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# **Part I**

## **Understanding Heterosexism in Health and Social Care**



# 1

## What is Heterosexism?

### Understanding homophobia

It was a balmy evening and Old Compton Street was even more crowded than usual. The drinkers spilling out from pubs onto the pavement to catch the sun's dying rays were relaxed . . . Work was over and for once the forecast was good for the bank holiday weekend. At 6.37 p.m. it happened. A sound like a massive crunch. It split the air, drowning out everything else. In less than a second, the inside of the *Admiral Duncan* was transformed into a scene from hell. A white flash, then a blast shook the building and hurtled hundreds of nails everywhere. Windows splintered, showering shards. Eyewitnesses said there were a couple of seconds of stunned silence before the screams began. Through a cloud of dust and smoke staggered dozens of bleeding, choking, mutilated people . . . It was as if a madman had thrown a bucket of blood everywhere . . . (Carroll, 1999)

The bombing of the *Admiral Duncan* pub was the third in a series of bombings in the spring of 1999 against 'minority' populations in London by a member of a right-wing extremist organisation. The previous two bombs, which targeted the Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane and the African-Caribbean community in Brixton, had mercifully exploded without loss of life. The third bomb had been planted to achieve maximum carnage in Soho, London's lesbian and gay district: three people died and many more were seriously injured. Such extreme forms of anti-gay violence have come to be known as homophobic attacks on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities and, in the case of the Soho bomb, their heterosexual friends. Homophobia gives name to hate crimes (such

as so-called queer bashing), the bullying of young lesbians and gay men in schools, the killing of David Morley – himself a survivor of the Soho bomb – and recently, of Jody Dubrowski in London. The term is widely used in the social and scientific literature and is in common, everyday usage. Yet, despite shared understanding of the word homophobia, there are some important limitations surrounding its use.

### **Homophobia as fear**

George Weinberg first popularised the term homophobia in his (1972) book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. Its invention marked a watershed in lesbian and gay scholarship because it located the ‘problem’ of homosexuality, not in homosexuals, but in heterosexuals who were intolerant of lesbians and gay men (Herek, 2004). Homophobia is derived from the Greek word *phobia* meaning fear and it has come to conceptualise the fear of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGB). Fear of having their own manhood questioned is believed to motivate heterosexual men’s hostility towards gay men. A man’s heterosexuality is proved, not in his relationship with a woman, but in his not being gay. (Some) heterosexual men, therefore, assert their heterosexuality by marking the separation between their own perceived status as ‘real’ men and that of gay men. While female heterosexuality is proved by a woman’s relationship with a man, the threat of being called lesbian is used to intimidate (heterosexual and lesbian) women into female heteronormative appearance or behaviour. With its connotations of fear, homophobia inadequately characterises the hostility expressed towards homosexuals. Some would argue that anti-gay hostility is more consistent with anger – and its association with aggression – rather than fear (Herek, 2004); further, the emotions of disgust and repulsion are those which are most commonly articulated about lesbians and gay men (Valentine and McDonald, 2004).

### **Homophobia as a mental disorder**

A phobia is a diagnostic category of mental disorder. Phobias are an irrational and persistent fear and they invite parallels with other forms of phobia – such as claustrophobia and agoraphobia. Being a lesbian or a gay man was considered a mental disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) II* and diagnostic labels such as neurosis, narcissism and nervous breakdown have frequently been applied to lesbians and gay men. The use of a term which implies psychiatric disorder continues the association between mental illness and homosexual identities. Similar arguments – since discredited – were developed to suggest that racism was a psychological disorder which left white people universally sick.

Moreover, if homophobes are mentally ill, the implication is that they should be treated with compassion and leniency (Kitzinger, 1996). Phobia as terminology, suggests that behaviour which is irrational and out of control is a 'normal' response to homosexuality. It makes possible a homosexual panic defence as a mitigating circumstance for murder. There have been cases in both the US and the UK where charges of murder of gay men have been reduced to manslaughter on these grounds.

### **Homophobia as an individual problem**

Unlike sexism and racism, which were developed as political concepts in liberation movements, homophobia takes its origins in psychology (Kitzinger, 1996). Psychology locates the problem of homophobia in an individual's psychopathology and replaces political explanations with personal ones (Kitzinger, 1996). Writers from black and feminist perspectives have rejected the use of xenophobia (fear of strangers), misogyny (hatred of women) or gynophobia (fear of women) as inadequate to the task of conceptualising racism and sexism. The problem of locating anti-gay prejudice with individuals is that it is easy to dismiss homophobia as pertaining to the actions and behaviour of a small number of extreme people: it marks a separation between me and them (not homophobic vs. homophobic) – and *they* are usually seen as card carrying members of the British National Party. Black and feminist perspectives have also shown that personal forms of racism and sexism are often overemphasised at the expense of other institutional forms. The widespread use of race awareness training (RAT) in the 1980s was extensively critiqued because the focus on individuals ignored the material, social and political conditions that helped to reproduce discrimination and racist ideas (Solomos, 2003).

### **Internalised homophobia**

Homophobia enables us to see the violence of 'queer bashing' and the bombing of the *Admiral Duncan* pub – these are violent acts perpetrated by others. But homophobia is also used to describe the internal or psychological state of lesbians and gay men. Internalised homophobia refers to the distress, lack of social support, maladaptive coping behaviours, greater alcohol consumption and low self-esteem experienced by some lesbians and gay men when they encounter hostility and rejection from heterosexuals. The term suggests that lesbians, gay men and bisexual people (LGB) fear or loathe themselves and it focuses attention on the psychological health of the victims of homophobia. Internalised homophobia suggests that a gay teenager who commits suicide, does so out of the same irrational fear that characterises the behaviour of those who have

subjected her/him to bullying. Moreover, the term limits our understanding of the phenomenon. The poor mental health of lesbians and gay men may not be the result of internalised homophobia, but rather the consequence of living in a world which constructs them as inferior. To name suicide as a possible outcome of heterosexism shifts the focus of attention from blaming the victim to the social and political environment which allows the bullying of young lesbians and gay men to go unchecked and which privileges discourses of heteronormative masculinity and femininity.

