

REFLECTIONS ON HOMOPHOBIA, MY SISTER'S WEDDING, AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This narrative tells the story of my reaction, being a lesbian, a social worker, a social work educator, and a homophobia educator and activist, to the wedding of my sister. We are not free from bias just because we ourselves belong to an oppressed group. I use the wedding as a backdrop to explore the impact of my homophobia on my teaching. Through these experiences and the writing of this narrative, my belief about the importance of self awareness for effective and responsible social work practice is reinforced. I feel joy, inspiration, and excitement at the opportunity to teach about self awareness and to travel this journey with my students.

By Stacey Peyer

Stacey Peyer, MSW, LCSW is Field Consultant, California Social Work Education Center at CA State University, Long Beach CA

A recurrent theme at a recent meeting of field instructors was the importance of self awareness. One of the field educators told a story about a first year M.S.W. cross cultural practice course he'd just finished teaching. He had begun the class by saying that he was racist, sexist, and homophobic. His new and expectedly naive students grew wide-eyed, and one had the chutzpa to raise her hand and ask, "Isn't that bad?"

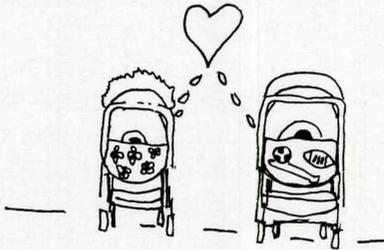
This story reminded me of a student I field instructed who was quite surprised when he heard me, an open lesbian, acknowledge my own homophobia. "You're homophobic?" he queried. Both incidents provoked discussions of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia, and the ways we all internalize the "ism's." I was also reminded of an experiential workshop entitled "Homophobia: Removing Barriers to Practice" that I developed years ago with my colleague, Bill Pederson and which we presented at numerous agencies and conferences.*

During one particular presentation, after I had offered an example about monogamy, a

participant confronted me saying that I had communicated certain biases about monogamy. Taken aback, I realized that her observation held some truth. Acknowledging this, I said that in presenting this workshop I was by no means proposing that any of us could be bias free. The key is that it is always a struggle to know ourselves better and to become more conscious in our professional and our personal lives so that we can work toward not letting our biases impede our ability to live and work by the tenet of self-determination. And, as my colleague acknowledged to his wide-eyed and somewhat confused first year M.S.W. students, we must strive every day to be less racist, homophobic, sexist, and ageist. I have realized through writing this narrative, that while the word "homophobia" and its meanings are clear to me, some readers may be confused or unclear about my use of the term. Many people think that homophobia refers to negative feelings and/or beliefs held by non-gay people about gay people and/or about homo-

sexuality in general. I have occasionally been asked why I use "homophobia" to describe feelings I have about my lack of equal rights and the lack of institutional recognition for my relationship. Are my feelings not simply an understandable reaction to such deprivation and discrimination? Why do I label my sadness/anxiety/anger/envy as my own homophobia, as opposed to a reaction to a homophobic society?

The answer? I have lived in a world where I receive daily messages, through books, through media, and even through the mouths of treasured family and friends, that the world expects and



wants me to be heterosexual. These messages begin in infancy when colors first define expectations of girls and boys, and mothers in playgrounds play matchmaker with their toddlers. These images and expectations bombard us. As we grow aware of our attraction for the same gender, we struggle with feelings of shame, isolation, and self-loathing. Some of us die in this process, literally and/or figuratively. Others work through it as we mature and our experiences broaden. We learn that we are not alone and we discover a rich history that was previously denied us. We learn to undo the negative teachings of family, school, and religion, and to rejoice in the power, pride, and progress of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. And of ourselves.

Gay and lesbian persons often cannot and/or do not differentiate between their own internal self-loathing and the reactions of society. This is why I refer to my homophobia. When I go to a baby shower for a heterosexual friend, I often

experience myriad feelings: pain, anger, sadness, envy. While my reaction is understandable, it also reflects an internalized sense of shame and wrongdoing, a feeling of being "less than." In situations such as this, the old questions resurface: "Wasn't I supposed to be straight? Why am I not? Have I hurt my mother by not fulfilling her heterosexual expectations?" This is my internalized homophobia.

