

Chapter 6

Homophobic Conduct as Normative Masculinity Test: Victimization, Male Hierarchies, and Heterosexualizing Violence in Hate Crimes

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ABSTRACT

Homophobic violence can be considered as an expressive act. Violent behavior can be considered as anti-homosexual when victims are chosen because they are considered or perceived as homosexual. Following this reasoning, hate crimes as homophobic crimes have a communicative value, since they represent a range of “masculinization” practices within the processes of gender socialization, both in conventional and illegitimate social worlds. Every homophobic act aims to intimidate not just the victim, but the whole group associated with the, whether concretely or merely in the perception of the perpetrator. This chapter will take into account the main research on victimization from an international perspective; it will highlight how both the gender of the perpetrator and the cultural constructions of masculinity(ies), in a heterosexist and hegemonic system, seem to play a fundamental role in producing homophobic and anti-homosexual behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Violent behavior against homosexuals can be grouped under the category of hate crimes (McPhail, 2002). A “hate crime” is usually not directed at an individual, or person; rather, it is directed at a group, or category of people, where a specific group is seen to embody each one of its members’ (dis)identification on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, physical appearance, gender, and sexual orientation. Hate crimes therefore entail a symbolic-communicative function, in that they target both the victim and the whole group to whom they belong, or to whom aggressors think they belong. Victims of hate crimes

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are not exclusively gays or lesbians, but also heterosexuals who are “perceived” as homosexuals, that is, who do not adhere to dominant normative gender and sexual scripts. We therefore are led to assume that there are as many kinds of violence against non-heterosexual subjects as hegemonic models and variations of gender – both inside and outside homosexual communities. Socio-criminological research and studies on victimization need to consider the cultural environments in which crimes are committed (Mason, 1993); above all, they need to analyze the ways in which the socially constructed hegemonic gender models and normative sexual configurations imply the subordination of (other) gendered and sexualized positions, based on a common sense distinction. This chapter aims to define the concept of homophobic conduct by disentangling it from its origins in psychoanalysis; it attempts to outline the main socio-cultural aspects of violent behavior/conduct that target specifically homosexual males. First, the chapter will briefly look at key statistics documenting the victimization of LGBT population; it will then use the gender of the perpetrators of violence as lens through which to read anti-homosexual conduct. In particular, by addressing “masculinity” in the context of homophobic behavior, the chapter will frame this specific type of hate crime within a broader discussion about the cultural construction of hegemonic genders, of normative sexualities, and of “masculinity”. As will be shown, key research on the characteristic features and dynamics of homophobic violence and the perpetrators’ profile agree on a number of aspects, including: young or young adult males are the typical would-be aggressors; these acts of violence are usually performed by a group of people and are inflicted on individuals; the attacker and the victim usually do not know each other; the violence is particularly brutal, and it occurs in public or semi-public places. One element that emerges with clarity, however, is that the aggressor’s gender and the situated cultural constructions of masculinity seem to play a fundamental role for generating anti-homosexual violence. Indeed, the violence performed is used to cement the bond among members of a group and its values; it also entails a predominantly communicative function, in that it is directed against a specific target, namely, those subjects who do not align themselves with hegemonic masculinity, and are perceived culturally either as “homosexuals”, or “not males”. For the aggressors, the recourse to violence is a way to distance themselves from victims, while also re-establishing the norm, whenever they sense that a transgression has taken place with regards to the natural relationship between genders. This also extends to gender boundaries, as in the case of trans-phobic attacks. Here, violence is a punishment to those individuals who are seen to betray heteronormative masculinity and cis-normativity (Rinaldi 2018). Violence against “other(ed)” males who are perceived as “not males” and “non-heterosexuals” can be seen as a series of instrumental moments in strengthening (homo)social bonds between males, and in celebrating male power. This takes the form of a public display of and claim for heterosexual masculinity: the enactment of male violence is a collective performance, where the very act of identifying the object of the violence has the strengthening of the aggressor(s)’ (hegemonic) masculinity as both its objective and performative effect (Franklin 2004; Tomsen 2009; Rinaldi 2012, 2013, 2018). The final part of the chapter concerns itself with increasing awareness within the field of socio-criminological research about gender identity, non-conforming/non-normative genders, and sexualities.

BACKGROUND

The concept of homophobia has become an integral part of the vocabulary of social science: it indicates any negative attitude (from simple discomfort, to hate, to total hostility and extreme violent conduct) of an individual or group towards homosexual individuals or relationships. “Homophobic” behavior, like

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