### **Contradiction in (the) terms**

Contrary to beliefs that it is a relatively new word, heterosexism first appeared as a parallel term to homophobia around the same time in 1972 (Herek, 2004); but its use is much less frequent. Its relation to the concept of homophobia is assumed to be simply a question of degree (Stewart, 1995). Homophobia is reserved for the most virulent and visible forms of anti-gay prejudice; it is often associated with some type of action. It is always intentional. Because of these connotations, there has been considerable resistance to the replacement of homophobia by another term. Opponents argue that alternative concepts – in particular heterosexism – diminish our rage or ‘dull our pain’ (Mohin in Kitlinger and Perkins, 1993: 60). Others are reluctant because the meaning of homophobia is widely understood (Rothblum and Bond, 1996). By contrast, heterosexism is often described in broad, vague terms and appears to be benign. It is frequently described as ‘unintentional’ (Gruskin, 1999); ‘careless and unthinking’ (Stewart, 1995); ‘unconscious’ (McFarlane, 1998); and is founded on errors of ‘omission’ or ‘neglect’ (Wilton, 2000). The characterisation of prejudice as something that is unintentional is usually made by those outside (rather than within) political movements. The McPherson report suggested that institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police – which led to the acquittal of those responsible for the murder of Stephen Lawrence – was unwitting. By constructing racism or heterosexism as unthinking, society is absolved from the responsibility of tackling them. Current understandings of heterosexism as unintentional have meant that even long-standing advocates of lesbian, gay and bisexual liberation believe the struggle against it is less significant.

As concepts, homophobia and heterosexism are profoundly contradictory. Paradoxically, while homophobia is primarily located in individuals, its effects are political. Because it gives name to our collective revulsion at acts of atrocities, it mobilises political opposition (in the form of demonstrations, lesbians’ abseiling in the House of Lords, storming the BBC

early evening news bulletin and protests by the pressure group *Outrage*). Heterosexism, which is structural and macro-level, invokes struggle using the 'meagre, individual resources of clothing, hairstyle and body language' (Wilton, 1997: 218). Its subtlety renders it difficult to define and hence to combat. Developing our understanding of anti-gay prejudice is limited by the fact that the terms are used as synonyms. In one of the few texts devoted to homophobia and heterosexism, their meanings overlap: both are defined as discrimination based on sexual orientation (Rothblum and Bond, 1996). Elsewhere, they are used interchangeably to mean discrimination and oppression. Learning some lessons from anti-racism suggests that discrimination and oppression refer to two different concepts and processes. Discrimination is rooted in the word to distinguish and refers to the unfair or unequal treatment of groups or individuals. It is evidenced in prejudicial behaviour against the interests of less powerful groups. Legislation is the key mechanism for dealing with discrimination (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995), but it is only able to target the most blatant forms. Yet, even in those instances where it is easiest to document and to prove, legislation to combat 'race' and sex discrimination has achieved relatively limited gains for black people and women. For example, despite the 1970 Equal Pay Act being on statute for more than 30 years, men still earn 17 per cent more than women working in similar jobs with equivalent skills and qualifications (retrieved 15 November 2005 from <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>). Moreover, sex and 'race' discrimination laws have frequently been used to redress inequalities experienced by men and white people.

Many people do not understand the term heterosexism, believing it to be prejudice against heterosexuals; others suggest that the term should be homosexuality. While sexism refers to the privileging of men over women and racism refers to the privileging of white people over black people, heterosexism refers to the privileging of heterosexuality over homosexuality and its assumed normality. The term seeks to draw attention to the ways that heterosexuality is inscribed in institutions, cultural practices and everyday interactions.

The use of two terms is unhelpful because it implies they are two separate processes. It suggests that the violence or bullying described by homophobia is intentional (which it is undoubtedly is), but that assumptions about the superiority of heterosexuality are unconscious (which they should not be). Furthermore, the continued use of two terms interchangeably uncouples the overt manifestations of prejudice from the conceptual understandings of how such discrimination is perpetuated. Thus homophobia is reduced to a personal prejudice with no reference

to the power and processes which sustain that prejudice: acts of discrimination are separated from theories of oppression. While homophobia is the most visible and direct form of discrimination, it is also the most exceptional. By focusing attention on the exceptional we ignore the everyday manifestations of oppression. Homophobia lacks explanation (other than individual prejudice); it can be eradicated by self-awareness, 'by learning the facts and by personal encounters with lesbians and gay men' (Ben-Ari, 2001: 121). Because of this, homophobia is limited in its ability to delineate the social, cultural, structural and institutional processes which serve to maintain the compulsory status of heterosexuality. By using the term homophobia, we see the goal only as the removal of discrimination, rather than a reinvention of the whole system.

### **The changing social landscape requires new conceptual understandings**

The early twenty-first century has signalled a change in the social and political landscape for lesbians and gay men. Hitherto, discrimination against lesbians, gay men and bisexual people was explicitly sanctioned in legislation. Recent legislative changes mean that those mechanisms of the state which enforced discrimination have almost all been overturned. Furthermore, some legislation has been enacted to prevent discrimination (see Appendix A). For the first time, queer bashing is no longer seen as an inevitable consequence of being visibly homosexual, but has been recognised as a hate crime. Same-sex domestic abuse is acknowledged in the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004. There has been considerable progress in the area of legislative reform. Some commentators suggest that lesbian, gay and bisexual equality is now achieved; however, important though these gains are, they do not herald a battle won. The changing political context requires new understandings of the processes which maintain inequality; heterosexism is a theoretical concept that can help us to do this.

### **Towards a theory of heterosexism**

Sexism, racism and disabilism are perpetuated in beliefs about the inherent inferiority of women, black people and disabled people. Similarly, heterosexism is based on assumptions about the inferiority of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. Researchers have traditionally sought evidence to account for the difference of homosexuality; this difference is always constructed as inferior. The nature of homosexual inferiority has had a long history and has taken many forms.