I have always considered myself to have gone through the process of "coming out" relatively unscathed and have emerged strong, proud, and comfortable in my identity as a lesbian. I came out in a very conservative juvenile justice agency and have done a great deal of community service in the gay arena, including presenting my homophobia workshop innumerable times. I have been on radio and television shows talking about homophobia and homosexuality, and have participated (with my most-loved mom) in a number of video projects, speaking about coming out to family, being a gay adolescent, etc. I am known to many as a homophobia educator or, affectionately, the "Queen of Homophobia." A colleague recently said that she thinks that I am probably the most comfortably open gay person that she has ever known. I liked that. But lately, that status has been challenged.

My only sibling, my older sister, is going to be married. She is 39 and has never before come close to marriage. This has not been an issue for her but my family was hoping she'd eventually tie the knot. I think I secretly wished she'd remain single. Of course, I wanted her to love and be loved, but not married. Why not? Because I can't marry. It's a continuation of childhood sibling rivalry. I've always struggled with feeling that she was more this or more that and better at this or better at that. I think I felt that by having a long-term relationship (nearly 12 years now), which we acknowledged in a Jewish (though not legal) ceremony in the presence of our family and friends, that I had accomplished something that she had not. And now that is being challenged. Not only will she have the ceremony, but it will be all of the things that



mine wasn't and never could be.

My sister is pretty non-traditional. (She's included photos of her precious Border Collies, Pepper and Primus, in her wedding invitation). I was thrilled when she planned to wear a tux to her wedding. This was fitting, as she wears man-tailored suits and ties when she needs to "dress."



That she would not be wearing a wedding dress gave me some sense of relief. My mom and others had mixed feelings about the tuxedo. "It's your wedding, but I'd really like you to wear a dress." My sister held out, claiming that she couldn't

imagine finding a wedding dress that would feel right. I was happy. Then she agreed that since it meant so much to my mom, she'd look for a dress and see if anything would suit her. And, she did. at the wedding show in Seattle. "The wedding show?" I shrieked. I was horrified. My sister was doing the hetero thing all the way.

What does this have to do with me and with social work education and/or myself as an educator? My homophobia was triggered by my sister doing something that I can't ever do. Giving my mother and grandmother something that I can never give. And whether I'd actually want to do it is irrelevant. Emotions can simply belie all logic. My sister's marriage has forced me to acknowledge that the world is a different place for me than it is for her. And it won't matter if gay marriage is legalized in Hawaii. It still won't be the same. My wedding would never generate the all-encompassing planning and excitement of friends and family all over the country. My dad, I'm sure, is telling casual acquaintances and business contacts that his first-born is to be married. Yet his closest friends and colleagues don't know that Sharon and I have spent the past 12 years of our lives together.



Accepting these feelings is difficult. It just doesn't fit my image of myself as a homophobia educator, an activist, a proud, vocal lesbian, a woman, a social worker, a Jew, a just plain proud-

to-be-me sort of person. And yet it persists. I can't wish it away. I could trade the discomfort for denial. But I won't. I've worked too hard (and spent too much money) to acknowledge and accept my feelings. I am lucky that those closest to me understand. I am able to talk about it with my mother, my sister, and my grandmother, too. These three women are all secure and smart enough to know that this is about me and the world in which we live and has nothing to do with my not wanting them to be happy and joyous. I have been able to ask my mother whether she did feel deprived by not seeing her "baby girl" walk down the traditional aisle in the traditional white dress. The answer is not important. What is important is that I have been able and willing to face these issues in the mirror.

As I consider my response to the wedding and write this narrative, I've wondered about the impact of my homophobia on my teaching. I am on the field faculty in the Department of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. Our social work students are required to participate in a mandatory seminar concurrent with fieldwork. I teach at least one and sometimes two sections of graduate seminar each year. The seminar is a place for students to learn about group process by being part of a group, to integrate field and classroom learning, to explore ethical issues as they arise in their practice, to provide support to each other, and to increase their self-awareness and nurture the development of a professional self. Part of the role of seminar instructor is to serve as the field liaison, visiting students in their agencies at least twice per year. As a member of the field faculty, I match students and field placements, develop new agency placements, and train new field instructors; and I work in the Department's child welfare training program. Additionally, I am the Faculty Advisor to the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Student Caucus in the Department. Prior to coming to the university, I worked in a residential treatment facility with delinquent adolescents. In that setting, I also served as a field instructor.

