



March 1979

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### Recommended Citation

Tully, Carol and Albro, Joyce C. (1979) "Homosexuality: A Social Worker's Imbroglio," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol6/iss2/3>

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## HOMOSEXUALITY: A SOCIAL WORKER'S IMBROGLIO

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### ABSTRACT

Few members of our society take time to put into historical context their prejudices about homosexuality. This article examines the historical context of these prejudices as well as how social workers may become co-opted by society into overlooking the social service needs of homosexual clients. How to combat institutional homophobia is also discussed.

### Introduction

The existence of homosexuals within our culture evokes fear and hatred in most members of society because homosexuals are generally considered to be sinners, criminals and/or mentally ill. There are, however, others within our society who regard homosexuality as a viable, alternative lifestyle deserving the same rights and privileges accorded to heterosexuals. Why does such a dichotomy exist and what role do social workers play in this situation? The purpose of this paper is to examine, from an historical perspective, how negative societal attitudes toward homosexuality developed and to explore how social workers' personal values about homosexuality and homosexuals are derived from societal attitudes. Additionally, while social workers are ethically committed to the concepts of human rights and self-determination, they often mirror society through perpetuating prejudices and discrimination against homosexuals. Because of this phenomenon, the impact of social attitudes and values about homosexuality on social workers will be discussed and some much needed, often overlooked social service needs of the homosexual client

will be considered. Various suggestions will be offered to enable social workers to more effectively work with their homosexual clientele.

### Historical Perspectives

Few people in our society, including social workers, ever thoroughly examine their prejudices against homosexuals in any historical context, but merely accept as "fact" society's general proscription of homosexuality. Overt homosexuality was practiced by the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, and the practice has virtually existed in all places and at all times of history. The Greeks, in fact, looked upon the practice of homosexuality as being more genuine and compassionate than its heterosexual counterpart. As both homosexuality and heterosexuality were practiced openly in the ancient world, the societal belief of that era was the concept of the bisexual nature of all people.<sup>1</sup>

The pre-Christian cultures were primarily polytheistic and often overt homosexual behavior was part of the religious ritual. Proscriptions against homosexuality per se were not then known. These "Great Mother" polytheistic cults of the ancient world eventually evolved into a monotheistic religious system when the Hebrews began worshiping Jahweh, an authoritarian, male god who ruled all. With this transformation from a polytheistic value system to a monotheistic value system came the first documented proscription of homosexuality.

Exactly how or why the monotheistic system condemned homosexuality is not clear. The system did make clear, though, that homosexual acts (between men or women) were considered ungodly and a crime that was punishable by death. Because homosexual acts had been an overt part of the polytheistic religious ritual, one theory postulates that condemning such behavior was one way of severing all ties with the multi-god worshipers. Homosexuality seemed to become equated with heresy and moral subversion because of its association with the polytheistic cults.<sup>2</sup>

Once the single-god religious system became the norm and the Bible was written, the proscriptions of homosexuality became more legitimized. The Old Testament clearly details laws that condemn homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 states, "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind: it is an abomination," and Leviticus 20:13

warns, "If a man also lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them."<sup>3</sup> Quite obviously these strict laws forbidding homosexuality had a profound impact on the ancient culture. In the New Testament, St. Paul condemned homosexuality,<sup>4</sup> and in the Thirteenth Century, Thomas Aquinas indicated that homosexuality was inconsistent with God's design for humanity, and it offended reason and nature.<sup>5</sup> The Christian ideal of the time was complete celibacy, and even certain types of heterosexual activities were banned as being too pleasurable.<sup>6</sup> It is easy to see why the homosexual was condemned for seeking sexual pleasure without attempting to procreate.

Our societal views of homosexuality as perverted, unChristian and contrary to God's will have their antecedent roots in religious laws. The contemporary church has generally adopted without question the tenets of the early church and bears the major responsibility for the anti-homosexual attitudes that pervade our society.<sup>7</sup> Another linkage from the ancient laws into the post-Christ world is legislation banning the commission of homosexual acts.