*Biological inferiority*

The body was believed to show evidence of differences between homosexuals and 'normal' heterosexuals in skull dimensions, postures, gestures and mannerisms. Researchers sought markers of deviance in lesbian bodies; they claimed that the typical lesbian had different genitals to heterosexual women and these differences were pathological (Terry, 1995). More recently, LeVay (1993) claimed to have discovered the 'gay brain': in particular, the hypothalamus in gay men was said to be smaller than in heterosexual men. (Smaller brain size was also related to 'race' and gender in the late nineteenth century.) Research has also suggested that lesbians have different hearing abilities and finger length ratios to heterosexual women (Birke, 2002).

*Hormonal imbalance*

The notion of homosexuals as a third sex dominated early twentieth-century constructions of the causes of homosexuality. Homosexuality was an intermediate sex and homosexuals were said to be stuck at a primitive stage of evolutionary development; they were 'unfinished specimens . . . a status they shared with savages and criminals' (Terry, 1995: 135). The subsequent discovery of sex hormones lent support to this theory; male and female sex hormones (testosterone and oestrogen) are believed to be imbalanced in lesbians and gay men. Lesbians are said to be mannish and gay men effeminate.

*Genetic inferiority*

Some have suggested that male homosexuality may be a result of genetic abnormality: gay men (it is said) tend to be born of elderly mothers. The late 1990s saw an increase in genetic explanations for homosexuality: some claimed to have found patterns of homosexuality in studies of twins, while others are said to have identified the 'gay gene'. Locating a gene raises the problem of testing the foetus in the womb and possible subsequent abortion (Birke, 2002).

*Psychological inferiority*

Lesbians and gay men are said to be aggressive, masochistic, destructive, deceitful, neurotic, obsessive, narcissistic, paranoid and psychotic. Being a lesbian or gay man was a mental disorder in the *DSM II*.

*Moral inferiority*

Lesbians and gay men have been considered to be responsible for the rise in crime, murder, racism, societal chaos, and weakening of the family.

Their ascribed immorality means they are less trustworthy and more likely to be a threat to the state.

### *Emotional inferiority*

Lesbians and gay men are said to be incapable of sustaining an emotional relationship with a partner. Their relationships are co-dependent (lesbians' tendency to merge) and seldom satisfying. They are emotionally immature, have irrational attractions and are deeply lonely.

### *Inferior upbringing*

The lack of normal childhood relations with their parents is said to cause homosexuality. The combination of an over-intense relationship with the mother and an unsatisfactory relationship with a weak father has been said to be typical for homosexual men. Lesbians are the result of an emotionally disturbed childhood; lesbians are said to hate and reject both parents (Bene, 1965a, 1965b).

### *Sexual inferiority*

Gay men, in particular, are said to be promiscuous and have unnatural desires and sexual practices. They are said to pose a threat to children and young people. Lesbians are said to be asexual.

These theories of inferiority act as pre-existing frameworks of meaning around homosexuality and serve to oppress lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. Heterosexism is the term used to describe this oppression; oppression implies agency; it moulds, restrains and restricts (Frye, 1998). Celia Kitzinger (1996) provides an illustration:

. . . when there is *no* anti-lesbian explosion from your parents because you have de-dyked your house before their visit; when there is no queer-bashing after an evening's clubbing, because you anticipated trouble and booked a taxi home; when you are not dismissed from work, because you stayed in the closet; when you are not subjected to prurient questions because you have talked about your partner euphemistically as a friend – when these non-events slip by as part of many gay men and lesbians' daily routine, has *nothing* really happened? Rather, heterosexism has been functioning in its most effective and most deadly way. In an oppressive society, it is not necessary, most of the time, to beat us up, to murder or torture us to ensure our silence and invisibility. This is because a climate of terror has been created instead in which most gay people *voluntarily* and of our own free will

*choose* to remain silent and invisible. (Kitzinger, 1996: 11, emphasis in original)

The example shows the pervasiveness of heterosexism; it functions by circumscribing opportunities and prescribing certain kinds of behaviour. It is characterised by an absence – where it appears that nothing has really happened. Oppression imposes a particular world-view which permeates the social and political fabric of our lives; it enforces silence and invisibility. Heterosexist beliefs not only enforce certain kinds of behaviour, but they also justify exclusion from social resources, such as housing, employment, education, health and social care. This system of beliefs together with the values, cultural norms, language, institutional practices and structures are the means by which relations of domination and subordination are asserted. Getting rid of heterosexuality as an institution means a complete overhaul of the system:

(It means) getting rid of sexual difference. It also means abolishing most of the legal system, marriage, the family, most cultural and national traditions, the church, in all its forms, all sects, and most aspects of all other religions too, the tax system, work patterns, childcare arrangements, the distribution of wealth. It means rethinking the language, rebuilding our houses, remaking most of the sculptures, repainting the pictures and rewriting the books. (Duncker, 1993: 148)

Our individual relationships and our social organisations are established in such a way as to assume, and thereby privilege, heterosexuality. This coercion has been conceived as ‘you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be’ (Wittig, 1988); that is, ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1983) does not allow an equal alternative. As Warner contends (1993) western culture insists that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous. Beliefs about the superiority of heterosexuality (in values, discourse and culture) together with discriminatory practices (in institutions, resources and services) and attitudes (assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices) work together to perpetuate the oppression of lesbians, gay men and bisexual people.

In the rest of the chapter, I aim to develop an understanding of heterosexism as a theory of lesbian, gay and bisexual oppression. It is intended, not as a definitive version, but instead to stimulate debate and to explore the ways we can begin to make the invisible, visible, the silent, spoken and to reveal the dichotomised power relationship in the homosexual/heterosexual binary. While there is agreement that there are some commonalities in the processes which maintain social divisions (Dominelli,

2002), it is less clear how these are manifested. Sexism and racism are well theorised by comparison to heterosexism; by drawing some parallels with them, it may be possible to uncover some of the ways heterosexism operates. Heterosexism is not monolithic, but is constantly shifting and contextual; it exists in a multiplicity of sites. Some of the processes by which it is perpetuated are analysed below and include privilege; the routine presumption of heterosexuality; the public/private divide; the silencing of sexual identities; 'just the same' arguments; reverse discrimination; language and discourse; and the moral backlash.

