

Combating Homophobia

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Introduction

In 2000, the organisation *LGBT Formation* [[1](#)] began work on a collaborative programme, whose aim was to *raise awareness of the potential difficulties faced by young people in their self-development and socialisation because of homophobia*. It was designed for those in positions of responsibility working with young people: teachers, social workers, carers, families etc. Our experience over the last ten years has provided much food for thought.

When the “Homosexuality Summer School” was relaunched in Marseille in 1999 [[2](#)], the significant contributions of young gays and lesbians revealed the existence of a number of structured support networks.

These networks testified to the need for and the benefits of having specific places in which to meet, talk with like-minded people and feel welcomed. However, they also highlighted the difficulties encountered by young people in their personal “coming out” and in their social assertion - to a greater extent than we had suspected.

The testimony of these young people pinpointed the doubts they had experienced in coming to terms with their own homosexuality. They spoke of the low esteem which had been inculcated in them, and of their anxiety at the reactions of others. Their description of hostility from family or the immediate social environment (including school) chimed strongly with our own past. We early activists had experienced exactly the same things, only in less favourable circumstances.

Our optimism as veterans of the cause had led us to underestimate the extent to which these phenomena had remained as constant and oppressive as ever. We believed that thirty years of considerable change (often won at a significant cost) had removed many of these obstacles.

Listening to these accounts, it became clear to us that coming out was still a path fraught with difficulties, perhaps not for all - some were certainly managing better than in the past - but certainly for far too many young people.

It was clear that while a great deal of significant change had taken place in terms of homosexuals’

situations, it remained the case that something was still awry, despite the repeal of legal prohibition.

The matter was not closed by any means. Paradoxically, the repeal of official legislation, the *rehabilitation* that dared not speak its name, the granting of democratic rights and the official acceptance of homosexuality had brought to light new difficulties, so much so that in fact *the emancipation process can be said to have revealed the extent of oppression*. The mantle of fatalism and self-rejection has been cast off, only to expose the limits of the newly-won equality, and more importantly, the sense of *prohibition, inhibition and stigmatisation* still widespread and vigorous in everyday life.

A study in Quebec revealed that one in four suicide attempts among youth under twenty-five was linked to sexual orientation: findings corroborated by similar studies in France [3].

During the 2000 summer school, with financial support from the Regional Health and Social Security Services in Provence Alpes-Côte d'Azur, B. Pommier and G. Girard made the film *Être et se vivre homo* [4], featuring three young men and three young women prepared to speak freely on camera.

Some striking testimony emerged during these hours of open discussion. They described the torment they had experienced in acknowledging their own homosexuality, the often obtuse reactions of friends and families, and the silence of those who had suspected “something” but did not want or dare to pursue the issue. They went on to outline their feelings of helplessness in the face of irrational reactions from families or professionals, themselves in the grip of a kind of panic when confronted with evidence, a revelation or an imminent revelation. They also spoke of the portrayals of homosexuality which each of them had internalised, and which weighed heavily on them during their childhood and adolescent journeys towards selfhood. In short, *being gay and feeling gay* were certainly not givens for young people. This film became the basis on which our programmes were designed.

A day of *homophobia awareness-raising* was developed by our team of men and women including social workers, teachers, psychologists, psychiatrists and simple activists. It was then given a live run-through with various public service professionals acting as trainees. Their feedback was unequivocally positive, and the organisation was launched.

Since then more than 2500 educators, teachers, facilitators, carers, social workers, volunteers in organisations, telephone counsellors, whether in post or in training, have participated in our awareness-raising days. In the process, we observed a tremendous discrepancy between what contemporary society is thought to have assimilated, and the web of prejudices, assumptions and misunderstandings that beleaguer the mindsets of “educators”, even the most enlightened, when faced with homophobia. We needed to untangle this web.

1. Awareness-raising

1. The issue: seeing, understanding, reacting.

What we call homophobia is poorly identified. Hardly visible, rarely spoken of, it is something which elicits awkward reactions, if any at all.