Although Christ himself never said anything against homosexuality,<sup>8</sup> every progressing culture of the early Christian era had strict legislation prohibiting homosexual behavior. In 1533, English law stipulated that people committing homosexual acts would be put to death. English law is, of course, the basis for this country's legal system, and laws in the United States requiring that those committing homosexual acts be put to death remained unchanged until the mid 1800's when North Carolina reduced the sentence to a sixty year prison term. Today, thirty jurisdictions have maximum penalties of at least ten years in jail for the commission of homosexual acts, and twenty percent of the states allow a maximum sentence of twenty years incarceration. The only legal penalties that surpass these are for kidnapping, rape and murder.<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly, such strict legislation instills fear in many homosexuals and causes them to remain covert about their sexual practices. Due to the covert nature of many homosexual liaisons and due to religiously based proscriptions about homosexuality, stereotypes, myths and folklore based on misinformation easily evolved about homosexuals.

A prevalent stereotypic generalization which has ancient roots is

that all homosexuals are mentally ill. According to the ancient Judeo-Christian value base, engaging in homosexual acts was thought to be ungodly or out of grace with God. To willfully be ungodly obviously indicated that the offender was possessed by devils. People who were mentally ill in older cultures were considered to be possessed by devils so it is easy to see how homosexuality became equated with mental illness. Even today, several prominent American psychiatrists describe homosexuality as a character defect, a pathology or a severe sexual maladjustment.<sup>10</sup> These doctors tend to believe the homosexual is in desperate need of treatment to insure that the deviant behavior will cease so the once disturbed patient can function normally within the society. Other contemporary psychiatrists believe that such psychiatric attitudes toward homosexuality are actually based on moral values and are reinstatements of the Judeo-Christian code with scientific rationalizations.<sup>11</sup> Such religiously based beliefs were easily rationalized by clinical experience with small numbers of homosexual patients who became the basis for generalized psychiatric opinions regarding all homosexuals.<sup>12</sup>

In an effort to "cure" homosexuality, our society has subjected homosexual women and men to psychiatric hospitalization, lengthy psychoanalysis, aversion therapy, group therapy, social work counseling and counseling by concerned clergy. If the homosexual did not consider homosexuality a mental illness, s/he was an unwilling participant in the curing process. The late 1960's, though, brought an increased trend in psychiatry to view homosexuality as a non-pathological, alternative lifestyle. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders,<sup>13</sup> but the fight continues to rage within the psychiatric community as to whether homosexuality is a mental illness or an acceptable, variant behavior.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, this society's Judeo-Christian value base has played an important role in how members of the society view homosexuality. Society's heterosexual majority, for the most part, still harbors stereotypes and myths about homosexuals based on proscriptions and prejudices that have transcended centuries.

#### Societal Attitudes and Social Workers' Values

Because social workers grow up and live in a society that has conflicting values about homosexuality, social workers themselves

often have such conflicting values. Generally, our society through its religious and legal ethics, does not condone a lifestyle other than the heterosexual, family oriented norm. Society fears anything that seems to disrupt the familial constellation, and hence, a deeply instilled fear of homosexuality exists in our culture. This fear has been termed "homophobia". Homophobia is simply an excessive fear of homosexuality that arises out of our society's ignorance and condemnation of a homosexual lifestyle. Societal stereotypes, myths and prejudices about homosexuality exist because of widespread ignorance and are an integral part of homophobia.

There are many unrealistic stereotypes, myths and prejudices that abound about homosexuals and homosexuality. For example, homosexuals are often stereotyped as primarily sexual beings with all other personality characteristics subordinate to their sexual drive. Thus, homosexuals are seen as constantly sexually active beings who will seduce anyone from an unwilling heterosexual to a child. Homosexuals are, therefore, equated with the criminally sexual deviant and are viewed as incorrigible child molesters. Such notions are easily derived due to the illegality of homosexual acts in most jurisdictions and the widespread belief that homosexuals are mentally ill. Also, public information on homosexuals is often based on media attention given to homosexuals who have been arrested for various crimes or who are otherwise unrepresentative of all homosexuals.

