

On the Internalization of Homophobia

Understanding the “Little Boy with the Big Secret”

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I was “out” for several years before I found a book which reflected the way I was socialized with homophobia, and had internalized that homophobia. When I was handed a copy of “The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing up Gay in the Straight Man’s World” by a therapist, I felt a bit of what I can only describe as awkwardly offended. I expected to be given a number of self-help guides, although I still believed we were in need of much advancement in society, I also believed my personal struggle with my sexuality to be a non-issue, something dismissible.

The book identifies a certain self-loathing that manifests through our socialization as children in our relationships ranging with our fathers and mothers, to our playground experiences. The book makes a shocking omission of our socialization through media, although I will attempt to do such myself. It goes lengths to identify some of the common ways that this self-loathing, the internalized homophobia of which I am writing about, can manifest in our adulthood. In becoming overwhelmed by this shame, we find ourselves relentlessly trying to compensate for it. This cycle often reveals itself in self-destruction:

“What is being said is that the trauma from growing up gay is a world primarily run by straight men is deeply wounding in a unique and profound way. Straight men have issues and struggles that are no less wounding but quite different from those of gay men.”

Downs goes on to describe a “little boy with a big secret” and an adult who takes the shame from their childhood, and seeks validation (at any cost, even if it’s inauthentic) to compensate for this shame. He discusses the high substance abuse and suicide rates of gay men, and the tendencies of gay men to decorate our lives as if we’re trying to compensate for something. Suddenly, it became very clear to me that I was absolutely wrong about not having issues with myself. I was very much the “little boy with a big secret”, and I still exhibit all the behaviors of someone trying to protect a secret that isn’t even there anymore.

Unfortunately, the social analysis falls very short. Perhaps that is due to his limitations within clinical psychology, but I find it impossible to talk about “cultivating authenticity” in our lives as gay men without talking about social empowerment. I also find it impossible to talk about gay shame without understanding it as internalized homophobia, and therefore a symptom of hetero-supremacy. He may signify this with his title, but he leaves us with few solutions (most of which are self-care) to the systemic issues which we suffer, only therapeutic strategies.

I certainly do not blame Dr. Downs for having a more narrow focus on the subject. However, the problems he describes and addresses in the title of the book, cannot be solved by therapy. Likewise, those of us read his book, learning so much about ourselves, and put it down feeling defeated still. We still live in the same conditions that produced us. The book fails to empower us to win our struggle, only helps us understand the way in which navigate through the “straight man’s world”.

What I cannot look past is that this is written from a somewhat critical of what can be interpreted as “Queerness within Gayness”. That is. the things we often associated with, but may or may not actually identify with. Polyamory (and what Downs describes as “hypersexuality”) are described as a part of the “over-compensation” stage. I don’t think it serves us to be sex-negative in any way whatsoever. We need to have our sexualities affirmed and empowered before we dissent upon them as products of homophobia.

Stages of Shame: Life in a Constantly Evolving Heteronormativity

Downs also believes that our fulfillment entails navigating through a world that “affords us our share of joy, happiness, fulfillment and love” and “isn’t about ‘not being Gay’”. There’s a lot of problems with this. The most obvious being that we do not live in that world. Dr. Alan Downs, being a white male in the first world, might certainly live in such a reality, but is unfair to everyone who doesn’t get their share. That worldview falls victim to the naive notion that we are isolated individuals on an equal playing field. A book about homophobia can’t afford that perspective.

“The stages are arranged by the primary manner in which the gay man handles shame. The first stage is “Overwhelmed by Shame” and includes the period of time when he remained “in the closet” and fearful of his own sexuality. The second stage is “Compensating for Shame” and describes the gay man’s attempt to neutralize his shame by being more successful, outrageous, beautiful or masculine. During this stage he may take on many sexual partners in his attempt to feel attractive, sexy and loved – in short, less shameful.

The final stage is “Discovering Authenticity”. Not all men progress out of the previous two stages, but those who do begin to build a life that is based upon their own passions and values, rather than proving to themselves that they are desirable and lovable.”

I would propose the idea that upon navigating through our heteronormative world, we are likely to find ourselves living in each of these stages based on our various different interpersonal exchanges. This means we never exclusively live in any of these stages, but rather all of them at once in various proportions. I can be closeted in a scenario where I still seek inauthentic validation and overcompensate again, then expressing my queerness, and once again may begin overcompensating for it out of fear and shame, possibly obtaining some authentic validation at some point. However, the “little boy with the big secret” isn’t something I believe to be completely inalienable, there’s some experiences that we have as a child that are difficult to disassociate from.

