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# Homophobia to heterosexism: constructs in need of re-visitation

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# Homophobia to heterosexism: constructs in need of re-visitation

## **Abstract**

Although the concept of homophobia has been used extensively in the literature since the early 1960s, researchers have shown growing concern for its relevance in present day research. Additionally, there has been variance in its definition leading to an array of ambiguities resulting in methodological limitations in empirical studies with a disregard for ensuring that definitions used match the focus of study. There have been numerous attempts to locate the construct within a theoretical framework and this has also resulted in weak empirical design. These weaknesses in research on homophobia have resulted in the coining of the construct heterosexism as a more contemporary and more appropriate definition than that of homophobia to indicate anti-gay discrimination. This review considers both terms with regard to their appropriateness and distinction and the utility of the construct heterosexism as it is applied to contemporary research on non-heterosexual communities. It is concluded that homophobia can no longer be framed as a straightforward function of individual psyches or irrational fear and loathing and that heterosexism is more appropriate in defining prejudiced behaviours and their consequences for non-heterosexual communities.

## **Keywords**

visitation, heterosexism, need, constructs, re, homophobia

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# Homophobia to Heterosexism: Constructs in need of re-visitation.

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## Abstract:

*Although the concept of homophobia has been used extensively in the literature since the early 1960s, researchers have shown a growing concern for its relevance in present day research. Additionally, there has been variance in its definition leading to an array of ambiguity resulting in methodological limitations in empirical studies with a disregard for ensuring that definitions used match the focus of study. There have been numerous attempts to locate the construct within a theoretical framework and this has also resulted in weak empirical design.*

*These weaknesses in research on the GLBTIQ community have resulted in the coining of the construct heterosexism as a more contemporary and more appropriate definition than that of homophobia to indicate anti-gay discrimination. This review considers both terms with regard to their appropriateness and distinction and the utility of the construct heterosexism as it is applied to contemporary research on the GLBTIQ community. It is concluded that homophobia can no longer be framed as a straightforward function of individual psyches or irrational fear and loathing and that heterosexism is more appropriate in defining prejudiced behaviours and their consequences against the GLBTIQ community.*

**Key words:** homophobia; heterosexism

**Word Count:** 3260

## Introduction

Sexual orientation discrimination includes acts which range from subtle or slight slurs to physical attacks (queer bashing) and even murder (Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik & Magley, 2008). There is an accumulation of literature which struggles to investigate this phenomenon, with a large number of methodological problems (for example, Croteau & Lark, 1995; Croteau & von Destinon, 1994; Fyfe, 1983; Hall, 1986; Hudson & Richetts, 1980; Levine & Leonard, 1984; MacDonald, 1976; Weinberg, 1973). These problems are complex and range from there being insufficient scientific language to encapsulate the distinctive features that sexual orientation discrimination of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning individuals (GLBTIQ)<sup>1</sup> are subjected to, and the chosen theoretical paradigm to conceptualise these attitudes and behaviours, held both individually and by the community at large (societal prevalent attitudes).

A large pool of misrepresented language exists to describe negative attitudes and behaviours towards sexual minorities (for example, Brenner, Lyons, Fassinger, 2010; Fassinger, 2000; Powers, 1996). Having the correct language to describe, understand and research sexual orientation discrimination is one step in helping researchers to create an opportunity for society to not only accept, but normalise same sex attraction, despite its minority membership. The constructs of homophobia and heterosexism have been reviewed and critiqued in relation to the numerous definitions put forward by researchers in the context of sexual orientation discrimination. Understanding terminology and its conceptualisation of an experience by a group is important in order to be able to (a) be more accurate and consistent in the use of terminology in research, (b) better understand the experiences of GLBTIQ individuals who experience sexual orientation discrimination, and (c) more accurately measure heterosexist experiences in different settings.

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<sup>1</sup> GLBTIQ is used by the authors as it is more inclusive and more representative of the sexual minority groups, thus separating them out from the majority heterosexual group. Sexual orientation is defined as the direction of sexual and romantic attractions. With regard to GLBTIQ research, this attraction is mainly towards people of the same sex (homosexuality), and for some it is towards either sex (bisexuality).

Due to profound changes in the attitudes of social science and society at large toward GLBTIQ individuals, most of what has been described descriptively and empirically since the early seventies (when research first started to be published in this area) demonstrates biases inherent in the actual research methodology. Researchers did not frame their constructs within an appropriate theory; and did not differentiate between attitude and assumptions, leading to ambiguity of hypotheses. Many studies therefore incorrectly labelled negative attitudes to homosexuality as homophobia (MacDonald, 1976; Weinberg, 1973). This was due to the then inaccurate theoretical framing of the construct of homophobia and the manner in which researchers conceptualised their language around this. This review considers both terms with regard to their appropriateness and distinction and the utility of the construct heterosexism as applied to research on the GLBTIQ community.

