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On Heterosexual Masculinity: Some Psychological Consequences of the Social Construction of Gender and Sexuality

Gregory M. Herek

This article considers the proposition that to be "a man" in contemporary American society is to be homophobic—that is, to be hostile toward homosexual persons in general and gay men in particular. Starting from some empirical observations of links between homophobia and gender, I shall discuss heterosexual masculinity as a culturally constructed identity and how it has been affected by the recent emergence of gay identities. Then I shall consider how heterosexual masculine identity is constructed by individuals, and how expressing hostility toward gay people enhances such an identity. Finally, I shall propose some strategies for disentangling homophobia from heterosexual masculinity and will consider prospects for changing both.

Throughout the article I will describe explicit hostility or prejudice toward gay men and lesbian women as *homophobia*. This term usually is defined as an irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuality or homosexual persons (Herek 1984; Lehne 1976; Morin and Garfinkle 1978; Weinberg 1972). Of the many words that describe prejudice against lesbians and gay men, it is currently the most popular. It is not an ideal label, however, for many reasons. It overly psychologizes the concept of prejudice against lesbians and gay men. Although it is sometimes used to describe a cultural ideology (Morin and Garfinkle 1978), it usually is interpreted as a psychological phenomenon, focusing more on what is wrong with individuals than on social-structural problems. Homophobia, however, is manifest at both individual and societal levels. Just as the distinction between individual and institutional racism has been important to the Black movement in the United States (Carnichael and Hamilton 1968), so it is important to distinguish psychological homophobia from its institutional manifesta-

tions. Examples of institutional homophobia are laws that prohibit two consenting people of the same sex from making love in the privacy of their bedroom or that require dismissal of teachers who say that such laws should be abolished.

Another problem with this term is that its *-phobia* suffix suggests that individual prejudice is based primarily on fear and that this fear is irrational and dysfunctional. I have argued elsewhere (Herek 1984) that homophobia is tenacious partly because it is very functional for individuals who manifest it. Later I will discuss the functions homophobia serves in connection with the male sex role.

STARTING POINTS: SOME EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

It is a common observation that heterosexual men are more homophobic than heterosexual women. Empirical data, however, suggest qualifications for this assertion: men are more homophobic than women in some respects but not in others. National opinion polls typically find no significant difference between males' and females' responses to questions about homosexuality (Glenn and Weaver 1979; Irwin and Thompson 1977; Levitt and Klassen 1974; Nyberg and Alston 1976–1977; Schneider and Lewis 1984). Smaller-scale experimental and questionnaire studies, in contrast, have generally found more negative attitudes among males than among females, especially with attitudes toward gay men (Herek 1986b; Kire 1984).

We can reconcile the different findings of public opinion polls and social psychological studies if we recognize each method's strengths and weaknesses. Poll data obtained from more or less representative samples allow generalization to the larger population, but they rely on only one or two items to assess attitudes concerning sexual orientation. Such single-item measures are less reliable than the multiple-item scales and behavioral measures used in more intensive psychological studies. The latter, however, are conducted with highly select samples—usually college students—and so do not produce readily generalizable results.

More important for the present context, there are differences in content. Polls focus on a single facet of attitudes, usually questions of morality or civil liberties. A frequently used item, for example, reads, "What about relations between two adults of the same sex—do you think it is always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?" (Nyberg and Alston 1976–1977). Disregarding the possible bias introduced by framing the

topic so negatively, such an item addresses a broad moralistic evaluation. Longer questionnaires of the sort used in laboratory studies include similar topics, but they also tap personal affective issues—personal comfort or discomfort, liking for gay persons, and general emotions associated with the topic of homosexuality. This is apparent in an item such as this: "I think male homosexuality is disgusting" (Herek 1986b). Both sets of data are revealing. Males and females probably hold roughly similar positions on general questions of morality and civil liberties, but males are more homophobic in their emotional reactions to homosexuality.

