Learning to Unlearn: A Case Study of the Initial Rejection and Subsequent Acceptance of Homosexuality by Heterosexuals

Tamara Priestley
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Abstract: This research sought to gain an understanding of the learning heterosexuals engage in while coming to acceptance of homosexuality and to examine their understandings of heterosexism, power and positionality that might be at the base of such learning. Transformative learning theory was used as a lens to understand the learning and its process.

Context and Background

Throughout the history of the United States the homosexual population has often been viewed with misunderstanding and contradictory messages. At times they have even been repressed through various legal edicts that have had significant negative impacts on their lives (*Bowers v. Hardwick* 1986, *Dallas v. England* 1993, *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale* 2000, *Ward v. Ward* 2002). This has often led homosexuals to live their lives "invisibly", under the radar of mainstream political, social and cultural issues. Browning (1993, 1994, p. 18) stated that, "gay people are admitted only to the degree that they sequester their difference and conduct a sexless public life that offers no model, no quarter, no inspiration to others-child or adult-who would explore all that is queer about themselves."

However, in current American society the gay and lesbian population has begun to move to the forefront of many mainstream agendas ranging from the political (Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act [H.R. 1592], The Military Readiness Enhancement Act [H.R. 1246]), to the social (Uniting American Families Act [proposed Federal Bill], Domestic Partnership Benefits and Obligations Act [proposed Federal Bill]) and work environment (Employment Non-Discrimination Act [proposed Federal Bill]). Each of these issues deals with rights that the majority heterosexual community is currently entitled to; but, they are unavailable to those of a homosexual orientation.

The number of homosexuals potentially in line for such rights and privileges is a question with varied answers. According to the 2000 United States Census Bureau (www.census.gov retrieved on November 22, 2008), there are 105.5 million households in America and of those, 1.2 million gay people live with a same-sex partner. However, this may be an under representation of the homosexual community because it only includes homosexuals who live together, leaving out those who do not live together, those who are single, homosexual youth, elderly homosexuals who live with caregivers, homeless homosexual people, undocumented homosexual immigrants and those who are not willing to disclose their sexual orientation for various reasons including the stigmatization and continued prejudice and discrimination against them.

Though the visibility of homosexuals is increasing and many have found a semblance of acceptance in society, they continue to be a marginalized group existing in a society where heterosexuality is the accepted norm. Heterosexist privilege—the taken-for-granted 'rights' of heterosexuals—permeates society (Mass 1996) and it is based on a heterosexism worldview (McNaught 1993) that believes that heterosexuality is actually superior to homosexuality and

should be an enforceable social norm (Badgett, 1995). Heterosexism is described by Hill (1995) "as the repressive social system of obligatory heterosexuality."

Vanessa Sheared and Peggy Sissel (2001, p. 327) have reported that factors including homophobia have created "caste-like situations whereby entire collective bodies become marginalized and isolated from those who maintain power and control. So, ultimately, rather than celebrating diversity and difference, humankind has participated in a zero-sum game of winners and losers which is premised by racist, sexist, classist and otherwise prejudicial rationales."

In spite of this prevalence of heterosexual hegemony toward homosexuality, results such as those shown in the 2006 survey by Harris Interactive in conjunction with Witeck-Combs Communications Inc. and the report "'Coming Out' and Americans' Attitudes on Gay Rights" (http://www.hrc.org/issues/workplace.asp retrieved on October 7, 2008) gives some credence to the notion that more heterosexuals are becoming accepting of homosexuality. This acceptance by heterosexuals may emanate from learning or perhaps more accurately from an unlearning of biases previously learned, lived and often acted upon. Brew (1996, p.88) describes a process she calls "unlearning through experience." She believes that without, "unlearning, real knowledge does not develop and grow."

As Grace (2001, p. 263) states in *Making Space: Merging Theory and Practice in Adult Education*, the acceptance of homosexuality also involves, "unlearning hegemonic knowledge that defines the acceptable and accepted in hetero-normative terms only. This unlearning in the name of inclusion is crucial to transform understandings of culture and citizenship in education and the broader culture."

The biases explored in this research project were viewed from the perspective of the majority heterosexual population towards the minority homosexual population. Newman (1996, p. 137) reminds us "rather than study the oppression, we should study the oppressors, we should look at their values, their culture, their ideologies, their addictions, their motives and their delusions." This study attempted to do just that.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the learning that leads to and impedes an adult heterosexual's shift from rejection to acceptance of homosexuality. A secondary purpose was to examine the understandings individuals have of heterosexism and power and positionality that might be at the base of such "unlearning". The researcher utilized transformational learning theory as a lens to gain an understanding of how individuals learned to become more accepting of homosexuality as well the power and positionality involved in the bias of non-acceptance of homosexuality.

