Beyond “Homophobia”: Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: George Weinberg’s introduction of the term homophobia in the late 1960s challenged traditional thinking about homosexuality and helped focus society’s attention on the problem of antigay prejudice and stigma. This paper briefly describes the history and impact of homophobia. The term’s limitations are discussed, including its underlying assumption that antigay prejudice is based mainly on fear and its inability to account for historical changes in how society regards homosexuality and heterosexuality as the bases for social identities. Although the importance of Weinberg’s contribution should not be underestimated, a new vocabulary is needed to advance scholarship in this area. Toward this end, three constructs are defined and discussed: sexual stigma (the shared knowledge of society’s negative regard for any nonheterosexual behavior, identity, relationship, or community), heterosexism (the cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma), and sexual prejudice (individuals’ negative attitudes based on sexual orientation). The concept of internalized homophobia is briefly considered.

Key words: antigay prejudice; heterosexism; heteronormativity; homosexuality; George Weinberg
decades earlier (Adam, 1987). But critiques by homophile activists had not yet achieved widespread currency when Weinberg published his 1972 book. Weinberg gave a name to the hostility and helped popularize the belief that it constituted a social problem worthy of scholarly analysis and intervention. His term became an important tool for gay and lesbian activists, advocates, and their allies.

The present article is at once an homage to George Weinberg for his role in shaping how American society thinks about sexual orientation, and an argument for the importance of moving beyond homophobia to a new conceptualization of antigay hostility. Although homophobia’s invention and eventual integration into common speech marked a watershed in American society’s conceptualization of sexuality, both the word and the construct it signifies have significant limitations. Some of them, such as the term’s implicit theoretical assumptions, have been remarked upon frequently. Less often noted are the changes in conceptions of homosexuality and hostility toward those who manifest it that have occurred in the decades since homophobia was first coined. Before considering these limitations, it is appropriate to discuss how homophobia first developed.

Looking Back: The Invention of “Homophobia”

Contemporary scholars and activists have used homophobia to refer to sexual attitudes dating back as far as ancient Greece (e.g., Fone, 2000). As noted above, however, the term itself is of more recent vintage. George Weinberg coined homophobia several years before publication of his 1972 book. A heterosexual psychologist trained in psychoanalytic techniques at Columbia University, he was taught to regard homosexuality as a pathology. Homosexual patients’ problems—whether associated with relationships, work, or any other aspect of their lives—were understood as ultimately stemming from their sexual orientation. Having personally known several gay people, however, Weinberg believed this assumption to be fundamentally wrong. By the mid-1960s, he was an active supporter of New York’s fledgling gay movement.

It was in September of 1965, while preparing an invited speech for the East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO) banquet, that Weinberg hit upon the idea that would develop into homophobia. In an interview, he told me he was reflecting on the fact that many heterosexual psychoanalysts evinced strongly negative personal reactions to being around a homosexual in a nonclinical setting. It occurred to him that these reactions could be described as a phobia:

“I coined the word homophobia to mean it was a phobia about homosexuals….It was a fear of homosexuals which seemed to be associated with a fear of contagion, a fear of reducing the things one fought for—home and family. It was a religious fear and it had led to great brutality as fear always does.”

Weinberg eventually discussed his idea with his friends Jack Nichols and Lige Clarke, gay activists who would be the first to use homophobia in an English-language publication. They wrote a weekly column on gay topics in Screw magazine, a raunchy tabloid otherwise oriented to heterosexual men. In their May 23, 1969, column—to which Screw’s publisher, Al Goldstein, attached the headline “He-Man Horse Shit”—Nichols and Clarke used homophobia to refer to heterosexuals’ fears that others might think they are homosexual. Such fear, they wrote, limited men’s experiences by declaring off limits such “sissified” things as poetry, art, movement, and touching. Although that was the first printed occurrence of homophobia, Nichols told me emphatically that George

2. Additional biographical information about George Weinberg is available in his foreword to Nichols (1996) and in Nichols (2002).

3. Personal interview by the author with George Weinberg, October 30, 1998. Weinberg told me that he coined the term homophobia some time after his ECHO speech but was not certain exactly when; he guessed that it was in 1966 or 1967. Nichols (2000) states that Weinberg began using homophobia in 1967.