Several other empirical observations are relevant to a discussion of this gender difference in affective reactions to gay people. First, heterosexuals' negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men are consistently correlated with traditional views of gender and family roles. This pattern undoubtedly is related to widespread stereotypes that gay people violate the demands of such roles; gay men commonly are perceived as effeminate and lesbian women as masculine (Herek 1984). Although such images are not the sole source of hostility toward gay people, they are an important contributing factor for both men and women (Laner and Laner 1979, 1980). Even controlling statistically for gender differences in sex-role attitudes (women tend to hold less traditional views than men do), this variable remains an important predictor of homophobia for heterosexuals, both female and male (Herek 1986b).

Another relevant set of empirical findings concerns the role of defensiveness in homophobia. In psychodynamic terms, defensiveness involves an unconscious distortion of reality as a strategy for avoiding recognition of some unacceptable part of the self. One mode of defense is externalization of unacceptable characteristics through projection and other strategies. This externalizing defensive style, as measured by Gleser and Hillewich's (1969) Defense Mechanisms Inventory (DMI) may affect homophobia in heterosexual males more than in heterosexual females (Herek 1986b).

In a study of the psychological functions served by homophobia (to be discussed in detail later), I observed that attitudes toward gay people served an entirely defensive function for 20 percent of the men ($n = 81$) and 5 percent of the women ($n = 123$). This evaluation was based on content analysis of essays written by respondents to describe their attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Persons classified as holding defensive attitudes toward gay people also showed a general tendency to externalize, as measured by the DMI. Defensive males showed the highest externalization scores of any respondents (Herek 1986a).

It is interesting that persons with defensive attitudes manifest greater conformity to what they perceived as gender-appropriate characteristics. Using a semantic differential technique with adjective pairs pretested for their relevance to gender stereotypes (e.g., hard-soft), respondents rated themselves, "men in general," and "women in general." Difference scores between ratings of self and of men and women provided a measure of self-perceptions. Defensive males perceived greater similarity between themselves and men in general and greater differences between themselves and women in general than did other males. Similarly, defensive females perceived themselves to be more like women and less like men than did other females (Herek 1986a).

This pattern suggests that the defensiveness associated with homophobia is linked to gender issues. Defensive attitudes appear to result from insecurities about personal adequacy in meeting gender-role demands. These insecurities may lead to hyperconformity to perceived standards of gender-appropriate traits (Pleck 1981). Although the sample was not systematically selected, the higher concentration of males in the defensive category suggests that such conflicts may be associated with homophobia more for heterosexual males than for females.

These findings suggest that some males' homophobia is based primarily on anxieties associated with the male role. But it would be a mistake to assume a link between homophobia and the male sex role only for overtly defensive males. Defenses are employed only when more common measures fail. The defensive males I observed probably were not qualitatively different from other homophobic males; they simply were experiencing greater difficulty maintaining a heterosexual masculine identity. Their strategy for reducing the anxiety that ensued was to exaggerate the "normal" level of homophobia associated with the male role.

This analysis points toward a hypothesis that heterosexual men have more negative reactions toward gay people than do women, on the average, because such hostility is inherent in the cultural construction of heterosexual male role and identity; this is less true for heterosexual female role and identity. This process works at a social level, where heterosexual males are pressured by peers and societal standards to conform to certain behavioral patterns, and at a psychological level, where heterosexual males internalize those standards and experience anxiety that they will fail to measure up to their role. The source for this anxiety is fear of losing one's sense of self, or identity, as a heterosexual man (which is equivalent to a male's identity as a person). Conformity to social standards and defense against anxiety push heterosexual men to express homophobic attitudes and pro-

vide rewards in the form of social support and reduced anxiety, both of which increase self-esteem. In other words, heterosexual men reaffirm their male identity by attacking gay men.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HETEROSEXUAL MASCULINITY

Social roles and their attendant psychological identities are not "given" by nature. Variables such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are human creations, based on certain observable phenomena that come to be defined in certain ways through social interaction over time. The social constructionist position holds that what most people call reality is a consensus worldview that develops through social interaction (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Foucault 1978; Gergen 1985; Plummer 1981). In this perspective gender and sexual orientation must be understood within historical, sociological, and social psychological contexts, rather than in exclusively individualistic terms. By highlighting human plasticity, the constructionist view also allows for the possibility of change. What has been constructed can be deconstructed and reconstructed, albeit with considerable effort. Gender and sexual orientation thus should be understood as changeable ideologies rather than as biological facts.