Homosexuals are also viewed as always conforming to some physical characteristics of the opposite sex. So all lesbians are believed to look masculine, while homosexual men are thought to look effeminate. Another misconception is that all homosexual couples are thought to follow roles of the traditional heterosexual marriage where one partner plays the "female" role while the other plays the "male" role. Finally, all homosexuals are assumed to hate the opposite sex with a pathological intensity. Because of such misguided beliefs, homophobia abounds. For example, a recent Gallup Poll found that:

- Seven in ten Americans believe homosexuals should not be allowed to adopt children.
- Fifty percent said that homosexual relations between consenting adults should not be legal.

-One in three believe that a homosexual cannot be a good Christian or Jew.

-A substantial majority of Americans believe that homosexuals should not be hired for certain occupations such as elementary school teaching or the clergy.<sup>15</sup>

Such prejudices stem from the previously discussed religious values. In addition, homophobia is particularly strong in reference to children. Thus, most people believe that homosexuals should not have custody of children or participate in occupations where they would be working with children. Society fears that homosexuals would influence children to become homosexual. In recent custody cases involving lesbian mothers, homosexuality alone is often found to be a sufficient basis to deny custody of children regardless of evidence of the fitness of the parent.<sup>16</sup>

Society is sometimes willing to tolerate homosexuality as a concept when the existence and identity of individual homosexuals can be ignored. Many people only object when homosexuals overtly proclaim their existence or try to openly fight for their rights. If homosexuals would only pretend to be heterosexuals, so say many homophobics, society would not have to confront the issue of homosexuality. Society enforces such mores by punishing newly discovered homosexuals with loss of employment and/or civil rights. For example, in a recent court case, a high school teacher with twelve favorably evaluated years of service lost his job when his homosexuality was discovered. The Washington State Supreme Court upheld his dismissal on the ground of immorality because the teacher was a known homosexual, and the court believed his homosexuality impaired his ability and fitness to teach which, in turn, injured his school.<sup>17</sup> In summary, being known as a homosexual provides a person with second-class citizenship and makes her/him the victim of stereotypes, myths and widespread discrimination.

Social workers, as products of this restrictive, condemning society are susceptible to homophobia. The social worker, ethically bound to the ideals of human rights and the individual's right to self-determination, faces an incredible dilemma when confronted with the issue of homosexuality. In the wake of centuries of myths

and through the reinforcement of ancient proscriptions about homosexuality in media coverage and court cases, social workers may encounter difficulty in being open minded about homosexuality and may have deeply ingrained homophobic attitudes which are compounded by ignorance. Such "gut" reactions and personal fears, based on misconceptions and limited social interaction with openly homosexual individuals must be confronted by every social worker. Social workers' values mirror the values of society, and need thorough evaluation to insure that human rights, individual self-determination and basic social work ethics are maintained.

#### The Unmet Social Service Needs of Homosexual Clients

The social service needs of homosexual clients are as varied as the service needs of heterosexual clients, but due to institutionalized homophobia, homosexual clients often have unique needs that are unmet in the traditional social worker/client relationship. While there are a multitude of service needs for any client, the most frequently overlooked needs of homosexual clients include: acceptance, specialized counseling, community involvement and legal referrals.

First, the need for a client to be accepted by a social worker is a crucial element in the helping relationship. Acceptance means that the social worker genuinely respects the client regardless of the client's personality, behavior or values. Such an understanding attitude is most easily conveyed by the worker through a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.<sup>18</sup> This encourages the client to develop a trusting relationship with the worker thereby facilitating the start of the helping process. In order for a social worker to effectively assist any client, the client must feel accepted and, therefore, willing to share information that is basic to the relationship. Without a thorough knowledge of the client, a social worker's efforts to assist the client are often narrowly confined to superficial or peripheral areas of the client's experiences. Yet, acceptance of the homosexual client often becomes difficult for the social worker who has been taught by society to view homosexuality as a perversion. The myths and unrealistic fears previously discussed may impede the worker's ability to relax and convey the acceptance that is more easily felt when a volatile issue is not involved.