### **Privilege**

Privilege is a characteristic of oppression; it confers advantage for one group over another. By its favoured status, privilege grants access to social, cultural, moral, linguistic and political resources. Those who possess privilege are often unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge it. Men (as a group) cannot see how they benefit from sexism; whites cannot comprehend how they gain privilege from racism; nor can the non-disabled see how they accrue advantage from disabilism. Privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets which can be cashed in daily:

(It) is like an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (McIntosh, 1998: 165)

It works most effectively when it is taken for granted; those who hold privileged status see it as natural, normative, average, unthinking, morally neutral and also ideal. For example, heterosexuality is the preferred living arrangement in which to bring up children. Because the family is seen to be morally neutral, and children are believed to fare better where there are two opposite-sexed parents, heterosexuality is construed as ideal. It is taken for granted that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and there are abundant examples in legislation, social policy and in our wider social arrangements. In attempting to understand the ways in which she enjoyed unearned 'white' privilege, McIntosh (1998) documents the daily conditions that white people take for granted. A similar exercise, by drawing on her examples, helps to uncover some of the privileges accruing to heterosexuality:

1. When I meet someone for the first time, I do not need to consider whether or not to disclose my heterosexuality.
2. If I choose to disclose my heterosexuality, people will not interpret this as a sexual advance.

3. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my sexual identity most of the time.
4. I can be almost certain that if I move house my neighbours will be neutral or pleasant towards me.
5. As a student, I can be sure that curricula materials will present my heterosexuality positively.
6. The media can represent someone of my sexual identity perform an act of intimacy (such as kissing) without this being considered remarkable.
7. As a member of a religious organisation, there is no contradiction between my heterosexuality and my faith.
8. My children will not be taunted or bullied because of my heterosexuality.
9. I am not considered biased on account of my heterosexuality.
10. I can automatically count on the support and understanding of my family and friends when I disclose problems in my heterosexual relationship.
11. As a teenager, my heterosexuality will not be dismissed as something I will grow out of by people close to me.
12. My heterosexuality is not universally considered a threat to (or a negative influence upon) children.
13. My partner will not be euphemistically referred to as my 'best friend', long-time companion or entirely ignored.
14. People do not generally assume that my primary heterosexual relationship will be short-lived.

Privilege is a mechanism which asserts the superiority of heterosexuality. Because privilege is unacknowledged and unreflective (it rarely has need to be), it allows those who hold it the power to deny or ignore the privilege they hold. This base of unacknowledged privilege is not only unconscious; members of privileged groups have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence (McIntosh, 1998). Heterosexuality protects from many kinds of hostility, distress, moral judgements and violence. Privilege then, confers belonging with people around us and it is a means of making social systems work for those who hold it. The privileged status of marriage as a heterosexual institution is continued in the new legislation which grants same-sex couples the right to register their partnerships, while the social status conferred by marriage is reserved for opposite-sex couples. Moreover, the social privilege of heterosexuality is confirmed by the unequal status of LGB citizenship.

### **The routine presumption of heterosexuality**

Heterosexism is also defined as the routine presumption of heterosexuality. This is subtly different to the way in which sexism is maintained. While male experience is normative and has often accounted for both male and female experience, women are not universally presumed to be men. Similarly, on a conceptual level, heterosexual experience encompasses homosexual experience. For example, women's health is often believed to account for the health of both heterosexual and lesbian women (see Chapter 8). But the heterosexual presumption also operates in everyday lives. On first meeting, a person is assumed to be heterosexual unless they identify themselves otherwise. This information is not usually volunteered; heterosexuals do not go round saying 'hello, I'm heterosexual' because there is no need to do so (Peel, 2001: 549). One of the many ways that heterosexuality is maintained is that it rarely has to attest to its existence.

Many heterosexuals, then, do not think about their heterosexuality except as an unquestioned given or as a personal choice which has no effect on the rest of their lives or on the lives of others. Heterosexual (like male, 'white' and able-bodied) is always implicit and unspoken. When Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993) produced a special issue of *Feminism & Psychology* on the topic of heterosexuality, they posed the question in their call for papers: 'How does your heterosexuality contribute to your feminist politics?' It was met with responses ranging from blank incomprehension to anger. The invitation positioned potential contributors as heterosexual; it seems that until then, many had considered themselves to be generic women. One woman, despite having lived monogamously with a man for 26 years, seemed to be unable to identify herself as heterosexual. Others (who had talked freely of their husbands and had never spoken on lesbian issues) wrote angrily: 'How dare you assume I'm heterosexual?' and 'Don't you think you are making one hell of an assumption?' (1993: 5). Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993) had made explicit an assumption that the (heterosexual) women had allowed to be implicit in their everyday lives. Their unwillingness to accept the label heterosexual suggests that they were unable to acknowledge the privilege which their heterosexuality had hitherto afforded them.

One of the most ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind – 'situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation' (Frye, 1998: 147). The double bind maintains the privileged status of heterosexuality by imposing contradictory constraints on LGB people. In the previous example, lesbians made visible the heterosexuality

of heterosexual women. One might assume then, that heterosexual women would be comfortable with an assumption that they were lesbian. This is not always the case. When I 'came out' in a sexuality workshop, my co-convenor came out as heterosexual (even though I had previously discussed my disclosure with her), presumably because she did not want to be mistaken for a lesbian. In discussion in *Challenging Heterosexism* workshops, many participants have failed to see this as an example of heterosexism. Instead, they suggest that the trainer may have intended to be helpful in giving information about herself. (This assumes that the information is neutral.) I wonder whether my co-convenor would have come out as heterosexual if I had not first come out as lesbian. It would seem not. Her heterosexuality would have been taken for granted, my sexual identity would have been wrongly assumed. There are numerous examples of heterosexual celebrities distancing themselves from any suggestion of homosexuality. A number have taken court action or placed notices in newspapers to assert their heterosexuality. The recent spate of heterosexual actors playing LGBT roles is a further example: while it is now a safe career move for straight actors to take on gay roles, most have been at pains to distance themselves from any suggestion of themselves being gay. The actors were so 'extraordinarily' heterosexual: one was cast alongside his (off-screen) opposite sex partner to provide a sexual alibi (Hensher, 2005: 22). Coming out then, is not the equivalent experience for heterosexuals and homosexuals:

It may be easy to understand why it might be offensive to treat heterosexuals as if they were gay, but less easy to recognise why it might be equally offensive to treat lesbians and gay men as if they were heterosexual. (Wilton, 1999: 7)

It is offensive to treat LGB as if they were heterosexual because it erases their existence – it is only possible to erase heterosexuality temporarily or situationally. The risks and perils about coming out as heterosexual are not the same as coming out as homosexual. Heterosexuals are not 'straight-bashed' because they are heterosexual. Compulsory heterosexuality means that heterosexuals may resist being positioned either as heterosexual or homosexual.