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Being a man is a crucial component of personal identity for males in our society, stemming from the early experience of gender as a self-defining characteristic. Although personal conceptions of masculine identity in contemporary America vary according to race, class, age, and other social variables (Cazenave 1984), there remains a stable common core, which I have called "heterosexual masculinity."

As an identity, heterosexual masculinity is defined both positively and negatively. Heterosexual masculinity embodies personal characteristics such as success and status, toughness and independence, aggressiveness and dominance. These are manifest by adult males through exclusively social relationships with men and primarily sexual relationships with women. Heterosexual masculinity is also defined according to what it is *not*—that is, not feminine and not homosexual. Being a man requires not being compliant, dependent, or submissive; not being effeminate (a "sissey") in physical appearance or mannerisms; not having relationships with men that are sexual or overly intimate; and not falling in sexual relationships with women (Brannon and David 1976; Pleck 1981).

In recent years writers have pointed out the maladaptive aspects of heterosexual masculinity in terms of physical health, personal happiness, and psychological adjustment (Fasteau 1974; Harrison 1978, Jourard 1971; Pleck 1981). Additionally, to the extent that heterosexual masculinity dominates politics and international relations, it may increase the likelihood of interstate warfare and thereby be maladaptive for the entire human species (Fasteau 1974). Although heterosexual masculinity may have been adequate or at least harmless in former times, historical change has rendered it today an outmoded identity seriously in need of transformation. Despite its dysfunctional aspects, it continues to meet some needs for individuals and will remain entrenched until those needs can be met in some other way.

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The historical development of our cultural ideology about sexuality is clearest in what cultural constructionists call the "making of the modern homosexual" (Plummer 1981). Over the last few centuries, the view developed that what a person *does* sexually defines who the person *is*, and negative evaluations were attached to people who did not do what they were supposed to do and who thus were not what they were supposed to be. Not being what one is supposed to be receives many labels, including criminal, wicked, and sick (see Boswell 1980; Katz 1983; Weeks 1977).

To analyze this process requires distinguishing sexual behavior from socioerotic identity. Sexual behavior is any observable action that involves sexual arousal and its continuation or satisfaction. This circular but adequate working definition emphasizes that sexual behavior is something one does. Barring some sort of injury or disability, all human beings can engage in sexual behavior, as can most other animal species. But what makes behavior sexual? What is sexually arousing? Here we can make use of Freud's (1961 [1905]) assumption that humans are born with an amorphous, unformed sexuality—we are polymorphously perverse. Our behavioral repertoire is ambisexual. Over the course of individual development, the principal source of sexual arousal becomes located in the genitals for most people, and they find that they are aroused by a relatively limited range of things in the world—typically by human beings of a particular gender with fairly specific physical and psychological qualities. In other words, people acquire preferences for certain sexual partners, acts, and situations. Obviously, people are attracted to each other for a host of reasons other than gender—for example, physical appearance, intellect,

personality, sense of humor, and religious and political values. But gender is a basic consideration for most people, whether or not it is conscious.

Development of sexual behavioral preferences is common across human cultures and in other species as well. But humans differ from other species (and among cultures) in their personal and social identities based in large part on sexual preferences. In our culture, we summarize those identities with the label *sexual orientation*, defined as a pattern of sexual and affectional preferences for persons of a particular sex. In contemporary American society, those preferences and their associated identities have settled on two categories: heterosexuality and homosexuality.¹

There is an important difference between the words *heterosexual* and *homosexual* when they are used as adjectives, describing sexual behavior of which anyone is capable, and when they are used as nouns, describing identity. As nouns *homosexual* and *heterosexual* are mutually exclusive socioerotic identities. Given this dichotomy, our society clearly approves of one identity and not the other.