Therefore, because of homophobia and unrealistic beliefs about homosexuals, some social workers may be unable to develop an atmosphere in which a trusting relationship with a homosexual client can develop. Such a relationship is necessary so the client feels safe to discuss important issues including sexual orientation. Another hindrance to the emergence of a trusting worker/client relationship is the general reluctance of some social workers to discuss sexuality at all. For the homosexual client who wishes to discuss sexual matters, this reluctance may become an insurmountable barrier. In order for a trusting relationship to develop between homosexual clients and workers, workers must be willing to genuinely accept homosexuality as a viable lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> Only then can the necessary climate of acceptance evolve.

A second frequently overlooked service need of homosexuals is specialized counseling. Because homosexuals grow up in a condemning heterosexual world, homosexual clients may have difficulty accepting their own sexuality. Through counseling, the non-judgmental social worker can provide support to help clients become more self-accepting. Clients can be assisted in examining the causes of societal condemnation and the effects of such condemnation on their feelings of self-acceptance and self-worth. Clients can also be helped in realistically assessing the problems and the joys of being a homosexual in today's society as well as being guided in making fundamental plans and decisions which will best enhance and improve a sense of self-acceptance.

Many homosexuals have difficulty synthesizing their homosexuality with their religion. This is due, of course, to the ancient Judeo-Christian values previously discussed. Social workers can provide appropriate services to help homosexual clients deal with this dichotomy. It may be helpful to refer clients to specific books written by liberal theologians who effectively synthesize homosexuality with organized religion. If possible, clients could be referred to local ministers known to be accepting of homosexuality. In addition, various faiths have organizations created for homosexuals. The most well known is Dignity, an organization comprised of homosexual Catholics. Such organizations can provide invaluable peer support to homosexuals who are trying to accept their sexuality without rejecting their religious beliefs.

The availability of supportive counseling services becomes even more important for homosexuals who are just beginning to admit or understand their sexual orientation. This process of "coming out" to oneself, family, friends, society etc., is a primary problem for many homosexuals. Social work services, if needed, should be provided to assist the client with this process by helping the client explore the anticipated and unanticipated consequences of "coming out".

For homosexuals, as well as heterosexuals, a major counseling need is in reference to their relationships with partners. For homosexuals, maintaining stable relationships without the many positive sanctions accorded to heterosexual couples is often a difficult undertaking. Homosexual couples or individuals may recognize a need for counseling, but not know of any counseling agencies that actively want to serve homosexuals or that have social workers known to be accepting of homosexual lifestyles. Agencies that have staff who are accepting of homosexuality should make this known in the community.

Needed counseling for homosexuals includes individual counseling as well as forms of premarital and marital counseling. Social workers can assist homosexual clients with a myriad of issues from the client's decision to enter into a permanent relationship to the "marital" difficulties of any long-term relationship. Additionally, the social worker should be available to provide appropriate services to the single homosexual, the homosexual couple that separates or to the homosexual whose partner dies.

Third, social workers may often be totally ignorant of the homophile subculture existing within their communities. The homosexual community can provide a much needed support system for the homosexual as well as provide opportunities for social interaction in an environment in which the homosexual will feel comfortable and unconstrained. Homosexuals who are just affirming their sexuality or are ignorant about the local homosexual community for various other reasons may need the assistance of a knowledgeable social worker to provide them with access to community involvement and support. A social worker who is ignorant of the homosexual community and the access roads into it, for both women and men, becomes rather ineffectual when dealing with homosexual clients who

have specific and unique needs.