Decisions about disclosure are also a double bind: disclosure is said to be flaunting oneself, while non-disclosure is deceitful. Coming out is at once compulsory and forbidden as Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick illustrates in an example of a teacher who was dismissed from his post. In a first court action, he was judged to have disclosed too much about his sexual identity;

but on appeal, he was deemed to have not disclosed enough (cf. Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1993). The suggestion that coming out as heterosexual and coming out as LGB is a parallel process ignores the routine presumption of heterosexuality.

### **The public/private divide in the lives of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals**

The public sphere is overwhelmingly heterosexual (Richardson, 1996, 2000). Our public institutions – the criminal justice system, medicine, education, the media, public services and religion – are founded on the concepts of heterosexuality; heterosexuality is everywhere assumed in social life. By contrast, the notion that homosexuality is something which is conducted in private has been regulated through legislation. Between 1885 and 1967 in the UK, all male homosexual acts whether committed in public or private were illegal (Weeks, 1979). The 1967 Sexual Offences Act is widely believed to have liberalised the laws on male homosexuality, but it did so on condition that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals not only conducted their relationships in private, but also lived their homosexuality in private. The Earl of Arran, one of the bill's supporters, declared that 'any form of ostentatious behaviour . . . any public flaunting would be utterly distasteful and would make the sponsors of the bill regret what they have done' (Simpson, 1994: 265). Following the introduction of the legislation, the penalties for public displays of homosexuality were strengthened. The number of convictions for homosexual offences increased (despite the apparent liberalisation) and the police were engaged in the active surveillance of lesbian, gay and bisexual meeting places (Weeks, 1979). Decades later, privacy framed political discourses surrounding the repeal of the age of consent, and previously, in constructing arguments for the introduction of section 28 (Waites, 2003). The Shadow Home Secretary, Anne Widdicombe, argued that 'what people do in private is their own business' and Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister, apparently did not object to homosexuals *per se*, but disliked them in publicly visible groups. The meanings of privacy were extremely limited: a hotel room was not private, nor was a house with a third person in it if the bedroom doors were not locked. The exhortation to privacy has not, however, reliably offered protection to gay men. In the US 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, the Supreme Court judgement denied a gay man the right to engage in consensual sex with another man in the privacy of his own bedroom. But privacy does not relate only to sexual behaviour: the term 'flaunting' suggests that all visible LGB identity should be toned down. Heterosexuals are offended by LGB 'show'.

Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals did not choose the closet; they were forced into it.

But while privacy is not simply a personal choice that lesbians and gay men make, it allows them to deflect unwanted attention about their sexual identity. Labour politicians, speaking in support of gay colleagues who had come out or who were outed by the press, avoided further discussion by arguing that it was a private issue. Conservative politicians, who have publicly opposed the civil rights of lesbians and gay men, have also used privacy to police the boundaries of what may be discussed. The family of Mary Cheney, the daughter of Bush's vice-presidential running-mate, avoided questions about her sexuality by claiming that it was a private matter (Johnson, 2002). Privacy is successfully used in liberal discourses, by lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, to avoid unwanted intrusions into their lives. The argument is often made: my personal life is my business and not anyone else's. The notion of privacy is also used as a damage limitation strategy. A trade union, seeking to dispel the myth that gay men are paedophiles, made the following argument in a booklet about gay rights and fighting prejudice:

A homosexual person is no more likely than a heterosexual person to make sexual advances to clients, customers, fellow workers or the general public . . . Gay workers have the same physical, mental and emotional characteristics as heterosexuals . . . They only differ in being gay. That might have implications for their private lives but ought to make no difference to their working lives. (cited in Thompson, 1997: 137)

Rather than tackle the offensiveness of the assumption that gay men are a threat to children, the argument turns to the 1967 legislation, that same-sex behaviour is only performed in private. A clear separation is maintained between a private life, where sexuality may be expressed, and a public, working life, where sexual behaviour is taboo. The suggestion that gay men regard children as valid objects of sexual desire is circumvented, rather than actively confronted. The boundary is used to draw a demarcation line between the public and the private, and, in this instance, allows some limited protection for gay men without challenging the underlying assumptions.

While lesbians and gay men are exhorted to keep their lives private, the quintessential domain of privacy – the family – has long been denied them. LGB have often lost child custody cases, were unable to access fertilisation services and were barred from jointly adopting children. Section

28 determined that same-sex families were inferior because they were only *pretended* family relationships rather than real ones. Heterosexism then, allows only a certain form of private life for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals: they are entitled to a circumscribed existence on condition that they do not seek full membership in society. When sexual minorities accept that their private lives (i.e. their identities as lesbians, bisexuals and gay men) do not form part of everyday interactions (as those of heterosexual identities do), they are agreeing to a second-class stake in social life. In the 1980s, feminists sought to politicise the personal, to draw attention to the political and social basis of women's oppression. The domestic, personal sphere was not seen to lie outside of social and political life, but to be fundamentally interwoven with it. The sphere occupied by lesbians, gay men and bisexuals is not the personal and domestic arena, however, but a private one. The connotations of privacy imply an arena that is not generally known, a confidential space that is peculiar to oneself. What is private is not, and should not, be open to public gaze. Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals need to politicise the private.

Politicians commonly cite the private nature of homosexuality as a reason for denying civil rights to lesbian, gay and bisexual people: because it is a personal matter it does not warrant political intervention in the form of enabling social policies. This has a number of implications for lesbian and gay citizenship. Because their identities properly 'belong' in the private sphere, lesbians and gay men have no basis on which to present themselves in public institutions: in hospitals, schools, to the police or social services. An equal citizenship does not seek the right to do what one wants to in private, but is concerned with establishing public lesbian, gay and bisexual identities. The right to a private life is enshrined in human rights legislation; what lesbians, gay men and bisexuals lack, is the right to a public life.