The significance of this construction for human experience can better be appreciated by considering alternative forms of sexuality. In many New Guinea societies, for example, becoming a man requires incorporating the semen of other men into one's own body through homosexual acts. Once manhood is achieved, heterosexual behavior is socially prescribed (Herdt 1981, 1982; Williams 1937). In some indigenous American societies, biological males could assume women's occupations and be recognized socially as women; some men in this "berdache" role married (biological and social) males. In some tribes, a comparable role was available to biological females (Blackwood 1984; Whitehead 1981). To the extent that the concept of "sexual orientation" can be applied to such societies, it must be modified considerably.

Such cross-cultural comparisons show us that our notions of heterosexuals and homosexuals are part of a particular historically derived knowledge system. As socioerotic identities, homosexuality and heterosexuality have been created within our culture, starting from the raw material of humans' inherent ambisexuality and inevitable development of erotic and affectional preferences.

This is not to minimize the reality of homosexual or heterosexual identities or to claim that they are simply figments of our imagination that can be easily dismissed. Culturally constructed identities are not easily changed. But it is important to realize that "heterosexuals" and "homosexuals" do not exist in nature; they are constructs, ways of giving meaning to particular patterns of sexual behavior and interpersonal relationships.

Understanding the roots of institutional homophobia requires learning how our cultural sense of erotic reality developed historically—how we came to be a society of heterosexuals and homosexuals, rather than people whose sexual behavior is shaped by other influences. This historical process of defining socioerotic identities must have been very closely tied to seeing one identity as natural and preferable and seeing the other as unnatural, criminal, wicked, or sick (see Chauncey 1983; D'Emilio 1983; Katz 1983; Plummer 1981; Weeks 1977).

Through intense political struggle, lesbians and gay men have made considerable progress in shifting the realm of discourse on sexual orientation from medicine to civil liberties (e.g., see Altman 1982; D'Emilio 1983). In many cities, being a homosexual person today is more like belonging to an ethnic minority than like sharing a psychiatric diagnosis with other deviants. Being heterosexual undoubtedly has changed as well in that it has become a more salient identity. Members of dominant groups typically think of themselves not as elites but as "normal"—for example, White men think of themselves as "people" until confronted by Blacks or women (Miller 1976). As more lesbians and gay men publicly assert their identities, sexual normalcy begins to include both homo- and heteroticism, and more people in the dominant majority must consciously label themselves as heterosexual rather than taking it for granted.

Thus, although past American notions of masculinity have implicitly included the component of heterosexuality, that component is now more salient and often must be explicitly avowed as part of one's identity. Pressures to define (rather than assume) one's status as a heterosexual man are likely to intensify in the near future for at least two reasons. First, the epidemic of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is likely to lead to more overt discrimination against gay men than has been evident in the recent past. Single males, in particular, are now being confronted with publicly labeling themselves as heterosexual to avoid such stigma. Second, it appears that the mainstream American conception of masculinity is currently changing in some respects, with some men adopting superficially more flexible behavior patterns. This may be a continuation of the social shift from traditional to modern male roles (Pleck 1981), or it may reflect a new shift to a "postmodern" definition of masculinity. In either case, recent changes in the "masculine" component of heterosexual masculinity seem to be offset by fortification of the heterosexual component. Thus, the man who is "secure" in his masculinity (heterosexuality) can be gentle and can eat quiche.

These cultural and historical patterns provide an appropriate context

for understanding heterosexual masculinity. They uncover its roots in social organization of interpersonal relations rather than in biological predispositions to be either heterosexual or masculine. Males in our society grow up in this context, and their identity develops through involvement with family, neighborhood, school, and society. I shall discuss this social psychological level, where cultural ideologies become a part of personal identity, in the next section.

THE PERSONAL CONSTRUCTION OF HETEROSEXUAL MASCULINITY

Personal identity (self-concept) involves what we are not at least as much as what we are (McGuire 1984). Boys may learn to be men primarily through learning not to be women, while girls can learn directly how to be women through observing readily available female role models (Lynn 1969). The negative definition of heterosexual masculinity is at least as important as its positive definition. Homophobia is thus an integral component of heterosexual masculinity, to the extent that it serves the psychological function of expressing who one is not (i.e., homosexual) and thereby affirming who one is (heterosexual). Further, homophobia reduces the likelihood that heterosexual men will interact with gay men, thereby ruling out opportunities for the attitude change that often occurs through such contact (Schneider and Lewis 1984). When such interactions occur, accidentally, heterosexual masculinity prevents individuation of the participating gay man; instead, he is treated primarily as a symbol. These assertions can be clarified best by explaining the psychological functions served by homophobia.