## Homophobia

For nearly fifty years the construct of homophobia has been defined in many different ways based on: (a) the theoretical paradigm used (Adam, 1998; Bernstein, Kostelac & Gaarder, 2003; Lyons, Brenner & Fassinger, 2005; Matthews & Adams, 2009; Smith & Ingram, 2004; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West & Meyer, 2008) and (b) the researcher's bias (Lyons, Brenner & Fassinger, 2005; Silverschanz, Cortina & Konik, 2008; Smith & Ingram, 2003). These methodological factors have resulted in the following list of definitions for homophobia. Table 1 illustrates key results from a literature search on homophobia and heterosexism. The search was carried out on the 'Summons' database and yielded forty one journal articles. Of the forty one articles, nineteen were selected as relevant, relevance being determined by articles which contained definitions of homophobia and/or heterosexism by seminal authors in the field. Seminal authors were identified as having published over five peer reviewed articles since research began to appear in this field. These nineteen articles were located in thirteen different journals. This list has been recorded in chronological order in order to illustrate developments over time.

Table 1 Definitions of Homophobia

Author	Date	Definition
Weinberg	1960's	Heterosexual people's fear, contempt and hatred of LGB people.
Weinberg	1972	Heterosexual person's irrational fear and dread of being in close contact/quarters with LGB persons
Macdonald	1976	An irrational persistent fear and dread of homosexuals
Morin & Garfinkle	1978	An individual's irrational fear, as well as a cultural belief system that supports negative stereotypes about gay people
Hudson & Ricketts	1980	A uni-dimensional construct composed of several emotional responses (e.g. fear, anger, disgust) that persons experience while interacting with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals
Fyfe	1983	Consists of negative attitudes, culture bound commitments to traditional sex roles and personality traits
Brittin	1990	Fear and dislike of lesbians and gay men

Table 1 Definitions of Homophobia

Author	Date	Definition
Adams et al.	1996	A construct that consists of negative attitudes, affect regulation and malevolence towards lesbians and gay men
Sears	1997	The prejudice, discrimination, harassment or acts of violence against sexual minorities, including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, evidenced in a deep-seated fear or hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex.
Adam	1998	Negative attitudes toward lesbian, gay and (sometimes) bisexual people
Herek	2000	The marginalisation and disenfranchisement of lesbians and gay men.
Kritzinger	2001	One way in which strict adherence to gender role stereotypes is enforced and gender oppression maintained.
Herek	2004	Refers to individual's beliefs and behaviours emanating from personal ideology.  Individual or social ignorance or fear of gay and /or lesbian people. Homophobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence and hatred.

Note: *'Definitions were obtained from a literature search which yielded 19 articles in 13 different journals with key words of 'homophobia and heterosexism'*

The conceptualisations in these definitions stem from the early 1960's. Prior to 1967, scholarly writings on homosexuality both mirrored and legitimised the negative attitudes about the 'sin' of homosexuality, the 'sickness' of gays and the 'unhealthiness' of the homosexual lifestyle. Early causes of homophobia were described as 'irrational fears of the opposite sex' and a 'deep fear of disease or injury to the genitals' (Bieber, 1976). Bieber also reported that the homosexual lifestyle was due to the 'disturbing psychopathology of its members'.

The first attitudinal shift came from George Weinberg (1972) who argued that the 'pervasive denigration' of homosexuals (by both heterosexuals and homosexuals alike) represented a social rather than a personal pathology. Weinberg (1972) contended that the problem with homosexuality rested not in the condition itself, but rather in the way it had been constructed by society as an illness. This shift of attitude to a sociological conceptualisation of the relationship between normal society and the homosexual sub-culture resulted in Weinberg (1960s) coining the term homophobia. He first described it as heterosexual people's fear, contempt and hatred of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals B minority group individuals. In 1972 he described it as a heterosexual person's irrational fear and dread of being in close quarters with LGB individuals. This term is taken to be an extension of Churchill's construct (1967) of homoerotomania which he described as the fear embedded in society or erotic or same sex contact with members of the same sex. Research, however indicates that Weinberg arrived at the concept of homophobia before Churchill's book was published (Herek, 2004), thus calling into question the origins of this construct. Nevertheless, Weinberg's use of the

word 'irrational' is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, it permits a delegitimizing of the mainstream condemnation at the time and fear of homosexual individuals. Secondly, it implicated society in the violence, deprivation and separation that Weinberg considered to be the consequences of homophobia.