The overarching focus of this study was on perspective transformations:

How heterosexuals come to an understanding of their own awareness of heterosexism and an 'unlearning' of non-acceptance of homosexuality.

The following questions guided the research:
1. How did the heterosexual come to such awareness and what were the facilitators and impediments on their journey to accepting homosexuality?
2. What role does an awareness of heterosexism play in one's acceptance of homosexuality?
3. In what ways does transformative learning theory help to understand the learning and its process?

Research Design and Framework

Qualitative research methods were selected for this study because it was not known in advance what the experiences or "learning's" of the subjects were. Thus, it was imperative to generate data that was of rich detail and adequately descriptive of the subjects experiences. Exploring the identified problem of this research was accomplished via thoughtfully constructed in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with an embedded critical incident.

The initial study sample participants were drawn from adult members of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). These respondents volunteered from PFLAG chapters located in New York City, New York and Fairfield and Danbury, Connecticut. The PFLAG organization was targeted as a pool for research respondents because it is primarily a heterosexual organization that has as one of its goals to, "…celebrate diversity and envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse sexual orientations" (http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=191 retrieved October 22, 2008).

Findings and Conclusions

With regard to how one initially learns to have a non-acceptance of homosexuality, the findings led the researcher to conclude that the early learning experiences youngsters have in K-12 schools are exceptionally important. The majority of participants stated unequivocally that during their time in a K-12 school, they repeatedly heard words and slurs that were negative toward homosexuality and that those utterances had a profound impact on their not accepting homosexuals. In addition, they also spoke about the pressure they encountered in high school to conform to heterosexual roles and standards. Conforming to heterosexual roles is an extension of the heterosexism that was discussed earlier and is prevalent in American society.

From this information the researcher concluded that one's early school experiences have a profound impact on one's initial frames of reference. Although the examples provided in this study focused on harassment-primarily in the form of hate language, the researcher believes that because the K-12 years seem to foster such a great impact on initial frames of reference, it is imperative that school systems use this information when designing inclusive, tolerance related programs. This finding and conclusion relates to Cervero and Wilson's (2006) second characteristic of power in that the school system holds the power but ultimately it will be up to the individual educational personnel to decide how that power will used.

All of the participants related that coming to know a homosexual on a personal basis was the most important factor in their coming to accept homosexuality. The majority of participants said that they first met and be-friended a homosexual in their place of employment. Ten mentioned that they also have a homosexual relative. Five said that a relative was their first experience of personally knowing a homosexual.

Based on these findings, the researcher concluded that interpersonal relationships are extremely important and in the case of this research, the catalyst for individuals when shifting from non-acceptance to acceptance. This finding and subsequent analysis is supported in the literature of transformative learning. Mezirow (2000) Taylor (2000) and Brookfield (2000) all mention the importance of relationships and critical reflection. The fact that ten of the fifteen respondents reported having a homosexual relative is a bit higher correlation than the general public according to census estimates. However, it does demonstrate that homosexuals and their relatives comprise a large portion of the population. This is significant in that it led the researcher to conclude that recognizing and providing safe, trusting environments in the workplace and within families for homosexuals to live their lives openly is crucial.

The findings and analysis in this research offered several insights into the facilitators and impediments of those who are on a journey to accepting homosexuality. More than half of the respondents mentioned that the media was helpful in their acceptance of homosexuality. The respondents mentioned a variety of media sources such as film, television, music and 'out' celebrities.

For example, a number of respondents mentioned the television show 'Will and Grace' and the gay character, Jack. They said that watching this character interact with a sense of humor among heterosexuals made them feel more comfortable about homosexuals. Most of the participants also expressed that the presence of 'out' homosexual celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres and her presence on a daily talk show gave them the opportunity to see and hear a homosexual living as a homosexual not as a character portraying a homosexual. The findings in the area of media as a facilitator led the researcher to conclude that the portrayal and opportunity to see and hear homosexuals can be an important aspect of one's journey to accepting homosexuality. Because of these findings within the context of different media, it will be important to examine more closely the positive attributes in the media that encourage acceptance and replicate those qualities for future media.