HETEROSEXUAL MASCULINITY AND THE FUNCTIONS OF HOMOPHOBIA

Our sense of self is established through social interaction (Mead 1934). Expressing our opinions, beliefs, values, and attitudes toward others plays a major role in constructing our personal identities. This view derives from a particular perspective on attitudes, the functional approach, which proposes that people hold their opinions because they get some psychological benefit from doing so. In other words, attitudes and opinions serve psychological functions (Katz 1960; Smith, Bruner, and White 1956; Herek 1986c).

There are two major categories of such functions. One includes attitudes that derive their benefit directly from characteristics of the attitude

object; these include heterosexual males attitudes based on utilitarian considerations of whether gay men have been (or are likely to be) a source of reward or punishment. Such considerations can be based on past interactions with individual gay men, as well as benefit or detriment from gay men as a group (e.g., a merchant who has many gay customers, a renter who must move because gentrification by gay speculators has inflated rents in his neighborhood).

A second category includes attitudes whose function is not directly related to perceived characteristics of gay men but instead results primarily through the attitude's expression. By expressing the attitude, individuals affirm their sense of self in relation to others and increase self-esteem. It is when homophobia serves an expressive function of this kind that it is integrally related to heterosexual masculinity in at least three specific ways. First, homophobia may serve a defensive-expressive function, a way of preventing anxiety that results from intrapsychic conflicts concerning one's own heterosexual masculinity. Gay men symbolize parts of the self that do not measure up to cultural standards; directing hostility at them is a way of externalizing the conflict. This is the function most likely served by homophobia for the defensive males described earlier. Second, homophobia may serve a social-expressive function. In this case, a heterosexual man expresses prejudice against gay men in order to win approval from important others and thereby increase self-esteem. Third, homophobia may serve a value-expressive function. A heterosexual man may express homophobia as part of a larger ideology that is self-defining—for example, a conservative religious ideology that prescribes strict behavioral guidelines for men and women in all facets of life.

For each of these expressive functions, homophobia helps to define what one is not and direct hostility toward that symbol. With the defensive-expressive function, homophobia serves to deny one's own homoerotic attractions and "feminine" characteristics; with the social-expressive function, it defines group boundaries (with gay men on the outside and the self on the inside); for the value-expressive function, it defines the world according to principles of good and bad, right and wrong (with oneself as good and gay men as bad).

To the extent that homophobia serves an expressive function, it is self-perpetuating. Under normal circumstances, homophobic men will not give up their prejudice as long as it continues to be functional. And their prejudice makes it unlikely that they will interact personally with gay men; rather, friendly interaction with gay men is likely to increase anxiety, incur the disapproval of friends, and call into question one's virtue. There is

hope, however, for reducing homophobia and for challenging the ideology of heterosexual masculinity.

THE WAY OUT: CHANGING ATTITUDES AND IDENTITIES

Given that heterosexual masculinity and homophobia exist at both societal and individual levels, change must also come at both levels. This means changing institutions (the organization of family, work, child care, marriage), as well as people. Here, I will briefly address the latter.

The functional approach suggests some strategies for changing attitudes, all based on the assumption that we must render the current attitude dysfunctional in some way while providing benefit from the target attitude. With direct functions, this usually involves arranging pleasant interactions with the attitude target (that is, gay men). With expressive attitudes, however, this is not a simple task for reasons already mentioned. Additional steps must be taken with each of the expressive functions.

With social-expressive functions, new norms must be created. One strategy is to solicit personal statements from significant role models of heterosexual masculinity that their own attitudes toward gay men are not hostile. Another approach is to provide direct social support for men whose homophobia is being challenged; this might be most effectively achieved in the context of a therapeutic or men's group. Attracting value-expressive attitudes does not necessarily require dismantling an entire value system. Instead, it can involve making competing values salient. For example, values of justice and fair play may be raised, or values of open-mindedness or charity toward one's neighbor.