Rather, we exist and live our lives going through these “stages of shame” not simply once in a lifetime, but constantly. Regardless of what our lifestyle is, we find ourselves forced into situations that revert us all the way back to the beginning. Understanding these stages is only a tool to help us live and assimilate to a world not built for us.

That’s not the world I want to live in either. Understanding the world we live in currently only goes so far to reconcile the problems in my life. There’s no dissociating and taming the “little boy with the big secret” inside of me. Faced with this contradiction, I’m faced with the difficult choice of letting it destroy me, or subvert the social order which created it.

The Social Construction of the Gay Identity under Capitalism

Homosexuality exists objectively in history. This much is true, and while we haven’t yet been able to reach a consensus of the biological (genetic) basis for homosexuality, it’s widely considered to be possible. A great advancement thus far in the academic community in regards to

homosexuality, is that we're starting to find more legitimacy granted from psychologists, who used to classify us as suffering from a mental illness, but now recognizes it almost universally as absolutely natural, the most significant result of this has been the APA's (American Psychological Association) resolution denouncing "conversion therapy" as psychologically harmful, anti-scientific, and ineffective and traumatic. This had a large influence in California, where last year they conversion therapy for minors. This is probably the first time rights have been granted in the name of queer youth, breaking a silence that had lingered for too long. Generally, it can be thought that people are being to see homosexuality as something as inalienable from our society as heterosexuality, because it is.

Being Gay is much different. Being Gay is new. Our identity formed as a direct result of Capitalism:

"I want to argue that gay men and lesbians have *not* always existed. Instead, they are a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era. Their emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism – more specifically, it's free labor system – that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity"
– John D'emilio in *Capitalism and the Gay Identity*

So this makes Capitalism seem rather empowering for Gay people. I assure you this, it is neither my intention nor that of D'emilio. It is important though, to recognize this very important distinction and creation of the Gay identity. It is the very marginalization of the alienated-labor system that created our identity, by reaction to the material conditions on my own. Tolerance for homosexuality is much more independent than that, it manifests itself in different points in history based on a number of variables, of which the system under which material goods are produced is simply one variable. While I am skeptical of most claims which paint the early USSR as some sort of Gay paradise, it is worth noting that they did bring some sort of legitimacy to us when Lenin legalized homosexuality, and decriminalized sodomy. This was some 50 years before the Gay identity formed in the Capitalist west. Almost a century later, we're actually still behind Lenin in some places, in terms of our legal status with the state.

Judith Butler has a very interesting way of describing this. I suspect she didn't title this herself. She speaks of the idea of the existence the of Gay culture being a phenomenon of "possibility". At the end she specifies how society doesn't "produce" homosexuals.

When we designate things as "social constructs" in social justice contexts, we're quick to become abolitionists. I'm guilty of this as a relatively cisgendered "gender abolitionist". I often have to clarify that by this I mean the dismantling and de-institutionalization of gender. "Gay abolitionist" sounds awfully reactionary, and I don't think this is needed to understand what Gayness is in relation to both Capitalism and it's difference from our Queerness and homosexuality. Perhaps a certain of buck-stopping should be done in regards to identity abolitionism. I have absolutely no interests in abolishing or erasing the elements of my culture which I identify with, much less anyone else's. The problems with this are numerous however, and they won't be resolved here.

So what does this actually reveal about *homophobia*, the systemic oppression of homosexuality under capitalism? The spaces we have deemed as "gay spaces" are not exactly places in which we

are safe from homophobia. In fact, homophobia is rather rampant within our community. The “possibility to be Gay” as Butler describes, doesn’t negate the possibility re-enforce and reproduce homophobia.

Male Self-awareness, Gay Patriarchy, and Cultural Homophobia

Gay men are hyper-aware of masculinity, and also have a heightened sense of self-awareness in regards to masculinity. We fetishize displays of power and dominion, sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. Some of us are insecure of our masculinity, some of us seek the validation of others in regards to our masculinity. We may even embrace misogyny in an attempt to reinforce our patriarchy.

We are greatest fanatics of the “Cult of Masculinity”, worshipers of the male body and everything there is to know about “men”. You can say we are amongst its biggest supporters. It’s doors remain shut to us, as a single portion of this Cult alienates us, the part concerning the objectification of women and heterosexuality. This has a painful ripple that I would say has a striking effect on Gay socialization.