We should specify at the outset that, rather than mere “homophobia”, the issue here is a “phobia” concerning lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and intersexuals, included under the umbrella acronym LGBTI. All these identities are tarred with the same brush by conformist attitudes, labelling them as shameful, pathological or perverse deviances, which in one way or another contravene what is “normal” in terms of sexual conduct.

The notions of lesbian, gay and bisexual are familiar. “Transsexual” denotes those who identify with a sex that is different from their biological one, and aspire to changes in their legal or indeed biological status. “Intersexual” was once a cognate of “hermaphrodite” but the term “sexually indeterminate at birth” is now preferred. These issues, with which the public at large is unfamiliar, are met with ignorance and confusion, which then translates as incomprehension or rejection.

Homophobia is closely linked to discrimination. Simply put, homosexuals are people to whom being unpleasant without cause is acceptable. Most people, including those dealing with youngsters, therefore notice it only occasionally: less a *refusal* to see than a lack of *awareness* of what the term signifies. Consequently, they do not react to situations which arise, or do so inappropriately.

Running away, addiction or lack of interest in school can all result from homophobic harassment from friends, anxiety at being discovered or having to come out to parents, or merely from the pressure brought on by acknowledging one’s own sexuality, acceptance of which is not as automatic as is often thought.

Therefore, for an act to be *identified* as homophobic, it must be blatant and crude, such as when the word “faggot” was uttered on camera in November 2009 by a Montpellier sporting official [5] angry with one of his players. We cry “homophobia!” when it becomes this obvious. The perpetrators defend themselves, apologise, talk of “gaffes” and then make a pathetic attempt to condemn homophobia.

Identifying homophobia in critical situations, hearing it in insults, seeing it in harassment and developing reaction strategies – these are not givens. This is our first issue.

When reduced to mere distaste for lesbians and gays, and therefore to a reprehensible but unthreatening tendency, homophobia is understood as *an opinion and an attitude*. Thus, while certainly discreditable, it seems to have little impact on daily life, apart from in unfortunate “exceptional cases” (the equivalent of gaffes again), such as the violent incidents occasionally carried in media reports, words spoken in the hurly-burly of schoolyard arguments, or in cases involving charges being pressed or a crime and dealt with by the courts.

However, homophobia experienced in secondary school is not a matter of mere gaffes, but something systemic - visible only to the trained eye. The homophobia of a neighbour is dismissed as the crazed antics of an oddball, and therefore not a cause of special concern for the neighbourhood. The scorn of a senior may well upset union workers but does not lead to protest, and so on. These real instances of violence are not exceptions – they are in fact unwittingly encouraged via insults and a variety of degrading behaviours: “symbolic” (but not insignificant) violence, threatening and vulgar conduct at every opportunity, a scornful remark at the family dinner table, lewd comments at the office, pointed jokes during the lunch break, which seem to have the approval of all and to shock nobody. These endless smears, (in some cases the perpetrators are unaware they *are* smears), are a

sword of Damocles hanging over young people, already anxious about the self-discovery ahead of them, threatening a life of harassment and mockery. Rémi, in *Être et se vivre homo*, exclaims: "I was going to get called a queen all the time – I just didn't want that kind of life".

Underlying all this, there is something aggressive at work, something woven and knotted in the web of human relations, in our psychological and social make up as men and women – something that needs to be unpicked. To be *unpacked*. And which, in the meantime inhibits, hurts, strikes and even kills.

2. Integration in professional problematics

Following thirty years of LGBT assertion, it is a matter of some surprise that those sectors dealing directly with young people are still virtually unaware of what it means to discover one is lesbian or gay and then come to terms with this, or more broadly, what it means to experience *gender trouble* [6]. This ignorance, which became apparent in our awareness-raising sessions, inevitably compounds the phobias latent in everyone.

Such phobias are sometimes acute, for example in the sports education sector (despite the fact that sports education is designed to provide a model of living together), in which exhortations on the sports field such as "Come on, we're not a bunch of queens!" (see above) mirror homophobic insults from the stands. Everyone may well claim as one that this is not really homophobic – *it doesn't mean that!* But faced with expressions such as "Poof, arse-bandit, queen", we need to ask if that isn't *exactly* what it means?