This was an important step forward, as it emphasised that it is not a person's sexual orientation per se that is the problem, but rather, that being a member of a sexual minority is what may make one vulnerable to discrimination (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 1995). It is this minority group membership (GLBTIQ) which then leads to the marginalisation and discrimination of individuals (Minority Stress model; Meyer, 1995). This discrimination is therefore based on the societal views or attitudes of the majority group which the individual experiences in the dominant culture (Meyer, 1995). Minority Stress Theory is described as the manner in which individuals from stigmatised social categories (such as GLBTIQ group members) experience excess stress and negative life events because of their minority status (Brooks, 1981; Kelleher, 2009; Meyer, 1995, 2003). Additionally, this stress is derived from relatively stable underlying social structures, institutions and processes beyond the individual, rather than from biological characteristics of the person or from individual conditions (Meyer, 2003). According to Meyer's (1995) Minority Stress Theory, GLB individuals often experience dystonic psychological states as a result of existing in environments in which they are virtually always minorities.

Homophobia in early research was taken to represent ways in which marginalisation is manifested towards gay and lesbian people and their sub-culture. These early attitudes and behaviours were premised on stereotypes of gay and lesbians as being 'sexually aggressive' and predatory (paedophiles), 'excessively effeminate' (in the case of gay men) or overly masculine (in the case of lesbians) and referred to as 'dykes' and therefore opposing gender norms and values of society at the time (Herek, 1984). The construct of homophobia represented a significant and dangerous pathology which was directly related to anti-gay victimisation. Some theorists have gone so far as to report that the effects of homophobia (irrational and intense fear, dread and disgust for GLBTIQ individuals) have fostered 'queer bashing' and thus violence and discrimination against GLBTIQ individuals (Petersen, 1991) based on their sexual orientation. The critique of this construct in its early use is that it posed a real threat to GLBTIQ individuals by instilling a self-hatred and fear that kept these individuals 'in the closet', thus preventing them from disclosing their same sex attraction. It can therefore be surmised that the misuse of the word homophobia and its poor conceptualisation led to the belief in the majority culture that homosexuality is an individual's pathology instead of a societal issue.

Prior to 1973, this resulted in homosexual individuals being declared 'mentally ill' according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) which proclaimed that homosexuality was inherently associated with psychopathology (Bayer, 1987; Minton, 2002). Gay men and lesbians were then treated as mentally ill and subjected to conversion 'therapies' including electro convulsive shock therapy (ECT). This continued up until the early 1980s in some countries, namely South Africa, where men who were serving their compulsory military service and who openly disclosed themselves as practicing homosexuals, were ordered to undergo ECT (S Lloyd 1987, pers. Comm. 30 July). This occurred, despite some countries such as Canada changing their Criminal Code as early as 1969 when homosexuality was decriminalised. Prior to this, homosexual acts were considered perverted and acts of gross indecency, 'sinful, unnatural and sick' (Herek, 2004). Even today, some countries such as Uganda and Zimbabwe still consider homosexual acts as criminal, with some behaviours being punishable by death. Uganda at the time of writing this article was proposing the death penalty for acts of sodomy.

Homophobia as a construct is thus rife with negative consequences as it results in the formation and acquisition of a negative homosexual identity (internalised homophobia) where GLBTIQ individuals develop a 'self-loathing' related to being a member of a minority group (Weinberg, 1972). This is then compounded by the development of negative feelings around one's own minority status resulting from the stigmatisation experienced from being a member of the minority group (Smith,

Dermer, Ng & Barto, 2007). It is important to note that the construct of homophobia was created in the midst of strong political rebellion against the medicalisation and pathologising of homosexuality, therefore placing it out of context in present day studies. Homophobia is thus limited in its representation of discrimination as basically the product of individual fear, that is, the fear of being close to gay and lesbian individuals. Homophobia therefore, does not as a construct encapsulate the dangerous societal pathology that is directly implicated in anti-gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender victimisation. Homophobia is consequently an inadequate term with which to frame the many experiences of prejudiced behaviours and their consequences against the GLBTIQ community.

### **Heterosexism**

As a result of these negative attitudes, behaviours and consequences of the historical unfolding of the construct homophobia, it appears that the concerns about its use and focus on the individual thoughts, actions and behaviours of the homophobic person, have led to the construct of heterosexism being coined by Weinberg (1972). Heterosexism was first used within the women's and gay liberation movement as a way to offer a political meaning and to present a common language with which to raise concerns around the systemic oppression of GLBTIQ individuals (Kitzinger, 1996). The construct of heterosexism was thus defined initially as an ideological system that 'denies, denigrates and stigmatises' any non-heterosexual 'form of behaviour, relationships of community' (Herek, 1990). Furthermore, it was used to describe a belief system that positions the 'superiority of heterosexuality over homosexuality' (Morin, 1977).