### **The silencing of sexual identity**

Oscar Wilde famously described homosexuality as 'the love that dare not speak its name'. The silencing of sexual identity is often taken to indicate an absence; Rosenblum (1996) argues that instead it signifies the presence of a multitude of barriers; silence and invisibility are themselves human rights violations. Injunctions to silence are maintained in everyday conversation. Any mention of one's sexual identity may be met with accusations of: 'ramming it down people's throats', 'being blatant', 'flaunting it'; even the language of disclosure suggests the secretive (e.g. confiding), sinful or criminal (e.g. confessing) quality in being open about one's gay

identity. Heterosexism then is discursively produced by a conspiracy of silence (Blumenfeld, 1992: 6).

In their research about the social positioning of sexual identity in the workplace, Ward and Winstanley (2003) point to the multi-faceted nature of silence: as absence of response, as a form of suppression and censorship and as self-protection and resistance. Even in apparently forward-thinking organisations with progressive diversity management practices, silence was a significant theme:

The reaction to my coming out was no reaction. I didn't encounter any hostility . . . The big difference I noticed in the way colleagues treat me is the degree of interest they show in my life outside work. When I was married, it was a two-way process; there was mutual interest in the mundane things in life, what we did at the weekend, kids, pets, even the trip to the supermarket. That way of communicating is now closed off to me to some extent. I've noticed that I can be asking people about what they do, but as soon as I start talking about what I'm doing they shut down, because they are not prepared to hear . . . (Ward and Winstanley, 2003: 1266)

By avoiding this social interaction, colleagues in the workplace clearly marked out the boundaries of what could be talked about and what must be left unsaid. Talk about everyday events with people around us gives meaning to them and provides a social connection with others; it often acts to mitigate some of the impersonal effects of work (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). While homosexuality is silenced, heterosexuality is silent. Many heterosexuals appear to believe they live in a sexually neutral world, rather than one in which heterosexuality is dominant. Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are considered to have a sexual orientation, while heterosexuals do not. This is illustrated in the treatment of a gay man who was working in the government department responsible for the repeal of section 28. He was moved from his job, ostensibly because his managers thought it was inappropriate for a gay man to have a say in the repeal of the legislation: by virtue of being a gay man he could not be impartial (Ward and Winstanley, 2003).

Heterosexuality as a silent term has implications beyond the identities of individuals. Assumptions of heterosexuality so permeate our daily lives, that many heterosexuals simply cannot hear or see heterosexism. In a response to the first *BMJ* editorial about lesbian and bisexual women's health needs, Julietta Patnick (the Programme Director) stated that the

NHS Cervical Screening Programme (CSP) offers screening to all women without enquiring about their sexual behaviour (Patnick and Davidson, 2003, retrieved 5 November 2003 from <http://bmjournals.com/cgi/letters/327/7421/939>). I encountered many similar claims from heterosexual women in audiences when I gave conference papers about lesbians' experiences of smear tests. Perhaps the reasons that lesbians 'hear' the question about their sexual identity and heterosexual women do not, can be accounted for by their different positions within the CSP. Simply, heterosexual women may not recognise the question 'what contraception do you use?' as an implicit question about their sexual identity. (Lesbians, mostly, do not need to control their fertility because sex is not linked to reproduction.) Sometimes, health professionals ask: 'Do you think you might be pregnant?' because they assume that (presumed) heterosexual women become pregnant accidentally and communicate this assumption during the smear test. (Lesbian pregnancies are more likely to be planned than accidental.) Heterosexual women may also fail to hear a question 'when did you last have sexual intercourse?' as problematic. Most lesbians would need to consider whether their sexual behaviour 'counted' as sexual intercourse because the term usually refers to penis-in-the-vagina sex. In addition, heterosexuality is assumed, not only in the individual interaction with a health care professional, but throughout the screening programme. Heterosexuality is inscribed in health promotion materials, the size of the speculum, the term 'family planning' and the heterosexualised nature of the smear itself (its classic missionary position). (For further discussion about heterosexism in cervical screening see Chapter 7.)

### **Why can't homosexuals be just like heterosexuals?**

Oppression operates through assumptions of a deficit and it demands that those deemed inferior approximate the characteristics of the superior group. The price of acceptance is to become what your oppressor wants you to be: just like them. Anti-racist analyses delineate similar processes of accommodation in which black people are expected to assimilate to white cultural norms: by wearing western clothes (not the *hijab*), eating western foods and by adopting Eurocentric traditions, values and ways of thinking. Women have often been excluded from public institutions, such as law schools and military colleges in the US, on the basis that intellectually and physically they were different from and inferior to men. Feminists successfully used the argument – that women are just the same as men – to secure access to public institutions from which they had been previously debarred. But while physical access has been

secured to some elite establishments, the terms of that access have been highly circumscribed. Fine and Addelston (1996) argue that access has been granted disproportionately to upper and middle class white women; but their presence has not changed the structure of institutions. Once inside these institutions – that now represent themselves as diverse – the women came to express attitudes, beliefs and experiences that mimicked those of men. The conceptual framework of sameness and difference determines the basis of acceptance. Being just like the dominant group means that minorities lose their distinct identities. Being different constructs minorities as inferior.

*Just the same* arguments are not only used by mainstream society, but also by oppressed groups. Common strategies of those seeking acceptance and tolerance are to emphasise the similarities between themselves and those of the dominant group. Such normalising strategies have been used to argue that lesbian and gay parenting is indistinguishable from heterosexual parenting: LGB parents help children with their homework, make packed lunches and argue about bedtimes (Clarke, 2001). Because *family* is a heterosexual concept (lesbians and gay men have only had *pretend* families), lesbians and gay men who want to be considered a family (or to adopt a family) must approximate heterosexuality. Rather than posing a challenge to the family as a heterosexual institution – for example, an analysis that argued the benefits of having two same-sex parents on conceptions about the sexual division of labour – many of the debates have instead served to bolster traditional family forms. Thus LGB who most conform to the values, beliefs, behaviours and lives of heterosexuals will be those most likely to be accepted by society. Heterosexism, then, determines the nature of social and political participation and sets the terms of debate. Assimilation irons out the differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality; but it does so by imposing the standards of heterosexuality (these arguments are developed in Chapter 9).