In reality, the homophobic hypothesis is not taken into account simply because it does not feature explicitly in the frameworks of sport, education or health. In cases where incidents take place, complaints are made or action is noted, they are either dismissed as "gaffes" – a sort of excuse which in reality only plays down the issue – or the cause is sought *elsewhere*, and "elsewhere" usually means within the victims themselves. We say of those youngsters who have difficulties in sport that *they are not keen on sport*. But turning the statement around, we may ask: what if in fact it is sport which isn't keen on them? What if a mindset which prizes virility, macho competition and unthinking homophobic humiliations obstructs and excludes them? (And let us remember it is not only LGBTI youngsters who suffer from exclusion).

In the teaching environment, the default response to "gaffes" is usually avoidance. Teachers misuse reprimands when attitudes are considered "too ostentatious": they resort to excluding the disturber, for example in boarding schools, where the issue has certainly not been brought under control. Little do they realise that sudden failure in a school career, which has hitherto been successful, may be linked to a coming out. They are also unaware that coming out requires a great deal of energy, which may impact temporarily on one's studies, and that support and care would be much more helpful than admonition and punishment.

In the case of social and cultural organisations, there is an atmosphere of panic. A great deal of fear surrounds issues of sex (the evil shadow of suspicion of paedophilia lurks constantly in the background). Most of the time the subject is either avoided or turned into a laughing matter. When a problem arises, it is either dismissed (*that's a personal issue which doesn't concern us*) with the suggestion that the victim would have done better to have kept quiet, or it is (oh-so-sympathetically), explained away as the *malaise* of someone ill at ease with him or herself. If need be, the hapless "suffering" youth, is delivered by the family in the safe hands of a safe shrink, playing the modern exorcist of our malaise and powerlessness.

Hospital services have difficulty in integrating homophobia into their systems for recording suicide cases, even though a number of existing studies assert its importance. Likewise, *SOS Amitiés* [7] telephone counsellors participating in our awareness-raising could recall no specific instances of calls linked to a crisis of sexual orientation.

It is a vicious circle, for want of evidence recorded within each profession, ignorance of the symptoms, the workings and the effects of homophobia persists, and the net result is denial. It is as simple as that.

In order to answer questions, they must first be asked.

Our aim is therefore to help integrate the issue of homophobia in professional problematics within institutions, fields and services which impact on young people.

To plug this gap, we need to work on three major directions: highlighting the impact of homophobia on the self-development of young people, enhancing ability to detect signs of homophobia, and raising awareness on this issue so that “clear symptoms” are noticed and identified as such. *We only see what we are trained to see.* Otherwise, seeing nothing, we convince ourselves that there is nothing, which allows us to dismiss any challenges from organisations as the excessive zeal of *special interest groups*. This is how latent phobia is perpetuated – feeding off the scepticism of certain (psychological) professions or organisations (e.g. suicide helplines) with regard to homophobia.

3. Proper use of organisations.

Fortunately there are professionals, neither in denial nor interested in resorting to psychiatrists, who occasionally turn to LGBTI organisations which have asked the authorities to recognise their competence in dealing with young people. The force of personal testimony they offer can be very effective, provided members of the organisation receive careful training. Still, professionals and institutions must not be encouraged shift the burden onto single-issue organisations, even where this is temporarily justified.

Our approach is a different one. We believe that homophobia is an integral matter for institutions dealing with education and youth. In winning citizenship rights, LGBTI has also won this right. This is why we have opted for a programme targeted at professionals. We offer them an integrated *approach* to the question of homophobia (problems linked to gender), enabling its incorporation into their professional problematics and thus into their goals.

It must be dealt with professionally, not merely in passing, just like other educational subjects. More importantly still, awareness-raising must lead to a sharing of experience, to the formulation of professional responses by the different professions themselves. In this way, a theoretical and practical body of knowledge taking into account the damaging effects of homophobia can emerge.