Heterosexism has thus moved the conceptualisation from the individual to the cultural and in ecological terms (Smith, Dermer, Ng & Barto, 2007). That is, where the majority group status (being heterosexual) is the assumed group membership for all individuals in the society or community unless there is evidence to the contrary. For example, an individual openly disclosing their homosexual orientation (Smith, 2004) and therefore coming out. Thus, heterosexism refers to the cultural ideology that maintains societal prejudice against sexual minorities (GLBTIQ individuals) and acknowledges that this prejudice may take many forms, from slight slurs, snubs and queer jokes (Silverschanz, Cortine, Konic & Magley, 2008) to overt hostile harassment and physical violence (Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, & Zeichner, 2001), such as occurs in 'gay bashings' and even murder as mentioned earlier.

Numerous definitions of heterosexism have proliferated the literature since the early 1980s attempting to delineate all the nuances involved in this complex phenomenon of sexual identity discrimination. The following table outlines these definitions as obtained via a literature research carried out as described earlier.

Table 2 Definitions of Heterosexism

Author	Date	Definition
Pharr	1988	The systemic display of homophobia in the institutions of society, creating the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual.
Neisen	1990	The continued promotion of a heterosexual lifestyle and simultaneous subordination of gay and lesbian ones

Table 2 Definitions of Heterosexism

Author	Date	Definition
Herek	1990	Defined as an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, relationship, or community
Herek	1992	Defined as an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship, or community
Herek	1995	Refers to an ideological system that operates on individual, institutional and cultural levels to stigmatize, deny and denigrate any non-heterosexual way of being
Sears	1997	Incorporates antigay attitudes, prejudice, and discriminatory behavior.
Herek	2004	Refers to the cultural ideology that maintains social prejudice against sexual minorities.
Alden & Parker	2005	A belief system that posits the superiority of heterosexuality over homosexuality.

Note. *'Definitions were obtained from a literature search which yielded 19 articles in 13 different Journals with key words of 'homophobia and heterosexism'.*

From a review of these definitions, it can be seen that there is an absence of a universal definition which clearly defines the construct. Definitions have diverse elements such as (1) a display of homophobia in society, (2) the promotion of a heterosexual lifestyle, (3) a system that stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, (4) a system that operates on an individual and cultural level, (5) the ideology that maintains prejudice against sexual minorities and (6) a system that posits the superiority of heterosexuality over homosexuality. It is therefore the reader's choice to decide whether these definitions are similar, interrelated, distinct from one another or indeed outdated and irrelevant due misleading or lacking empirical data to support these conceptualisations.

Furthermore, the definitions locate the construct as either a social, individual or combined phenomenon. In a number of the definitions, heterosexism is seen as being bound to the identity of the self which internalises the consequences of heterosexism, resulting in what has come to be referred to as 'internalised heterosexism' (Szymanski & Meyer, 2008) previously referred to as 'internalised homophobia' (Weinberg, 1972, p. 83). This adds a further dimension to the definition as it brings with it the construct of self-identity as a homosexual and the individual's identity formation process which will determine the individual's position on their identity and hence the manner in which they view themselves and their world. This also impacts and influences one's 'coming out' or decision to disclose their sexual orientation in various settings.

The other concern with this construct is its use in isolation from a theoretical framework. Only a few researchers have attempted to combine definitions with theoretical underpinnings (Bernstein, Kostelac & Gaarder, 2003; Lyons, Brenner & Fassinger, 2005; Smith & Ingram 2004; Wald, 1999), with a number of researchers having no theoretical framework in which to locate their research (Drydakis, 2009; Silverschanz, Cortine, Konik & Magley, 2008). The lack of a consistent theory further dissipates the strength of definitions used. There is however, a growing body of literature which indicates a leaning towards Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 1995) as the dominant theoretical



framework, as this theory encapsulates and highlights the negative experience, negative life events and stress GLBTIQ members' experience because of their minority status.

The criticisms of the definitions for heterosexism are therefore numerous due to: (a) the theories used to posit them and the lack thereof, (b) the bias of the researcher and (c) their failure to reflect the intolerant attitudes and behaviours of the majority group. Other terms such as sexual prejudice (Herek 2004), homosexual prejudice (Reiter, 1991) and heterosexist harassment (Silverschanz, Cortine, Konik & Magley, 2008) have been used to capture the negative attitudes and hostility based on sexual orientation. Prejudice, as a construct, is helpful to define an attitude based on judgment which is directed at a specific social group, involving negativity and hostility, in contrast to the term homophobia, which implies a fear with the encounter of the minority group. The latter definition is inconsistent with studies indicating that heterosexuals do not have a fear for homosexuals, but rather experience an intense anger and disgust for homosexual individuals and their 'behaviours'. (Fyfe, 1983).