As I reflect on my work experiences, I can see many ways in which my teaching has been im-pacted by my homophobia. At times, the impact has been negative. I remember when I first

began to field instruct. Employed at the agency just over two years, and struggling with whether and how to be openly gay at work, I was aware that most of the boys in my cottage knew (or suspected) that I was a lesbian and this made me uncomfortable. How did they know? What "clues" had I inadvertently given? Examining my mannerisms and mode of dress, I wondered what I was doing "wrong" that allowed others to guess that I was gay. Soon I realized that the boys knew I was gay simply because it was true. That they knew was not an indication that I was doing anything "wrong." Conversations about this aspect of my life undoubtedly were occurring on the baseball field and at school, and even between my team of line staff and the boys. Seemingly, I was the only one not talking. This presented a dilemma and I agonized over how to respond. I knew that the kids focused on me to avoid their own work, and also because of their age-appropriate interest in anything connected to sexuality. I grappled with their need to know, with my belief in productive honesty in relationships, and with "rules" regarding self-disclosure. I was searching for my point of view and style about self disclosure and genuineness in the treatment relationship. Was my silence replicating unhealthy communication styles of the kid's families? As a field instructor, I was role modeling a professional self. My homophobia blocked me from doing my best. I knew that it was a serious countertransference issue. Yet I felt immobilized.

Perhaps a cogent example of this occurred when one boy received a write-up from school for saying out loud in class that his social worker was a "dyke." I knew I must discuss it with him as I would any other write-up. I was frozen with fear about what it might mean to enter such a conversation with him. So I did not. And my student sensed my dread. I wondered if the teacher had written the child up for using the derogatory word "dyke," or if it would have been the same if the child had said, "My social worker is a Lesbian." This was very significant, because in this conservative, often homophobic facility, it would not be out of the ordinary for a teacher or another staff member to consider "Lesbian" an inappropriate and insulting thing to say. I knew

that I had to meet with the teacher to determine if there had been any misconduct on the child's part. Perhaps my perceived lesbianism was a treatment issue for this boy. What was the context of his comment? How would he feel if his perception were accurate? Maybe he was dealing with some sexual identity issues of his own or trying to understand a gay family member. I will never know. I was too fearful to open a dialogue. My homophobia won that round and my performance as a social worker and a teacher was compromised.

A few years later, again in the presence of a social work intern, a teenage boy who had been a resident for about eight months asked me at the end of our daily group session if I were gay. I felt extremely anxious. Yet I had been preparing for this question since the day I began the job five years earlier. I had struggled with my countertransference, processed and processed until I could process no more. And so, I was able to respond in the way that I believed best for my clients. I knew that this was a "doorknob" question, the kind a client might ask as he or she leaves a session, often indicative of some anxiety and/or ambivalence. And I knew that it demanded more time and attention than I could give it in the 30 seconds before the kids had to eat lunch. I told the group that we did not have time to address the question, but that we could come back to it the next day.

I have talked about this situation with many colleagues (heterosexual and gay/lesbian) over the years. Many acknowledged discomfort at leaving the group without answering the question. They believed that the kids would have probably assumed that the worker was gay; otherwise, he/she would have said "No, I'm not." Some colleagues confessed that they might not have been able to handle the anxiety and would give a quick answer based on their countertransference, although they agreed that it was in the kids' best interests to delay it, as I had. It's not that I was comfortable waiting until the next day. I was able to deal with my anxiety and respond to the kids based on what I believed was best for them. My intern and I discussed the group interaction at length that day, and explored the many issues and decisions.

I began group the next day by reminding the boys of the question I had been asked. I explained why I had not answered immediately, and told them I was a lesbian. Suffice it to say that the boys had many feelings and questions and continued to raise related issues in the group for weeks to come. The boys whose mothers were lesbians were able to begin to address some concerns that they had previously felt unable to discuss.

The boy who raised the question in group had given me a gift. It was a "teachable moment" for all. It gave me an opportunity to relieve any remaining sense of failure and guilt about the situation, years earlier with the write-up from school. My personal and professional growth were evident to me. This gave me peace. And pride.