Such is the philosophy and the goal of our homophobia awareness-raising campaign. Responsibility for this should not, however, ultimately fall to those involved in the campaign. Such a damaging approach would lead to a general disintegration of the concept of “living together” and the emergence of isolated special interest lobbies each queuing up to make their own public case.

4. Why young people?

It is by the way young people express themselves that we can gauge the extent of what has been achieved. They are after all *living out* the consequences of the “moral liberation”, of the way acceptance has increased, and of the way it is now anchored in the concept of “living together”.

The results are mixed.

There is the striking persistence of violence (both symbolic and physical), judging by the testimonies [8] of these young people, the accounts they post on websites [9], the content of their posts, and indeed their comments on “coming out” itself, usually indicating that it is to “a few people”, rarely to “everybody”. During the group work sessions at the summer school, the number of references to aggression, whether verbal or physical, far exceeded our fears.

Many homosexuals claim to be doing fine, which is fair enough, though it should be borne in mind that in the current climate, there is a certain stigma attached to being a victim or a sufferer. However, their tone changes when asked about past or present problems with family, at work or in their neighbourhoods. Once initial ordeals have been overcome, the resulting “resilience” enables them not only to forge ahead with the momentum such victories generate, but also to “forget” the suffering involved, and underestimate the toll it has taken.

The silence that covers these forms of violence is punctuated only by occasional media sallies by politicians in search of publicity, or by sudden outbursts of compassion following an *incident* such as the 2004 case of S. Nouchet, who was badly burned after he and his partner were bullied by a neighbour and his gang; or when a young man was attacked with an iron bar by youngsters from a middle-class area in Marseille.

The violence is not always so dramatic. It lurks in the background every time a young homosexual or LGBTI acknowledges his or her sexuality. It is perceived as a vague sense of threat: the possibility of physical aggression, harassment by a gang, or family rejection. It is part and parcel of acknowledging one’s homosexuality, against the backdrop of the full hormonal and emotional tumult of adolescence.

The threat can become so oppressive that it actually stifles acknowledgment of one’s sexuality, as described by Brahim Naït-Balk in his book *Un homo dans la cité* [10], and by young Rémi in *Être et se vivre homo*. Both bury their heads in the sand when facing the moment of “revelation”. They live in distress, they feel excluded, they don’t know how to put their experience into words. Reluctantly, painfully, they postpone the inevitable, at a time which should be, conversely, devoted to developing the self. This tumultuous stage in life scarcely needs such a burden, such a stumbling block to self-development, although for some, this difficulty may be seen as a positive challenge, a concept Boris Cyrulnik develops in his book, *Un merveilleux malheur* [11] drawing on the concept of “resilience” from the United States.

Indeed we are also witnessing the emergence of young gays and lesbians free of inhibitions, sure of themselves even in the face of homophobia, unashamed in front of their friends, forceful in asserting themselves and their bodies. They testify dramatically (in a way which is often criticised as “ostentatious”) to the gains made by the homosexual movement and to the changing times. They create *visibility* for everyone, including their peers. They challenge us both to accept others and to accept ourselves.

Even so, it remains the case that no one should be forced into acknowledging anything, or into resigning oneself: such an imposition is in itself a form of aggression. Having to opt either to hide

or to disclose; having to prepare for the worst, (given the homophobia already witnessed in the school playground alone); having to imagine a life about which nothing is known, even if certain well-known personalities, novels or films have provided insights; having to throw oneself into coming out much as you would throw yourself into icy water, steeling yourself in preparation for unknown sensations. Everyday life is dominated by stigmatising portrayals and prejudices: not everyone can be a tennis champion or the mayor of Paris or Berlin.