This cult doesn’t actually exist in any material manner, it’s more a spectacle that gay men exhibit through our behaviors, a phenomenon for which I don’t have a word for yet. I would say this Cult of Masculinity is an entirely separate institution than patriarchy. In many ways, we may attempt to reproduce or replicate patriarchy, in an attempt to appease the Cult. Some of us grow distant from our fathers and our heterosexual male role models, feeling like a disappointment to them, regardless of how they express their tolerance. The manner in which this can affect these kinds of interpersonal relationships is astonishing. Feeling inadequately male amongst my straight male friends is something rather consistent in my life.

This is because we only know what most people seem to know about gender. We undergo the same patriarchal socialization that all men do. We certainly may internalize it differently, we may not have some of the behaviors, but this does little to actually negate our patriarchy. John David wrote this in an article called “Gay Patriarchy” for an old magazine for Gay youth:

“The answer is that gay men are *men* with the same conditioned patriarchal upbringing in the same coercive structures. As boys, the apprentice men, we are taught:

- to expect to be the rulers of the world;
- to view all people as objects and services (sex, work, leisure, nurturing);
- that men are competitors and there is no sympathy or celebration if you lose;
- that men cannot talk about their feelings or be intimate without sex;
- that there are immovable hierarchies of power and influence based on looks, money, class, education, and employment.

Very young homosexual boys get the same conditioning as all boys. We avoid, just as straight boys do, the name calling and bashing “in case we’re gay”. Our general society, family, peers and educators see us only as boys, and to avoid the punishment of not being “normal” (read patriarchal) we have to react as boys. Our dismissiveness and disdain of women and girls becomes installed successfully.”

Homonormativity

Homonormativity is the capitalist reconciliation of the hetero-normative class and queerness. It is the mechanism in which we assimilate, and form our culture within the heteronormative world as a reflection. It is also the source of devaluation of genderqueer and trans* people, over the elevated concerns of cisgendered homosexuals. It is the way we have found a sort of “detente” with heteronormativity.

Our success as queers is often measured by how well we can live as cisgendered/heteronormative people, or how they believe we should. This is our push for marriage and military equality, but on the other side of the coin, it’s also terming our weddings as “commitment ceremonies”.

Homonormativity is the entire embodiment of the liberal LGBT platform. I do not understand the means or measure of these alphabet soup conglomerations. I don’t know where exactly I decided they weren’t speaking for me, but it was definitely affirmed the moment I saw QUILTBAG. If you are *that* desperate to identify exactly what we are that brings us together, then we clearly need a departure in our political discourse from fixed identities. I don’t (in any way whatsoever) endorse that we abandon identity politics altogether, but I’m not “LGBT”, I’m one of those letters, but never can I be the others, and at this point I am staunchly opposed to using that platform for that reason alone. It is not our identities that brings us together, as we vary so much naturally in our beautiful species. What brings us together is our queer experience in the world of the heterosexual gender binary.

Alan Downs directly addresses Gay men and not other gender/sexual minorities, as he feels he cannot do them justice, and that his experience has not been theirs. For that reason, I think my ability to identify with the subject(s) begins with the shared experience I have with other gay men, but does little to reconcile my actual queerness (because reconciliation is not the idea anyways).

My primary issue with homonormativity, and our replication of some very oppressive bullshit, is the shit you will see on Grindr. Yes, I said Grindr. A lot can be learned about Gay men by giving them a radar app to which they use to whatever ends they choose (usually casual sex). Upon your introduction to Grindr, whether you like it or not, you will be assigned an animal or creature. You’re a “Bear”, or a “Seal”, maybe an “Otter”, perhaps a “Pig”, or “Twink”, eventually you’ll be “Daddy”. I didn’t even consent to being Gay, but apparently I’ll be a couple of different animals in my lifetime too.

Don’t even get me started with the things people put in their profiles as “preferences”. This almost always is related to race, masculinity, size or HIV status. It’s not uncommon at all to see “White masculine male here. Fit and HIV negative. UB2”. Apparently if you’re a douche-bag, we can work something out. But if you don’t fit their idea of what it means to be masculine (as if we don’t struggle enough with that as it is), you’re screwed. You better have it straightened out by the time you meet them, because “masculine” is a range of things of which you can’t occupy all at once.