Fourth, homosexual clients may need proper legal referrals. Because homosexual acts committed by consenting adults in private are still a criminal offense accorded severe punishment in the majority of jurisdictions in this country,<sup>20</sup> homosexuals can face criminal prosecution. In addition, homosexuals face a plethora of basic civil rights violations due simply to their known or assumed sexual orientation. The need for a legal referral is obvious when criminal charges are involved yet legal services may also be appropriate when violations of civil liberties are involved.<sup>21</sup>

Although discrimination based on sexual preference has been made illegal in thirty-nine counties and cities in this country,<sup>22</sup> the provision of full human rights for all homosexuals will require many more years of legislative and judicial action at local and federal levels. In the meantime, social workers can make necessary legal referrals to homosexual clients to assist them in their legal fight for basic human rights. In order to do this, it may be necessary for social workers to assist homosexual clients in evaluating alleged discriminatory acts or events in terms of the possible personal consequences involved in administrative or legal challenges versus the potential for furthering the client's rights and the rights of all homosexuals. It is also important for social workers to regularly act as community advocates for homosexuals' civil rights. The support of respected community members, such as social workers, is essential to the furtherance of expanded legal rights for homosexuals.

Generally, social workers may overlook the service needs of their homosexual clientele simply by being under-educated about the realities of homosexuality and by being victims of institutional homophobia. To overcome these problems and to begin to effectively deal with homosexual issues, social workers must become better educated about the topic. Such education must be instituted at the baccalaureate and master's degree levels so social work students have an opportunity to examine their values and come to some conclusions without impacting upon a homosexual client. All social workers can become more realistically informed by contacting community or regional homophile organizations

which will often provide bibliographies and other written information as well as homosexual speakers.<sup>23</sup> By reading realistic information about homosexuals and by listening to homosexuals discuss their lifestyles, the social worker can start to discount stereotypes and myths and can view homosexuals as fully functioning, unique persons. Once so educated, the social worker can then knowledgeably act as client advocate. Providing such an advocacy support system for the homosexual client can do nothing but enhance the worker/client relationship and improve societal attitudes regarding homosexuals.

For every social worker, there are certain things that must be remembered when working with any homosexual client. To facilitate this special kind of worker/client relationship the following suggestions are provided.

#### A Guide to Providing Services to Homosexual Clients

- 1) Evaluate personal feelings, attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality.
- 2) Accept the homosexual client as a member of an oppressed minority, not as a pathological entity.
- 3) Become familiar with the homosexual community in your area. (Every community has a homosexual subculture.)
- 4) Become educated about homosexuality - do not believe myths and stereotypes.
- 5) Act as an advocate for the homosexual and help others become better educated about homosexuality.
- 6) Know resources within the heterosexual community that will provide a support system for homosexual clients.
- 7) Be aware that homosexual clients may not totally accept their sexuality and may have difficulty synthesizing their sexuality with religion and societal attitudes.
- 8) Realize that the homosexual individual or couple with problems is like any individual or couple and may need appropriate counseling or other services.

- 9) Become at ease when talking to the homosexual client about sexual matters.

#### Conclusion

While the N.A.S.W. Code of Ethics does not specifically prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, the Code does state that the primary obligation of a social worker is to "the welfare of the individual or group served, which includes action for improving social conditions."<sup>24</sup> Certainly no other minority group in this country today has fewer human rights or has more need for the improvement of their social condition than homosexuals. An inherent ethical responsibility for all social workers is to aid in the quest for human rights for everyone. Regardless of occasional signs of an improving climate of acceptance of homosexuals in our country, pervasive hatred, ignorance and misunderstanding persist. As long as biases of such magnitude exist, how can our profession ignore our ethical responsibility to be community leaders striving for the acceptance of homosexuals? Confronting such a misunderstood issue as homosexuality both personally and professionally becomes a necessity for all social workers.

