

New Study Links Homophobia with Homosexual Arousal

WASHINGTON—Psychoanalytic theory holds that homophobia—the fear, anxiety, anger, discomfort and aversion that some ostensibly heterosexual people hold for gay individuals—is the result of repressed homosexual urges that the person is either unaware of or denies. A study appearing in the August issue of the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA), provides new empirical evidence that is consistent with that theory.

Researchers at the University of Georgia conducted an experiment involving 35 homophobic men and 29 nonhomophobic men as measured by the Index of Homophobia scale. All the participants selected for the study described themselves as exclusively heterosexual both in terms of sexual arousal and experience.

Each participant was exposed to sexually explicit erotic stimuli consisting of heterosexual, male homosexual and lesbian videotapes (but not necessarily in that order). Their degree of sexual arousal was measured by penile plethysmography, which precisely measures and records male tumescence.

Men in both groups were aroused by about the same degree by the video depicting heterosexual sexual behavior and by the video showing two women engaged in sexual behavior. The only significant difference in degree of arousal between the two groups occurred when they viewed the video depicting male homosexual sex: ‘The homophobic men showed a significant increase in penile circumference to the male homosexual video, but the control [nonhomophobic] men did not.’

Broken down further, the measurements showed that while 66% of the nonhomophobic group showed no significant tumescence while watching the male homosexual video, only 20% of the homophobic men showed little or no evidence of arousal. Similarly, while 24% of the nonhomophobic men showed definite tumescence while watching the homosexual video, 54% of the homophobic men did.

When asked to give their own subjective assessment of the degree to which they were aroused by watching each of the three videos, men in both groups gave answers that tracked fairly closely with the results of the objective physiological measurement, with one exception: the homophobic men significantly underestimated their degree of arousal by the male homosexual video.

Do these findings mean, then, that homophobia in men is a reaction to repressed homosexual urges, as psychoanalysis theorizes? While their findings are consistent with that theory, the authors note that there is another, competing theoretical explanation: anxiety. According to this theory, viewing the male homosexual videotape may have caused negative emotions (such as anxiety) in the homophobic men, but not in the nonhomophobic men. As the authors note, ‘anxiety has been shown to enhance arousal and erection,’ and so it is also possible that ‘a response to homosexual stimuli [in these men] is a function of the threat condition rather than sexual arousal per se. These competing notions can and should be evaluated by future research.’

Article: 'Is Homophobia Associated With Homosexual Arousal?' by Henry E. Adams, Ph.D., Lester W. Wright, Jr., Ph.D. and Bethany A. Lohr, University of Georgia, in *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 105, No. 3, pp 440-445.

(Full text available from the APA Public Affairs Office.)

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