

The Connections between Homophobia and the other "Isms"

Co-authored with Althea Smith, published by The Campaign to End Homophobia, 1991

"It is virtually impossible to view one oppression, such as sexism or homophobia, in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism. They are linked by a common origin -- economic power and control -- and by common methods of limiting, controlling, and destroying lives. There is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each is terrible and destructive. To eliminate one oppression successfully, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all or success will be always be limited and incomplete."
(Suzanne Pharr, Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism)

For lesbian, gay, and bisexual people who are also white, or middle class, or Christian, or able-bodied, homophobia can be all consuming. At the same time, the experience of being a member of an oppressor group can evoke guilt and feel paralyzing. Consequently, it is tempting to minimize racism, classism, or other forms of oppression and ignore privilege. The task for all of us -- regardless of the our membership in oppressed and oppressor groups -- is to make the connections between the "isms."

Why do the connections matter?

For some people, the connections are unavoidable, as the "isms" are experienced simultaneously and continuously. For others, learning about the ways in which a particular oppression targets other groups is a vehicle for learning more about one's own experience in oppressed groups. Although a heterosexual African American woman may know a lot about being Black, her experience may be illuminated through the experiences of white lesbian and gay people, and lead her to new insights about ways to respond to the oppression she experiences.

From the perspective of those in the oppressor group, learning about one's privilege and the experience of being in oppressor groups is necessary for integrating all of one's identities. A white gay man may know first hand about what it means to be gay, but if he fails to come to terms with what it means to be white or male, then he will be missing critical information about himself as he moves through his life. He is a product of all his cultural identities, not just those for which he is oppressed; his perspective on the world is shaped by all of his cultural identities, not just those for which he is oppressed; he is experienced by others as a result of all his cultural identities, not just those for which his is oppressed.

From a political perspective, making the connections between oppressions is an opportunity to strengthen our individual efforts to end oppression. Recent increases in hate crimes, and the rise of hate groups, are an example of the need to work together: our resources for challenging hate groups are limited, so we need to decide how to end all hate crimes, and not get caught in arguments over which oppressed groups have it worse. Recent backlashes to multiculturalism also compel us to work together to develop the broadest possible base of anti-oppression efforts.

Finally, seeing the connections between oppressions is an opportunity to notice and understand how the "isms" come from the same core belief about the need for one people to dominate another. bell hooks refers to this as the politics of domination: "We live in a world ... governed

by politics of domination, one in which the belief in the notion of superior and inferior, and its concomitant ideology -- that the superior should rule over the inferior -- effects the lives of people everywhere." (bell hooks, Talking Back).

Therefore, ending oppression is in all of our self-interest, regardless of our particular memberships in target and non-target groups. A society which treats some of its members as "less-than" is capable of treating any of its members as "less-than."

Yet, ours is a society which professes justice and equality for all. Acknowledging and challenging the oppressions that other people face helps us realize the promises of this society. As others have said, "none of us can be truly free until all of us are free."

Some guidelines for exploring the connections

Coming to terms with all of one's cultural identities -- particularly those in the oppressor category -- can be scary as well as exciting. As you begin the journey of exploring the connections between oppressions, you may want to keep the following in mind:

1. Allow for the possibility that the "isms" are related. If we allow for the possibility, then we stay in a learning mode about the ways in which the "isms" are connected. But if we try to argue whether or not there is a connection, and only defend our old position, then we may well shut off our learning.
2. Use the knowledge you have about one form of oppression to increase your understanding about other forms of oppression. While it is true that a White person can not experience what it's like to be a Black person, a woman can use her understanding of sexism to begin to understand the personal impact of racism. Similarly, a white lesbian might use her knowledge of racism to deepen her understanding of her own homophobia.
3. Forgive yourself for what you don't know about other people and take personal responsibility for acquiring new information. Blaming ourselves and others generally leads to defensiveness, and when we get defensive, we stop learning and avoid contact. All of us, since birth, have been accumulating misinformation about a variety of groups; often, we have little or no accurate information about other groups. We can't change the past, but we can decide to take responsibility for learning about ourselves and others from this point on.
4. Focus on the impact that a particular oppression has on you. We often think only about the negative impact of oppression on members of the oppressed group. But each "ism" also has a negative impact on members of the oppressor group. If we focus on all the ways in which oppression affects all of us, we are likely to bring more energy and commitment to the challenge of ending oppression.

Some traps to be aware of as you make the connections between the "isms"

1. "My oppression is more severe than your oppression; we've suffered more than you have!" Arguments over which is worse -- being poor or being gay -- are generally hopeless and likely to

provoke feelings of guilt and pity ("I guess I don't really have it so bad") or hurt and anger over having one's experience discounted ("What do you mean I'm overreacting?"). Judging others experience as worse or better will keep us from learning about ourselves and others.

An alternative is to notice the similarities in the peoples experiences with oppression and learn from one another across oppressions. How is the experience of growing up poor similar to the experience of growing up lesbian, gay, or bisexual? And how is the experience of growing up middle class or wealthy similar to the experience of growing up heterosexual?