When I was hired at CSULB in the Fall of 1994, I was aware that those who interviewed me knew that I was a lesbian because of personal connections, my workshops, and other professional activities. Soon after my arrival we developed a way to integrate my workshop into the curriculum. Anyone who did not initially know I was a lesbian learned this quickly. Since I was doing the workshops and advising the caucus. I was "out there." No reason to experience any of that nasty internalized homophobia, right? Wrong. Dead wrong. This surprised me, the Queen of Homophobia. Just this morning when I informed my seminar class that we'd be joining another class next week and I would be presenting the workshop, I felt a familiar twisting in my gut. The class showed no signs of negativity, but I know from experience that many different feelings are provoked by the subject and that some remain unexpressed.

Weeks before, at a field seminar, a female student said that all of the women in the class had checked the posted lists to determine which "guys" would be in the class. Inside, I felt that twist again. Did she know that every woman in the class was heterosexual and was truly concerned with the question of male classmates? Maybe, maybe not. It's not important. . What is important is that I reacted internally to that-all too-familiar assumption of heterosexuality that I hear in my world everyday. On television, a talk

show host asks a 12-year-old girl how she feels her situation (whatever it is) will impact her dating experiences with boys. Or in the supermarket line two young mothers talk about their opposite sex one-year-olds growing up to be boyfriend and girlfriend. This may all sound a bit nit picky, but as I've said before, everyday "the world" tells gay and lesbian people and their families and friends, in this back door sort of way, that they are not supposed to be who and what they are. I am confident that I made the right decision not to confront my seminar student's comment, for it was relatively innocent and certainly not malicious. .

I still feel that my teaching is occasionally negatively impacted by my homophobia. At times I want to make a comment or ask a question, but I stop myself, for fear that the student(s) will say to themselves, "Oh, here she goes with that gay stuff again." I know that some students have similar reactions to other content that they believe gets too much attention. But that knowledge does not stop me from raising those issues with them as often and as thoroughly as I believe necessary. Why? Because I have no personal investment. No fear that they will "blame" it on my belonging to a particular group. It's my homophobia, those bits of self loathing, guilt, and internalization of early messages to "just be quiet about it" that impact my teaching behavior and stifle my natural style and instinct.

A similar issue occurred at a faculty meeting when I spoke of how we can improve the way in which we integrate gay/lesbian content into our curriculum. The topic of discussion was program strengths and weaknesses. I began by apologizing for myself ... "I don't mean to seem to have tunnel vision or to focus on one single issue, but..." I suppose I was protecting myself just in case someone "accused" me of this. It would be less painful if I said it first. My homophobia was winning again. You may be thinking that no harm was done because I fought my fear successfully and said what needed to be said. But by apologizing, I gave the message that being gay/lesbian and/or focusing on related issues is something about which one must apologize. I most certainly reinforced that message for myself.

I realize that I have moved far from the topic of my sister's wedding. I began this article over a year ago, the wedding has come and gone. My initial intention had been to use the wedding to illustrate how consciousness of our issues is critical to our personal and professional development. Not only does it make work with clients and colleagues more effective, but it also allows us to enjoy richer and deeper relationships in all aspects of our lives. I hope that this narrative has succeeded in illustrating what I try to instill in my students. I try to teach about self-awareness with a passionate commitment. As I watch the process unfold, as I see my students growing and learning, I feel a sense of joy, of inspiration, of fulfillment. I am proud and happy to be a social work educator. As students enter the profession, they must let go of the naive myth that social workers must keep their feelings submerged. This is just not possible. Even if it were, we would be losing the invaluable tool of our own emotions. We all have biases and we all have transference and countertransference reactions. It's not so much what we feel that's important. It's about constantly working to learn about our feelings and struggling with ways to approach and manage them in the best interest of our professional relationships. □

P.S. My sister, dress and all, was a beautiful bride.

* The main goals (of the workshop) are to increase participants' awareness of their own homophobia and help them to recognize how it developed, and how to minimize its negative impact on their practice. We attempt this through didactic presentation and experiential exercises. The exercises require that participants take on the identities and situations of various gay/lesbian people and/or their family members and discuss and explore the thoughts and feelings that arise. We later ask participants questions that help them to reflect on their own childhood's and to identify how, what, and when they "learned" about gay/lesbian people. Through this process, it becomes clear the ways in which each of us has been taught what and how to think and feel (positive, negative, as well as neutral) regarding

homosexuality and gay/lesbian people. Connections are made to other "isms" as well. We then explore ways participants can begin to "unlearn" biases through consciousness and commitment. Using case vignettes, we end with a discussion of how this relates to practice, including work with peers, supervisors, clients, and communities. □



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.