### **Reverse discrimination**

The statement that homosexuals are oppressed is often met with the claim that heterosexuals are oppressed too: it is a means of discounting heterosexism. Such claims have led one theorist to coin the phrase ‘the problem of the oppressed heterosexual’ (Brickell, 2001: 225). The links with sexism and racism are important because one invidious ideological backlash has been the notion of *political correctness*. The accusation of being *PC* suggests that the person pointing out oppression is taking things too far. It claims that being female is given preference over being male and blackness is unconditionally valued over whiteness.

Privilege rests on the assumption that there are no power differentials between one group and another; as a consequence, homosexuals and heterosexuals are believed to enjoy the same access to social, cultural and institutional resources. It operates by making a false equivalence. If equality is already achieved, then any (minority) group which receives different treatment is seen (by the majority) to be granted special rights as the following example illustrates.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs in Wellington, New Zealand hosted a catered meeting for lesbians who work in the civil service (for a full discussion of this incident see Brickell, 2001). This meeting, which came to be known as the lesbian lunch, was widely reported in the news media under such headlines as 'Government to give lesbians a free lunch'. One of the daily newspapers encouraged readers to express their views in the letters page: readers wrote to demand that men also wanted lunch laid on. Another suggested that some women employees came out of the closet when they heard that a free lunch was available. In their reports, newspapers frequently compared lesbians with other occupational groups with the apparent intention of making lesbians seem ridiculous:

There are some weird and wonderful collectives in this world. One of the more unusual in our experience is the Canadian Association of Seed Crushers, though the British Society of Deep Fat Fryers would run it close. So there should be no surprise that the Ministry of Women's Affairs has found another one. Lesbians working in government. (Brickell, 2001: 219–20)

The comparisons are interesting: *Seed Crushers* suggests a little known, and of equally little interest, trade association. *Deep Fat Fryers* connotes mundane kitchen skills. There is nothing discriminatory in the terms themselves, but they convey an offensive suggestion of triviality. Humour, or more precisely, ridicule, is an effective weapon in undermining claims to minority status. Similar mechanisms operated in relation to descriptions of feminists in the 1980s as bra-burning women's libbers. There is no recognition in these reports that lesbians are located in particular ways within workplace hierarchies, or that there may be difficulties in making contact with, or being visible to, other lesbians. Their needs for associating with others are posited as no different from those of a society of deep fat fryers. The media report is effective because it constructs a false equivalence between a minority interest trade association and lesbians as a minority group.

Some of the debates around the introduction of the civil partnership legislation rested on similar concepts. Unmarried heterosexuals claimed

that they were also oppressed because their partners would not receive their pensions on their death (Peel, 2001). Their argument wilfully ignores the fact that heterosexual couples can make a choice to marry; civil partnerships offer second-class status and the privileged institution of marriage is reserved for heterosexuals. Any attempt to redress the balance of structured inequalities is undermined by notions of equality of opportunity. The concept of equal opportunity is profoundly individualistic and liberal: it assumes an individual will achieve the same educational success (for example), if everyone is treated as if they are the same. Those who claim reverse discrimination invoke such arguments as: heterosexuals are not singled out for special treatment so why should homosexuals be? Heterosexism is perpetuated by beliefs that we occupy a level playing-field. It confuses equality of opportunity with equality of outcome.

### Language and discourse

Critical social theorists have drawn attention to the ways language is used in perpetuating oppression. For instance, 'he' as a generic pronoun was used to refer to both men and women. In the mid-1980s, the debate focused on terminology: language was seen to both reflect and reinforce power relations. These concerns were subsequently adopted as guidelines on anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-disabilist language in organisations such as the British Sociological Association (BSA). There was relatively little work on anti-heterosexist language. From the early 1990s, there has been a move within discursive psychology to consider the ways that discourse (all textual and spoken language) constructs oppression. Blatant comments are becoming increasingly less common. Instead, opponents of LGB rights draw on discourses which construct LGB people as inferior and make claims by association. For example, in Clarke's (1999) research an audience member in *Kilroy* undermines LGB's claims to provide good enough parenting:

For a child to grow up, a child learns from parents okay, and for a child when – when they see loving relationships, it's normal for a child to see a man and a woman being loving with each other, it isn't normal (I bet a lot) will agree, it isn't normal [ . . . ] for a child to walk in a bedroom and see two men kissing each other on a bed, or two women kissing on a bed, it isn't a normal thing for a child to grow up with. (1999: 10)

This argument would not usually be described as discriminatory. But it is constructed in such a way that it functions to perpetuate heterosexism.

The speaker infers that LGB relationships are detrimental to a child's development by drawing on notions of homosexual recruitment: in witnessing homosexual relationships, the child will become LGB. The argument implies that LGB are abnormal, although it does not do so explicitly. (Indeed, some heterosexuals do not appear to think it is offensive to describe homosexuals as abnormal.) The speaker also suggests that only heterosexual relationships are loving relationships; in the extract, these are decontextualised as 'being loving'. Homosexual relationships, by contrast, are sexualised – they take place in the bedroom; they involve kissing; and there is no mention of love. All this is achieved indirectly and by implication. It is only possible because it draws upon existing heteronormative discourses.

Discursive psychological studies of racism and sexism have highlighted the way in which concerns about being heard as speaking from a prejudiced position are managed by speakers by constructing evaluations as mere factual descriptions. Participants employ a range of strategies which enable them to express remarks – such as he was a complete poof – that otherwise would be considered offensive. Speer and Potter (2000) note a dual concern to express a view and also manage it in a way that portrays the speaker as caring and egalitarian. In response to a question about his perceptions of a gay club, Ben (a heterosexual research participant) has to negotiate a line between lack of enjoyment which might indicate psychological trouble with gay people, with that of enjoyment which might suggest that Ben is gay or harbours gay feelings. His denials, mis-starts, frequent pauses, hesitation and self-repair indicate his dilemma. Awareness of heterosexism allows us to become attuned to the particular nuances of prejudiced talk.