2. "This oppression is older and more entrenched than that oppression; racism has been around forever, and will take more energy to change than heterosexism!" Debates over which is the older or more persistent oppression can be interesting, but may keep us from seeing that all oppressions are perpetuated by domination and competition. The history of an oppression is irrelevant in terms of its impact on individuals in the present, and deciding that one oppression has a longer and deeper history may fuel our sense of futility about ever being able to change that oppression.

An alternative is to learn about the ways in which one oppression has been successfully challenged in the past and then use that learning to challenge another oppression in the present. Studying the history of slave revolts may lead us to discover new ways of building pride and unity among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people; reading about white abolitionists may help us discover ways to involve heterosexuals in ending homophobia.

3. "My experience with this oppression is unique; there is no comparison to your experience with that oppression." Believing that others are unable to understand our particular experience, simply because their identity as members of oppressed and oppressor groups is different from ours, will make it difficult for us to find the allies we need.

An alternative is to consider similarities as well as differences as a way to begin building bridges between groups. The similarities include the ways in which people of color, women, poor and working class people, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are stereotyped as "less than," denied access to power and resources, and ignored in terms of their contributions to society. The differences include the existence and effectiveness of anti-discrimination legislation, the opportunity to hide one's identity, and the possibility of changing one's membership in oppressed and oppressor groups over a lifetime. We might also consider the similarities as well as differences in the experiences of being white, male, middle or owner class, Christian, temporarily able-bodied, middle aged, and heterosexual.

4. "If we also work on that oppression, we will be stigmatized by our contact with that other group; our constituents will question our commitment and integrity to ending their oppression!" Frequently, activists for one oppression fear that their work will be compromised if they add another oppression to their agenda: women's rights groups have balked at embracing homophobia, out of fear that they would lose support from women who didn't want to be associated with lesbians; gay rights organizations have had their commitment to gay rights questioned when they have spoken out about the impact of racism, ageism, sexism, or anti-

Semitism.

An alternative is to focus on the ways in which all of us are negatively affected by the oppression directed at a particular group. If there is a incident in the neighborhood involving anti-Semitic graffiti, we might consider how lesbian, gay, and bisexual people could benefit from protecting the community from such behavior.

5. "If I work on that oppression, it will take away energy from working on this oppression!" Sometimes it seems as if there is precious little energy and resources to devote to "our" cause, let alone others' causes. But if we only focus on the elimination of one oppression, and are successful in alleviating that oppression in the short term, another oppression will probably takes its place. The culture will find a new scapegoat among oppressed groups and we'll be left wondering when our time to be scapegoated will come, or come again.

An alternative is to consider the questions, "Why are there so few of us? How might we make our movement more meaningful and fun so that others will join us? How can we collaborate with others? How can we work on both this oppression and that oppression? How can we challenge the politics of domination which underlie both this and that oppression?"

Taking Action Steps

1. Use intracultural and intercultural groups to increase our knowledge and experience. We can meet with members of our own cultural group as well as members of other cultural groups to discuss any of our oppressions. For example, white gay men could benefit from the opportunity to meet with racially diverse groups on gay issues and a group of diverse white people on racial issues. Or a group of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people from diverse class backgrounds could meet in same and mixed class groupings to discuss issues facing poor lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

2. Join organizations committed to ending other oppressions. We can seek and build coalitions with other groups which are culturally different from our own. For example, a chapter of Queer Nation might join a chapter of the NAACP as a way to support anti-racism work and explore ways to develop new support for anti-homophobia work. In addition to adding resources for both groups' work, they might find that political issues such as domestic partnership legislation and documentation of hate crimes could be in both of their interest.

3. Develop collaborative projects across oppressions. Within activist organizations to which we belong, we can propose and develop projects in collaboration with other groups working on different oppressions. For example, a white lesbian group interested in developing day care options in the community might find allies among groups of poor and working class men and women.

4. Ask questions of and talk with others about the possible connections between oppressions.

In social, work, spiritual, or political settings, we can share our experiences with oppression and ask others about theirs. We don't need to have a politically correct answer prepared ahead of time -- a healthy curiosity will lead us to new insights about ourselves and others.

5. Read

This is a beginning list of the books about the connections between oppressions; we encourage you to use your own good thinking to make the connections as you read other materials.

Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism, Suzanne Pharr. Inverness, CA: Chardon Press, 1988.

(connections between homophobia and sexism)

The Dominated Man, Albert Memmi (connections between racism and anti-Semitism)

Sister Outsider, Audre Lourde. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984 (essays on the

connections between homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism)

This Bridge Called My Back: writings by radical women of color, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981 (connections between homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism)

The Colonizer and the Colonized, Albert Memmi. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965. (an exploration of the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized and the colonizer)

Killers of the Dream, Lillian Smith. New York: Norton, 1978. (an exploration of the psychological effects of racism on white people)

Talking Back, bell hooks. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989. (connections between homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism)

Thanks to all the people -- known and unknown to us -- who have thought about, talked about, and written about the connections between oppressions.