Hard as I try, and as objectively I understand Queerness, I cannot entirely remove myself from Gay culture, because that is what society designates as the place for homosexual behaviors is. You can’t really go “cruising” at a punk show, as much as Limp Wrist would like you to believe that you can. We also have to remember we’re mostly living in the same historical context that produced us. People have fought and died for my ability to be Gay, and while some of us have

agreed to fight on more, I can't pretend like the current state of things for me at the moment could be worse.

But being "Gay" comes with being associated with other Gay men, and often we find homophobia from each other. I grow exhausted trying to live up to the expectations of other Gay men, to be hyper-masculine sex-god and a ton of other things that can be difficult to perform. I'm also tired of trying to fit this juggling act of assimilating to the straight world and fulfilling my obligations to the Gay world. Apparently having a wedding stylized like a straight persons, but calling it a "commitment ceremony" is a win-win for everyone, and "progressive".

Conclusions

When I finished with Down's book, I did feel a sense of individual strength in my ability to navigate through capitalism, but I also looked to my queerness with a certain disempowerment. Once identified, the pain of being "little boy with the big secret" doesn't really go away. In fact, you start to see it more. I realized that my life had been the accumulation of a lot of Gay shame. I saw this pain in other gay men as well. In short, the whole world and my whole life made a bit more sense to me.

Making a bit more sense doesn't really change the fact that we are deeply damaged lot. The wounds are dug deeper at times, quite often we cannot even rely on each other to not do this. We can't even find refuge in our heads from this. It can be difficult to love yourself, after you lose the love your father or grandfather. It's an everyday battle to not shame ones self in a world hell-bent on shaming you.

This was during a time where I was undergoing a period of deep self-reflection and reflection of my worldview as well, which continues to this very day. I came out of that with a few things, all of which are both personal and political:

- 1.) Everyone (regardless of identity or lack thereof) is socialized with homophobia.
- 2.) My life (at the time of finding the discussed pieces from Downs and Butler) is being ruled by gay shame and internalized homophobia, and the source of a lot of self-destruction.
- 3.) The primary contradiction in my life thus far has been with hetero-normativity and capitalism.

I think there are certainly unique manifestations of social repression within and amongst Gay men. I would like to take Radical Queer perspective and explore these issues. Sociologists can be as fascinated by us as they want, the truth is only we know the things we know. These issues shouldn't be elevated over trans*, genderqueer, intersex and lesbian issues, that is absolutely not my intention.

From here I am given a unique set of choices of what to do with the pain of the "little boy with the big secret". The "pain" has matured into a Queer rage. I cannot say I see a future for myself by doing what Dr. Downs would have me do, which is to constantly deconstruct this shame and anger with therapeutic methods. Sure, these may make it easier for me to live my life, but I still think (despite his efforts to say otherwise) Dr. Downs still plays the game of "let's be like the hets!".

So instead of discarding my "Velvet Rage", I'll make use of it, and take my chances with plan B, the negation of normativity through a Queer revolution:

In a Capitalist society, there can be no reconciliation of Queerness and Normativity, and that's what the Gay identity seeks to do, was meant to do. I normally don't mind being Gay, but I have to objectively understand what it means. The only reconciliation can be the total negation of normativity by Queerness under Full Communism. Until then (most of us) are hopelessly "identified", navigating through a capitalist world that isn't meant for us.

Position regarding "Homosexuality", "Gay" and "Queer" and the difference between them.

1.) Homosexuality is a fixed and material condition. I am attracted to those with a similar gender identity as I. This is objective.

2.) Being Gay is my identity. I never consented to this, society came up with it for me long before I was born. My identity as a Gay man is more or less comfortable for me, which backfires into conflicts with both homonormativity and assimilationism.

Gayness is a social construct, and is usually used to signify a culture. The materialist term for being "Gay" is that I'm homosexual, and my homosexuality is objective and a part of my essential self. However, I am not biologically linked to a "culture", yet I simultaneously often find myself unable to navigate away from Gay society.

Lastly, being Gay might manifest in my personal life and social life, but I have little use for it in a socio-political context, but I cannot fail to recognize that my personal struggle has been overwhelming "gay" (internalized homophobia, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse/mental health),

3.) Being Queer is not my identity. While also being something I never consented to, it's a social condition which is an unstable place to inhabit. The evolution of Queerness is constantly ongoing, as normativity is constantly changing as well. The Queer perspective is the understanding of Gender and Sexual minorities as social constructions having material manifestations in identities, and regards the historical objectivity of these identities to be intrinsically tied to social construction.

It means analyzing from the perspective of a person objectively homosexual, yet "Gay" in a social and historical context.

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