### **The moral backlash**

Unlike race, disability and gender, homosexuality has been centrally defined by discourses of morality (Warner, 1993). Feminism's insistence that men should share responsibility for child-rearing and domestic labour also met with a powerful right-wing backlash with links to fundamentalist Christianity (Bacchi, 1990). However, social conservatives have overwhelmingly seen LGB civil rights claims as a threat to the heterosexual family and traditional values. Proposals surrounding adoption, civil partnerships and the age of consent are said to contravene immutable human truths.

Right-wing strategists have frequently used homosexuality to divert attention from current social problems. George W. Bush's 2004 presidential campaign was a calculated (and successful) attempt to mobilise the

Republican vote by appealing to evangelical Christians through a ballot measure to ban gay marriage. In the eleven states where the ballot was being polled, tens of thousands of new voters were registered. Bush constituted same-sex marriage as the most important threat to the USA during a presidency in which he had waged an illegal war in Iraq, detained prisoners without trial in Guantanamo Bay and had overseen a period of increased economic disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Republicans achieved the Reagan landslide in 1980 using similar tactics.

Lesbians and gay men have become targets for persecution as a means of diverting attention away from other social ills such as economic recession, social upheaval or war. They have, at times, been constituted as posing a social danger to national security because of their supposed moral deviance. During the McCarthy era in the 1950s, homosexuals were routinely sacked from their jobs and imprisoned because they were seen to have less integrity, be susceptible to 'blackmail' and lacking in moral fibre (Faderman, 1992). The legacy of this period has been to create discursive practices which link homosexuality with immorality, disease, decadence and chaos. Subsequently, New Right ideology has drawn upon these discourses and blamed homosexuals for the alleged inability of the US to stand up to the Russians (Rubin, 1993). In the hysteria surrounding the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the so-called 'moral majority' claimed that diseased homosexuals would infect the entire nation and destroy the US (Shilts, 1987). In 2003, the Egyptian government created a moral panic about homosexuality through arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and the subsequent *Queen Boat* trials as a means of diverting attention from the country's economic recession (de Gruchy and Fish, 2004).

It may seem surprising in an increasingly secular age that arguments about religion and morality are used to invoke opposition to lesbian, gay and bisexual rights and continue to hold such sway. Moreover, they are returned to (in US elections in 1980 and 2004) and reformulated: they enabled, for example, the aspiring EU Commissioner, Rocco Buttiglione to suggest that homosexuality is a sin. Baroness Young and Brian Souter drew on similar arguments in the opposition to the lowering of the age of consent and the repeal of section 28. The arguments of the New Right have shifted to a more complex terrain with parameters which clearly define the inferior status of homosexuality (Waites, 2000). The church as an institution actively constructs homosexuality as inferior as seen in recent debates about whether Anglican priests can register their civil partnerships and remain a member of the clergy. If a priest wishes to register a partnership this might imply that the relationship is sexual; while the church allows its clergy to be non-practising homosexuals it does not

accord them a sexual relationship. The ban rests on assumptions that gay sex is intrinsically more reprehensible than straight sex.

These are not the random utterances of a few, isolated individuals which may be disregarded as homophobic. Instead they draw upon a set of beliefs, ideological positions and institutional practices that have been sanctioned by religion, medicine, the law and culture and which specify the nature of homosexual inferiority. Homosexuals are inherently threatening: to institutional heterosexuality, to children, to family life, to morality. Those who use religious and moral arguments claim a higher ground (god is on our side); because of its place in cultural and social life, religious and moral arguments are accorded higher status than secular and rights-based arguments.

## **Conclusion**

Although there have been numerous calls to replace homophobia with the term heterosexism, there has also been considerable resistance. This is partly because an (apparently) politicised term would be replaced by one that suggests that LGB oppression is unconscious. It is also because political activity, so far, has been directed to the removal of the most blatant forms of discrimination. Before the term homophobia can be superseded (it is not merely substitution), we need first to understand heterosexism as a theoretical concept, to recognise its similarities and differences to other forms of oppression and to analyse how it is perpetuated. Heterosexism may be commonplace, but it is neither mundane nor benign. Examples of it, however, are often benign and include the assumptions of heterosexuality implicit in employment application forms; assessment forms in social work; and sexual history taking in health care. In drawing parallels with other forms of oppression, the chapter has attempted to reveal how heterosexism is organised, for example, by making implicit privilege, explicit. There are also other parallels including assimilation (just the same arguments), the double bind, false equivalence and the construction of LGB issues (as with sexism) as private or personal concerns. By examining the processes which perpetuate the inferiority of homosexuality and the heterosexual assumption, the chapter has aimed to show that these can be seen, not simply as indications of homophobia, but as the mechanisms by which heterosexism is maintained.

The rest of the book is organised in two parts in order to analyse heterosexism in concrete situations. The first part deals with overarching themes and in doing so, draws on existing research to examine the pervasiveness of heterosexism in relation to access to health and social care (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 recognises that 'race', transgender, class, disability,

bisexuality, geographic location and sexual identity are not occupied as separate and divisible aspects of the self, but as multiple identities. It considers the particular manifestations of heterosexism in relation to different LGBT identities. Chapter 4 investigates the ways in which research is constrained by heterosexist concepts. The invisibility of LGB populations is considered in Chapter 5 which discusses what is known about the demographic characteristics of the LGB population.

The second part of the book takes quantitative and qualitative data as case studies from a large UK research project of lesbian health to look specifically at the ways in which health and health care are permeated by heterosexism. Disclosure is a constant theme in lesbian, gay and bisexual health and social care research; Chapter 6 considers the ways in which lesbians negotiate disclosure and non-disclosure in their interactions with health professionals. They choose active and passive strategies of disclosure and non-disclosure. In Chapter 7, the positive and adverse experiences which lesbians report in their health care interactions with service providers are examined. Chapter 8 considers how current understandings about risk are constrained by heterosexism. The final chapter looks forward to new directions in equality agendas and to the opportunities and threats posed by policies of social inclusion and the establishment of a single equality commission.

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