

How Much: The Cost of Heterosexism in Child Welfare

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On March 11th 2000, Hamed Nastoh, a bright fourteen year old British Columbia high-school student packed his backpack full of rocks and jumped to his death off Patullo Bridge. He left a seven page suicide note stating that he could not bear to continue being bullied by his school-mates who would call him “gay, fag, queer” (Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, 2003). Hamed was not gay, but was tormented because he was perceived as being gay. Hamed’s story is but one in a long list of incidents where youth have been tormented because of homophobia and heterosexism.

Introduction

In 2002, the OACAS Journal published *Child Welfare: Addressing and Meeting the Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Youth in Care* (Weitzman, 2002) which outlined the lack of services and recognition of sexual orientation in the *Child and Family Services Act* which governs the work done by Ontario’s child welfare agencies. In 2006, Bill 210, another amendment to the Act has gone through with the same omission although it takes into account “physical, cultural, emotional, spiritual, mental and developmental needs and differences among children... wherever possible, services to children and their families should be provided in a manner that respects cultural, religious and regional differences” (Office of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2005, p.1). Sexual orientation, however, is not mentioned at all in the whole document, which is supposed to be inclusive of all children. This “legacy of denial” (Sullivan, 1994, p.291) of overlooking gay, lesbian and bisexual¹ (glb) youth continues despite over a decade of research outlining the importance of meeting the specific needs of this marginalized group. This lack of inclusiveness is a result of societal and institutional heterosexism, which begs the question of what will it take to make agencies and lawmakers stand

¹ Though often talked about in conjunction with gay, lesbian and bisexual groups, I have specifically chosen not to include transgender individuals since transgenderism is an issue of gender and not sexual orientation. An illustration of this is that a person can be transgendered and identify as heterosexual.

up and care about glb youth? This article's primary focus is not to offer specific tips on how to work with glb youth since that research² already exists and has been utilised by a few agencies in Ontario. Instead, this article is going to focus on posing several questions while critically examining heterosexism and the institutional impact on *heterosexual youth* in an attempt to get the child welfare sector to examine their work on this issue, since it appears, even in this era of anti-oppressive social work, that the impact of this "ism" will continue to be ignored unless it is shown to affect and cost the dominant class.

Understanding heterosexism

Every day all across the world, babies are being born and are pronounced as female or male. With these binary labels comes the assumption that they will be described as "pretty" or "handsome", "gentle" or "strong". They will be given gender specific toys and adults will assume that one day they will grow up to date or marry someone of the opposite sex, since gender and sexuality are intricately connected and it is assumed that a boy will be attracted to a girl and vice versa. Actions that young children have are socially constructed as heterosexual: a baby boy smiles coyly at a woman and is labeled as "flirting," but not so if he does the same thing to a man. These socially constructed actions and language are symptomatic of heterosexism which pervades mainstream culture, media, language and institutions. Although Canada has been one of the leading countries in glb rights, heterosexism continues to permeate people's everyday interactions as well as in institutions, including ones that are mandated to provide socially-conscious service.

² Mallon, G. P. (1999). *Let's Get This Straight: A Gay and Lesbian Approach to Child Welfare*. New York, