity, and privilege of, in this case, heterosexuals. Yet the concept of discrimination may still be insufficient, because certain kinds of discrimination can be positive, such as affirmative action policies. What terms based on discrimination alone fail to reflect adequately is the occasional fervour of overtly intolerant attitudes and behaviors, and the unrelenting, self-shattering consequences to non-heterosexuals.

Therefore, as a more suitable alternative, I suggest the term “homoppression.”

If repression is about how we unconsciously control ourselves in the Freudian sense, and if suppression is about how we consciously control ourselves in the volitional and moral sense, then oppression is most simply about how we control others to their detriment. Oppression is the collective act of placing severe restrictions on individuals and groups. It is the social tyranny that marks a category of people out as Other, holds them down, hems them in, and blocks their pursuit of a good life. The ruling segment of a population prevents a less powerful segment from gaining access to the valued goods of the social system they share. According to Merriam-Webster, oppression is “an unjust and excessive exercise of authority or power.”

In the end, oppression is one form of systemic social injustice, which Gary Haugen of the International Justice Mission defined as misusing social power to take from others their dignity, liberty, or the fruits of their love and labour. According to Iris Young, “all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.” Homoppression then is using the social power of moral and legal codes to take from LGBTQI people their dignity and liberty to express themselves sexually and enjoy the fruits of their love. Our legal and medical systems no longer do, but some moral and religious codes still want to.

One immediate objection from homoppressors will be that sexuality must be restrained by moral and criminal codes, otherwise all manner of depraved impulses would be free to run rampant and create sexual and familial chaos. They will insist that not all moral and legal codes and forms of restraint are oppressive, because some do function positively to restrain destructive practices such as pedophilia, polygamy, and bestiality.

But such all-or-nothing false dichotomies and slippery slope arguments do not take into account that each expression of sexuality can in fact be evaluated on its own merits and demerits. Yes of course some forms of restraint on sexuality are necessary. The question is in which conditions restraints become unjust and oppressive, and by what measures. There is no compelling reason, evidence, or debate that restraint of pedophilia, polygamy, and bestiality is unjust and oppressive. Pedophilia criminally victimizes persons incapable of giving legal sexual consent. Polygamy entrenches exploitative sexual inequality in marriage. Bestiality degrades sexuality by dehumanizing it. Non-heterosexuality does none of the above.

Homoppressors will also insist that they genuinely love LGBTQI “confused sinners” (love the sinner, hate the sin), and furthermore seek their good by urging “reparative therapy” for their “defective desires.” If a LGBTQI person declines, or fails to undergo “gay-conversion” successfully, they are then “lovingly” called to life-long sexual abstinence and a denial of self far deeper than heterosexuals who voluntarily choose celibacy. Non-heterosexuals are not called to the same Christian sexual virtues as heterosexuals – modesty, privacy, pre-marital abstinence, monogamy, fidelity, avoidance of lust – but rather are prohibited from all sexual expression and disqualified from marriage. Celibate heterosexuals remain securely assured that

their desires for the other sex are “healthy,” because they fit the straight script of heteronormativity. Compliantly celibate non-heterosexuals, in contrast, live in mandatory singleness, assured only that they are loved despite their “perversion.”

But such love is not unlike love expressed for persons of other biological and social identities who are equally not responsible for their ascribed status and its assigned inferiority. Some slave owners sincerely loved their slaves, and perhaps many patriarchs genuinely love their wives, whom they nevertheless continue to oppress by consigning them to a subordinated category, restricting their opportunities in life, and exploiting their labour. Ironically and tragically, love can indeed coexist with oppression, but that does not lessen the oppressive character of such maltreatment.

Deeper, more authentic love may occasionally lead to living gracefully in a third space between disapproval and oppression. Some people disapprove of LGBTQI sexuality without advocating that special social constraint or restraint be placed on those of such orientations. They do not affirm LGBTQI sexuality, but neither do they wish to withhold from LGBTQI people their dignity and liberty to express themselves sexually and enjoy the fruits of their love. They have no agenda for other sexualities because they are not invested in correcting or curbing them. Their love is simply empathetic, seeking the other’s good as they would seek their own.

The term homoppressive may be a more accurate description of those who both disapprove and restrain than the term homophobic, but is it really less judgmental in tone or manner? It clearly remains a judgement, an evaluation completed and a conclusion drawn after careful thought. One judgement or another is unavoidable, and a precise judgement that is neither excessively hasty nor harsh is not inherently judgemental, regardless of the discomforts it may generate for both those judged and their communities. That, in fact, is exactly what more rational homoppressors maintain when explaining and justifying their disapproval of non-heterosexuality.

Abandoning the term homophobia and adopting homoppression in its place would align our language with the more sociologically informed critiques of the 21st century, compared to the overly psychologized critiques of the 20th century. It would also shift the critical eye from the mental and emotional health of individual objectors to the morality of social systems. Abusively accusing someone of being insane or irrational only makes them defensive and defiant, and makes reflective dialogue with them all but impossible. It also indirectly excuses them, because to be mentally ill or disordered is not their fault, whereas to oppress targeted others remains their moral responsibility. Viewing such individuals as part of a sector of society enacting what no one person alone could bring about avoids a provocatively pointed, individualistic assessment.

Obviously, the biblical text does not speak the modern psychological language of phobia. But liberation from oppression is an over-arching, clangingly repetitive narrative theme running through the Old Testament from the exodus to the exile to the social practices of the

Israelites themselves, addressed directly 145 times (NRSV). “From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight” (Psa. 72:14). “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free?” (Isa. 58:6). And when Jesus reads from that scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, saying for the first time publicly that the scripture has been fulfilled in him, he proclaims that “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to....let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18).

All of us in Western societies today are admittedly complicit in multiple systems of oppression. Some of us are also trying to do something about one or two of them. Formulating more precise language that names it as such is one small but necessary step toward more productive dialogue and constructive interaction.

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