Another finding was the emphasis participants placed on one's self-esteem. The participants unanimously agreed that a negative sense of self-esteem would hinder not only an acceptance of themselves, but of others as well, particularly those of a homosexual orientation. However, among the respondents, there was no common definition or example of what constituted positive or negative self-esteem. The literature in this area was also not explicit in its definitions or examples of what creates positive or negative self-esteem and how it is displayed or acted out. This led the researcher to conclude that self-esteem whether positive or negative is a factor in accepting homosexuality but that more research is needed in order to find ways to foster positive self-esteem in the K-12 school systems, families and in adult places of employment.

Religion was mentioned as a facilitator and impediment to one's acceptance of homosexuality. Because of the complex nature and emotional overtones of religions and their histories as well as reasons provided in the literature and by interviewees, the researcher concluded that religion and it's relationship to acceptance and non-acceptance of homosexuality needs to be explored further within and across religious beliefs. The current very public climate of religion and homosexuality is another area that would benefit from further exploration.

Discussion of religion in the interviews was fraught with passionate emotions both in favor of and against religion and it's role as a facilitator or impediment in accepting homosexuality. This led the researcher to conclude that in the future, religion may play a more important role in either encouraging acceptance or non-acceptance of homosexuality. From the literature, regardless of the religion, if it has at it's foundation a dogma that is ethnocentric, it will be slow in encouraging acceptance of homosexuality. The less fundamentalist in structure of the church, the greater chance one has to promote homosexual acceptance.

Even though a number of participants were able to express with dismay, examples such as unequal marriage rights, military policy, and workplace conditions that demonstrated the unequal status of homosexuals in America, none used the word 'heterosexism'. With the exception of two, no one demonstrated an understanding that their heterosexual privilege contributed to the unequal status of homosexuals. Another finding was that all of the participants were in agreement that hierarchical societies have always existed in the past and will into the future. Perhaps because only two participants identified their possible role in heterosexism and none were able to

articulate it, is a demonstration of just how deeply ingrained heterosexism is in our society and consciousness.

Transformative learning theory was used to help in understanding the learning process respondents engaged in while shifting from non-acceptance to acceptance of homosexuality. All of the respondents reported experiencing either a singular or series of events that caused a change in their meaning perspective. Only two respondents described a singular epochal event and they each reported that the event was framed around intense emotionally moving feelings for the individual who was the center of their transformation. Thus, it can be concluded that in this research as in previous research on transformative learning, gradual, multiple experiences are the most common occurrence for a change in meaning perspective.

The respondents also described periods of self-examination when they assessed their assumptions and critically reflected. Each respondent reported having a memorable period of emotions while engaging in the process of reflection. Some told of emotionally breaking down at PFLAG meetings when they reflected while sharing their stories of non-acceptance and eventual acceptance. Three males spoke with tears in their eyes when they recalled the very personal experience of discovering someone whom they were close with was a homosexual. Other participants recanted their self-reflection as an extremely private, personal time while others told of reflecting outward with others whom they knew and trusted.

From heartfelt, emotion-laden experiences, the researcher concludes that emotions are a fundamental part of self-examination, assessing assumptions and critically reflecting. The researcher also concludes that the participants did not share a common technique or process for their reflecting, but rather described a wide range of reflection experiences. Since all of the participants described a sense of relief when they found others who could share their new viewpoint, journey, emotions and perspective, the researcher concluded that critical reflection is an arduous experience emotionally and perhaps even physically.

The majority of respondents engaged in some form of action that required the use of their new perspective on homosexuality. Some found solace in sharing with co-workers and relatives while others became leaders in groups that promote acceptance of homosexuality. For all of these respondents, they expressed that whatever action they took, it was freeing for them, allowing them to explore new social situations, locales and workplace rules that in the past they had dismissed. Based on these reported experiences, the researcher concluded that dialogue around issues of homosexuality is necessary and should be encouraged, especially in the workplace.

Finally, the ability to reintegrate a new perspective into one's daily life is an important characteristic of transformative learning. The respondents spoke of how their lives had been changed forever because of their new perspective. Respondents gave examples that primarily focused on the gaining of new friends and freedom from the prejudices that previously restricted their lives. The conclusion the researcher drew from this, was that once a person truly changes perspective, they have little choice but to live within that perspective. Thus, their daily routines, roles and activities become synonymous with their perspective. As one respondent said, "It's like being on a battlefield, there is no going back".

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