BEHAVIOR & SOCIETY

Homophobes Might Be Hidden Homosexuals

A new analysis of implicit bias and explicit sexual orientation statements may help to explain the underpinnings of anti-gay bullying and hate crimes

By Jeanna Bryner, LiveScience on April 10, 2012

Homophobes should consider a little self-reflection, suggests a new study finding those individuals who are most hostile toward gays and hold strong anti-gay views may themselves have same-sex desires, albeit undercover ones.

The prejudice of homophobia may also stem from authoritarian parents, particularly those with homophobic views as well, the researchers added.

"This study shows that if you are feeling that kind of visceral reaction to an out-group, ask yourself, 'Why?'" co-author Richard Ryan, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, said in a statement. "Those intense emotions should serve as a call to self-reflection."

The research, published in the April 2012 issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, reveals the nuances of prejudices like homophobia, which can ultimately have dire consequences. [The 10 Most Destructive Human Behaviors]

"Sometimes people are threatened by gays and lesbians because they are fearing their own impulses, in a sense they 'doth protest too much,'" Ryan told LiveScience. "In addition, it appears that sometimes those who would oppress others have been oppressed themselves, and we can have some compassion for them too, they may be unaccepting of others because they cannot be accepting of themselves."

Ryan cautioned, however, that this link is only one source of anti-gay sentiments.

Hidden homosexuality
In four studies, the researchers looked at the discrepancies between what people say about their sexual orientation and their implicit sexual orientation based on a reaction-time test. The studies involved college students from Germany and the United States.

For the implicit measure, students had to categorize words and pictures flashed onto a computer screen into "gay" or "straight" groups. Words included "gay," "straight," "homosexual" and "heterosexual," while the pictures showed straight and gay couples. Before each trial, participants were primed with the word "me" or "others" flashed momentarily onto a computer screen. The researchers said quicker reaction time for "me" and "gay," and a slower association of "me" with "straight" would indicate said an implicit gay orientation. [Why Gay Parents May Be the Best Parents]

In another experiment, the researchers measured implicit sexual orientation by having participants choose to browse same-sex or opposite-sex photos on a computer screen.

Questionnaires also teased out the parenting style the participants were exposed to, with students asked how much they agreed or disagreed with statements such as: "I felt controlled and pressured in certain ways;" and "I felt free to be who I am." To gauge homophobia in a household, students responded to items such as, "It would be upsetting for my mom to find out she was alone with a lesbian" or "My dad avoids gay men whenever possible."

Participants indicated their own level of homophobia, both overt and implicit; in word-completion tasks, students wrote down the first three words that came to mind when prompted with some of the words' letters. Students were primed at some point with the word "gay" to see how that impacted the amount of aggressive words used.

Controlling parents
In all of the studies, participants who reported supportive and accepting parents were more in touch with their implicit sexual orientation, meaning it tended to jibe with their outward sexual orientation. Students who indicated they came from authoritarian homes showed the biggest discrepancy between the two measures of sexual orientation.

"In a predominately heterosexual society, 'know thyself' can be a challenge for many gay individuals," lead author Netta Weinstein, a lecturer at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom,said in a statement. "But in controlling and homophobic homes, embracing a minority sexual orientation can be terrifying." [5 Ways to Foster Self-Compassion in Your Child]

Those participants who reported their heterosexuality despite having hidden same-sex desires were also the most likely to show hostility toward gay individuals, including self-reported anti-gay attitudes, endorsement of anti-gay policies and discrimination such as supporting harsher punishments for homosexuals.

The research may help to explain the underpinnings of anti-gay bullying and hate crimes, the researchers note. People in denial about their own sexual orientation, perhaps a denial fostered by authoritarian and homophobic parents, may feel a threat from other gay and lesbian individuals. Lashing out may ultimately be an indicator of the person's own internal conflict with sexual orientation.

This inner conflict can be seen in some high-profile cases in which anti-gay public figures are caught engaging in same-sex acts, the researchers say. For instance, evangelical preacher and anti-gay-marriage advocate Ted Haggard was caught in a gay sex scandal in 2006. And in 2010, prominent anti-gay activist and co-founder of conservative Family Research Council George Rekers was reportedly spotted in 2010 with a male escort rented from Rentboy.com. According to news reports, the escort confirmed Rekers is gay.

"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," Ryan said. "Homophobia is not a laughing matter. It can sometimes have tragic consequences," as was the case in the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay man.