Furthermore, due to the necessity to include the expanded range of possible heterosexist behaviours to include actions which create a climate of negativity towards sexual minorities, Herek (1990) has introduced additional constructs to account for these negative attitudes such as institutionalised favouritism and psychological heterosexism (p.316) which represents individual-level heterosexism that may be manifested through both feelings/attitudes and behaviours and is usually discussed in terms of how it promotes and perpetuates violence against GLBTIQ people. Additionally, Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik & Magley, (2008, p. 178) also refer to heterosexist harassment which they define as insensitive verbal and symbolic (but non-assaultive) behaviours that convey dislike toward non-heterosexuals.

The advantage of using the construct heterosexism over homophobia, which is arguably the most recognised term used to describe the marginalisation and disenfranchisement of gay men and lesbians (Herek, 2000), is that it acknowledges the collusion in anti-gay attitudes at all societal levels. The broad definition of homophobia is restrictive in its understanding of the negative reactions to gay individuals (Fyfe, 1983). On the other hand, the disadvantage of heterosexism is that it also fails to sufficiently reflect the fervour of overtly intolerant attitudes and behaviours.

Heterosexism has been used in the literature as a more appropriate conceptualisation for a number of positive reasons. The construct is more inclusive as it includes the mental and physical health problems resulting from invalidating social environments created by the stigma, prejudice and discrimination carried out by the majority group e.g. (Fisher & Shaw, 1999; Gee, 2002; Meyer, 2003). Additionally, it takes into account social injustice, which has been seen to contribute to diminished physical and mental health of GLBT individuals due to their being exposed to acts of oppression, discrimination and bias (Matthews and Adams, 2009). One such bias noted in the literature is that of biased evaluations of competence of GLBT individuals within the workplace (Drydakis, 2009), where it is assumed that customers will be uncomfortable dealing with homosexual workers and thus take their business elsewhere.

Moreover, heterosexism is seen to include the political or legislative action (Russell, 2000), where ramifications for both the environmental level (from relatively contained local systems to larger, national, political systems) and the person level, through social individual empowerment. This results in the manifestation of heterosexism in two primary ways; namely through societal customs and institutions (cultural heterosexism) and through individual attitudes and behaviours (psychological heterosexism viz. prejudice, harassment and violence).

Heterosexism also centres on the normalising and privileging of heterosexuality, rather than merely a fear of homosexuality. It is therefore not limited to the phobia or fear of homosexuals, or to violent episodes, but conceptually includes prejudice toward bisexual men and women as well, thus preventing the assumption that only 'homosexuals' suffer from the effects of discrimination due to sexual orientation. Heterosexism also highlights the persistence of threats and the perpetuation of

false stereotypes held by heterosexuals about the GLBT individuals and with regard to gender identity in general.

The construct also takes into consideration the minimising of alternate sexual orientation (GLBT) and the unsupportive responses which lead to non-heterosexuals feeling 'invisible' (Smith & Ingram, 2004) in numerous settings, one of those being the workplace, where it is surmised that the level of openness is a trade-off between disclosure and possible discrimination (Badgett, 1995).

Heterosexism therefore operates on many levels and is inclusive of all forms of stigma, prejudice and discrimination. It lays bare the belief in the superiority of heterosexuality in which non-heterosexuality or non-heterosexual persons are consciously or unconsciously shut off from daily activities (Sears & Williams 1997). It thus exposes the notion that other sexual orientations are not considered and are even silenced, thereby promoting the notion of heteronormativity.

## **Conclusion**

The review has described (1) the out-dated and inappropriate use of the construct homophobia (fear of man) compared with the conceptualisation of heterosexism, despite homophobia being arguably the most popular term used, (2) the lack of a universal definition of what is meant by the construct heterosexism and the lack of a theoretical framework when using the construct, to encapsulate all the nuances and invisible experiences of heterosexism. Political opinions and discourse about sexual orientation has changed over time as LGBTIQ advocates try to win constituents and change laws. Homophobia can no longer be framed as a straightforward function of individual psyches or irrational fear and loathing. In its place, heterosexism highlights group beliefs, maintaining heterosexual privilege. Heterosexism strives to move beyond understanding homophobia solely in psychological terms and to invoke more dynamic ways of thinking about prejudiced behaviours.

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