

Homophobia linked to lack of awareness of one's sexual orientation and authoritarian parenting, study shows

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Homophobia is more pronounced in individuals with an unacknowledged attraction to the same sex and who grew up with authoritarian parents who forbade such desires, a series of psychology studies demonstrates. The study is the first to document the role that both parenting and sexual orientation play in the formation of intense and visceral fear of homosexuals, including self-reported homophobic attitudes, discriminatory bias, implicit hostility towards gays, and endorsement of anti-gay policies. Conducted by a team from the University of Rochester, the University of Essex, England, and the University of California in Santa Barbara, the research will be published the April issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"Individuals who identify as straight but in psychological tests show a strong attraction to the same sex may be threatened by gays and lesbians because homosexuals remind them of similar tendencies within themselves," explains Netta Weinstein, a lecturer at the University of Essex and the study's lead author.

"In many cases these are people who are at war with themselves and they are turning this internal conflict outward," adds co-author Richard Ryan, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester who helped direct the research.

The paper includes four separate experiments, conducted in the United

States and Germany, with each study involving an average of 160 college students. The findings provide new empirical evidence to support the psychoanalytic theory that the fear, anxiety, and aversion that some seemingly heterosexual people hold toward gays and lesbians can grow out of their own repressed same-sex desires, Ryan says. The results also support the more modern self-determination theory, developed by Ryan and Edward Deci at the University of Rochester, which links controlling parenting to poorer self-acceptance and difficulty valuing oneself unconditionally.

The findings may help to explain the personal dynamics behind some bullying and hate crimes directed at gays and lesbians, the authors argue. Media coverage of gay-related hate crimes suggests that attackers often perceive some level of threat from homosexuals. People in denial about their [sexual orientation](#) may lash out because gay targets threaten and bring this internal conflict to the forefront, the authors write.

The research also sheds light on high profile cases in which anti-gay public figures are caught engaging in same-sex sexual acts. The authors cite such examples as Ted Haggard, the evangelical preacher who opposed gay marriage but was exposed in a gay sex scandal in 2006, and Glenn Murphy, Jr., former chairman of the Young Republican National Federation and vocal opponent of gay marriage, who was accused of sexually assaulting a 22-year-old man in 2007, as potentially reflecting this dynamic.

"We laugh at or make fun of such blatant hypocrisy, but in a real way, these people may often themselves be victims of repression and experience exaggerated feelings of threat," says Ryan. "Homophobia is not a laughing matter. It can sometimes have tragic consequences," Ryan says, pointing to cases such as the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard or the 2011 shooting of Larry King.

To explore participants' explicit and implicit sexual attraction, the researchers measured the discrepancies between what people say about their sexual orientation and how they react during a split-second timed task. Students were shown words and pictures on a computer screen and asked to put these in "gay" or "straight" categories. Before each of the 50 trials, participants were subliminally primed with either the word "me" or "others" flashed on the screen for 35 milliseconds. They were then shown the words "gay," "straight," "homosexual," and "heterosexual" as well as pictures of straight and gay couples, and the computer tracked precisely their response times. A faster association of "me" with "gay" and a slower association of "me" with "straight" indicated an implicit gay orientation.

A second experiment, in which subjects were free to browse same-sex or opposite-sex photos, provided an additional measure of implicit sexual attraction.

Through a series of questionnaires, participants also reported on the type of parenting they experienced growing up, from authoritarian to democratic. Students were asked to agree or disagree with statements like: "I felt controlled and pressured in certain ways," and "I felt free to be who I am." For gauging the level of homophobia in a household, subjects responded to items like: "It would be upsetting for my mom to find out she was alone with a lesbian" or "My dad avoids gay men whenever possible."

Finally, the researcher measured participants' level of [homophobia](#) – both overt, as expressed in questionnaires on social policy and beliefs, and implicit, as revealed in word-completion tasks. In the latter, students wrote down the first three words that came to mind, for example for the prompt "k i _ _". The study tracked the increase in the amount of aggressive words elicited after subliminally priming subjects with the word "gay" for 35 milliseconds.

Across all the studies, participants with supportive and accepting parents were more in touch with their implicit sexual orientation, while participants from authoritarian homes revealed the most discrepancy between explicit and implicit attraction.

"In a predominately heterosexual society, 'know thyself' can be a challenge for many gay individuals. But in controlling and homophobic homes, embracing a minority sexual orientation can be terrifying," explains Weinstein. These individuals risk losing the love and approval of their parents if they admit to same sex attractions, so many people deny or repress that part of themselves, she said.

In addition, participants who reported themselves to be more heterosexual than their performance on the reaction time task indicated were most likely to react with hostility to gay others, the studies showed. That incongruence between implicit and explicit measures of sexual orientation predicted a variety of homophobic behaviors, including self-reported anti-gay attitudes, implicit hostility towards gays, endorsement of anti-gay policies, and discriminatory bias such as the assignment of harsher punishments for homosexuals, the authors conclude.

"This study shows that if you are feeling that kind of visceral reaction to an out-group, ask yourself, 'Why?'" says Ryan. "Those intense emotions should serve as a call to self-reflection."

The study had several limitations, the authors write. All participants were college students, so it may be helpful in future research to test these effects in younger adolescents still living at home and in older adults who have had more time to establish lives independent of their parents and to look at attitudes as they change over time.

Provided by University of Rochester

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