It is a lengthy process, riddled with questions fretted over a hundred times, littered with hindrances and obstacles, set against a backdrop of pretence. To come out is to expose oneself to a host of dangers. Some enter into it without too much apprehension, many play for time while others struggle but get nowhere. This compulsory initiation test may be beset with doubts (*What's wrong with me? Who am I?*), worries (*Am I like them? Are they really the way people describe them?*), and fear of others' opinions, in particular of parents. (*Will they accept me? Will I be a disappointment to them?*)

Adolescence is of course always a time of initiation fraught with trials and traps, doubts and assertions. In this sense, homosexual adolescence is merely a part of the wider adolescent process, neither outside it nor divorced from it. But the impact of homophobia can inhibit, add to the existing confusion, and compound the difficulty of this precious, complex and banal experience.

5. Why homophobia?

First of all because this, not homosexuality, is our subject.

The distinction is not an empty one. The focus shifts all too easily from homophobia to homosexuality, to sexuality, to the "finer details" of erotic activity and so on. In mounting our counter-attacks against xenophobic hatred, do we resort equally to talking about biology and ethnology?

The issue of homosexuality per se ought to be taken as read. Our subject is *homophobia*: a form of social violence afflicting citizens who theoretically have the same rights as anyone else in society.

Of course we can never fully escape or avoid discussions on homosexuality. Each of us is prepared to ask questions of ourselves, something which remains uncommon in our puritan societies. However, for us the subject is and continues to be homophobia – the fear of LGBTI people: a social disease which attacks, hurts, mutilates and on occasion leads to suicide or murder. It must remain our focus.

We first need to agree that this phenomenon of homophobia exists in a whole range of phobic aggressions. Acceptance of its existence is not a given: it is often concealed and denied. That is the price we have paid for our initial success – the homosexuality question now appears settled (*They aren't persecuted any more, are they? They've won their battle*). Each of us has in our personal circles a homosexual friend, relative, colleague who seems to be doing just fine: surely a positive sign that things are on the right track?

Consequently, an optimistic mindset which holds that all is now going well for homosexuals, based on the fact that many things have changed, empties the concept of homophobia of all meaning. It is a thing of the past – no longer worth discussing. In the process the "last-ditch recriminations" of activists appear excessive: the preserve of special interest groups.

Furthermore, there are homosexuals who would support this point of view, claiming that they have never been victims of homophobia. They consider themselves beyond reach because they are

comfortable with themselves. They may even give the impression that victims of homophobia are in some way responsible – their discomfort with themselves being the problem.

The widespread feeling in this new climate of good will (apart from the “gaffes” referred to earlier), now that the bad old laws have been repealed and some good laws adopted, is that LGBTI activists should exercise some patience while things sort themselves out.

We still therefore need to demonstrate that “homophobia” is an aggressive entity, with its own coherence and symptoms.

6. Citizenship

In a country like ours, “worked on” by thirty years of gay activism, which has acknowledged past injustices committed towards homosexuals, one point should be taken as read. When we talk of homosexuality and homosexuals, we speak from a position as full citizens, not from the margins and even less so as social outsiders. Homosexuals have won the right to have their voices heard on all issues. In other words, homosexuals are no longer an institutional problem. They no longer have to contest their legitimacy; they have nothing more to prove.

Thus officially rehabilitated, they are *entitled* to act as full citizens, even if this is not always a given in daily life. LGBTI may still consider themselves “second-class citizens” in certain areas concerning rights (marriage, homoparentality). Nevertheless, LGBTI orientation is no longer a matter of discussion in civic terms.

Our thinking therefore takes full citizenship as its starting point.

As recognised citizens, homosexuals now have access to rights once denied them, such as the right to dignity and to their relationships, although institutions and professionals still have work to do in fully implementing what has been achieved in recent decades: gains such as the right to exist, to live one’s own life, openly, without hindrance or restriction.

These benefits have legal standing. They form part of “living together” and are enshrined in the “social contract”. They are (in most cases) part of our shared public life. We must ensure this is respected. The fact that Ms Lesbian and Mr Gay live in a certain way is no concern of ours, but the fact that they *suffer* because of this *is*. Generally speaking, the tip of the phobia iceberg is subject to legal enforcement: exclusion and stigmatisation are frowned upon, while discrimination and violence are punishable by law, and instances of these usually arouse indignation.