#### FOOTNOTES

1  
Arno Karlen, Sexuality and Homosexuality (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), p. 3.

2  
Ibid., pp. 9-10 and Delores Klaich, Woman Plus Woman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 232-233.

3  
Holy Bible, King James Version.

4  
Romans 1:26-27; I Corinthians 6:9; Timothy 1:10.

5  
St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Question 154, Arts. 11-12, pt. 11-11 at 1825-26 (Fathers of the English Dominican Province translation, 1947).

6  
Genesis 19:1-38; Judges 19:22-30.

7

Betty Wysor, The Lesbian Myth (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 65.

8

John A. Symonds, "A Problem in Modern Ethics," in Donald W. Cory, ed., Homosexuality: A Cross Cultural Approach (New York: Julian Press, 1956), pp. 7-8.

9

"The Homosexual's Legal Dilemma," Arkansas Law Review, 27(Winter 1973), pp. 689-690.

10

Specific psychiatrists that share one or more of these values include: Edmund Bergler, Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life? (New York: Collier Books, 1956); Charles Hite, "Now That It's Not Abnormal to be Gay," Washington Star Newspaper, 4 April 1974, sec. 4, p. D1; Richard Ryan, "A Catholic Psychiatrist Dissents," The Tablet Magazine, 30 May 1974, p. 1M; and Charles Socarides in "Should Marriage Between Homosexuals be Permitted?," Advocates (Transcript, WGBH-TV Boston, Producers: 11 May 1974).

11

Judd Marmor, "Homosexuality and Cultural Value Systems," American Journal of Psychiatry, 130 (November 1973), p. 1208 and George Weinberg, Society and the Healthy Homosexual (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), p. 22.

12

Advocates, p. 9.

13

American Psychiatric Association, Press Release (Washington, D.C., 15 December 1973), p. 1.

14

Advocates, pp. 9, 20-22.

15

"Gallup Poll: Social Role Sets View of Gays," Richmond Times-Dispatch Newspaper, 19 July 1977, sec. 1, p. A2.

16

See Gifford G. Gibson, By Her Own Admission: A Lesbian Mother's Fight to Keep Her Son (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977); Bennett v. Clemens, 196 S.E. 2d 842 (S.C. Ga. 1973), cited in E. Carrington Boggan; Marilyn G. Haft; Charles Lister and John P. Rupp, The Rights of Gay People (New York: Discus Books, 1975), p. 125; Chaffin v. Frye, 2 Civ. No. 43862 (Cal. Ct. App. 2d App. Dist., 12 December 1973),

cited in R.A. Basile, "Lesbian Mothers I," Women's Rights Law Reporter, 2(December 1974), p. 23 and In re Tammy F., 1 Civ. No. 32648 (Cal. 1st App. Dist., Div. 2, 21 August 1973), cited in Basile, p. 21.

17

"Status as Homosexual Grounds for Teacher Dismissal," Sexual Law Reporter, 3 (March/April 1977), pp. 14-15.

18

Gordon Hamilton, Theory and Practice of Social Casework (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp. 52-55 and Florence Hollis, Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 91.

19

It is our contention that any worker who views homosexuality as anything other than a viable, alternative lifestyle should not work with homosexual clients. Since homosexuals receive little societal support anyway, the homosexual client needs and deserves an accepting social worker.

20

"The Homosexual's Legal Dilemma," p. 693.

21

John P. DeCecco, "Studying Violations of Civil Liberties of Homosexual Men and Women," Journal of Homosexuality, 2 (Summer 1977), pp. 315-322 and Mary Adelman, "Sexual Orientation and Violations of Civil Liberties," Journal of Homosexuality 2 (Summer 1977), pp. 327-330.

22

"Tucson Enacts Gay Rights Ordinance," Sexual Law Reporter, 3 (March/April 1977), p.21.

23

Several good journals about homosexuality now exist as well as more and more credible research on the topic. For information about the gay community, the best resource now available is the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), Room 506, 80 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011. NGTF is an excellent resource for educational materials and information about the homophile community in your area.

24

National Association of Social Workers, "Code of Ethics."