Defensive-expressive attitudes probably are the most difficult to challenge because, like any defense mechanism, they work at an unconscious level. Any attempt to make them conscious (which threatens to make conscious the repressed anxiety) is likely to be met by great resistance. To some extent, this can be used favorably by "short-circuiting" the prejudice through arousal of insight. Simply convincing a man that excessive hostility toward gay men is a sign of latent homosexuality may at least lead that man to avoid expressing his hostility. Unfortunately, it will not resolve the conflict underlying the prejudice and may, in fact, exacerbate it. One strategy might be attempting to change attitudes incrementally, starting with attitudes toward lesbians, who may be less anxiety-arousing.

My suggestions to this point have focused on changing attitudes toward gay men without changing the identity of heterosexual masculinity that underlies them. A long-term strategy for eradicating homophobia, how-

ever, must focus on heterosexual masculinity. Although a detailed consideration of how to change contemporary male roles is beyond the scope of this article, two promising avenues of inquiry deserve mention.

First, it will be useful to explore systematically how gay men deal with their own internalized homophobia in the process of coming out. As males in this culture, gay men are taught the ideal of heterosexual masculinity. When they acknowledge their own sexual preferences to themselves, however, they must discard this ideology in order to maintain their self-esteem. Although gay men often adhere to many components of the male sex role, their understanding of masculinity must somehow change in the course of accepting their homoeroticism. Research on this topic may provide insight for changing heterosexual males as well (see Nungesser 1983).

Second, this perspective will lead to a functional analysis of heterosexual masculinity. Gay men usually renounce their internalized homophobia only when its costs outweigh its benefits. Similarly, individuals will renounce heterosexual masculinity only when it becomes clearly dysfunctional to them. Although the male sex role is hazardous to the health of those who adhere to it (Harrison 1978), it also meets some basic psychological needs in much the same way that homophobic attitudes do. Approximating the ideal of heterosexual masculinity can help one's career, attract friends and admirers, increase self-esteem, and give one a sense of doing one's duty as a man. Of course, the career also may be damaging to one's physical and psychological health, the friendships may lack intimacy, the self-esteem may be based on a general inability for critical introspection and emotional expression, and doing one's duty may preclude pursuing one's own goals. Until men become aware of these costs, change is unlikely. They will become what Pleck calls "martyrs for the male role" (personal communication). And through the homophobia inherent in heterosexual masculinity, they will take many gay men and lesbians with them.

Even realizing how dysfunctional the male role can be does not make change inevitable. Men cannot change without clear alternative ways of living. Formulating such alternatives must constitute an agenda for all who hope to improve our society—gay, lesbian, and heterosexual.

NOTE

1. Although the category of bisexuality exists, its status as a true identity is suspect; regardless of its accuracy, most people seem to hold the view that one is either heterosexual or homosexual (Klein and Wolf 1985; Ruitenbeck 1973).

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V Cultural Diversity Among Lesbians and Gay Men

To understand fully the experiences of lesbians and gay men, we must examine the interaction between cultural diversity and sexual orientation. Prior to acquiring a gay or lesbian identity, one has a racial or ethnic identity, which is part of the core of childhood identity. Moreover, racial and ethnic groups experience prejudice and discrimination based on their minority group status, which may place constraints on various life options. Gay men and lesbians of color are "polycultural and multiply oppressed" (Browning, Reynolds, and Dworkin 1991:181).

Recent attention has focused on cultural diversity among gay male and lesbian individuals and the important role of culture in shaping and defining the meaning of same-gender sexual and affectional behavior. Cultural values evolve over generations and are moderated by the influences of interacting cultures. Gay male and lesbian status has different meanings in various cultures (Blackwood 1985). The experiences of gay men and lesbians of color often do not parallel Anglo experience. Shared sexual orientations by themselves do not guarantee that people have a great deal in common. Thus, there is a need for a model of sexual orientation based on multiplicity, not sameness, that examines the overlapping identities and statuses of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality (Cohen 1991).