Let us take that as read.

It is the underside of the iceberg that needs to be examined: how and why the phenomenon of phobic rejection persists. And how to eliminate it.

7. Recourse to law

Of course, the various forms of homosexuality may still be open to philosophical, theological or even moral debate. No-one can be prevented from nurturing private or philosophical prejudices, or indeed from sharing them (for example via *urbi et orbi* addresses delivered from the Vatican balcony).

But something has changed: citizenship for us means that, yes, debate is possible, but only with the

active and lawful participation of all concerned. This is crucial. For centuries, homosexuality and homosexuals were the focus of debate, but they were never allowed to participate. It was the same for women, and likewise for “natives” in the colonies. These debates all took place in a context in which those most affected were voiceless or hidden. And always to their cost.

Those days are gone. As a fully paid-up sector of society, the gay community now has a voice. This has changed everything – for their self-esteem and also for their detractors, who have to face them, deal with their own prejudices, re-evaluate their own citizenship.

This hard-won voice *entitles* these former outcasts to take part in public debate, they who only recently were barred from office.

The homophobic consensus has been broken: homophobes can no longer conduct their debates with impunity; they have to remain within the limits of respect for citizens’ rights, refrain from expressing contempt or from incitement to violence. Authorities and teachers alike are certainly duty-bound to entertain debate, but they must do so while respecting the law.

In terms of homophobia, this requires that each and every citizen fulfils their duty in the exercise of their professional, social, political, organisation and family life: even the French member of parliament given to spreading homophobia in the media or on his blog [12] is not immune: his views are contested, condemned and even legally challenged, the judicial system monitors him, he may be denounced and is not beyond the law.

By all means debate, but within limits, and *with* homosexuals!

8. Truisms

These comments may appear superfluous. Our experience of homophobia awareness-raising suggests however that it is useful to establish points of reference. One sector of the public has not buried its prejudices, or believes in good faith that it is free of prejudice. Another sector reaches the rather too easy conclusion that in their sensitivity, they have understood everything. And then there is of course the opinion (illusion) that there is nothing left to understand, as the matter has been settled once and for all.

These reactions are often impassioned and passionate. Identifying the subject and its limits, i.e. “homophobia” and not “homosexuality”, helps avoid the danger of overly emotive debates full of received wisdom, making measured debate impossible.

These truisms are useful in establishing an approach for those who, in their professional lives, have to react to homophobic incidents in the course of their teaching (in class, on the sports field etc), or in their relations with colleagues, when tacit or ill-considered slips may occur.

Above all, they provide a clear basis for facing future developments.

Jacques Fortin, 2009

Footnotes

[1] (“LGBT Training”) - Community organisation based in Marseille, France, specialising in awareness and training days on homophobia, designed for professionals dealing with young people.

[2] A week-long annual encounter first held in Luminy in 1979, discontinued in 1987, relaunched in 1999.

[3] Prof. Xavier Pommereau, psychiatrist and director of the Aquitaine Adolescent Unit at the Abadie Centre, Bordeaux University Hospital: “l’adolescent suicidaire” [“The Suicidal Adolescent”] (Dunod, 2005).

[4] “Being gay, feeling gay” by Bruno Pommier and Gabriel Girard

[5] Louis Nicollin, President of the city’s football club. Compare the statement made by Olympic judo champion David Douillet in his autobiography, claiming, like all men except queens, to be a misogynist (L’âme d’un conquérant, Robert Laffont 1999).

[6] Term coined by to Judith Butler in her 1990 book of the same name.

[7] “SOS Friendship”: National telephone helpline in France for those in distress.

[8] Annual reports of the Azur youth helpline (AIDS Information Service) and of SOS Homophobie.

[9] www.moncomingout.com

[10] [Being gay in the city], 2009, Calmann-Levy.

[11] A marvellous misfortune, 2009 Odile Jacob.

[12] Christian Vaneste, UMP Member of Parliament..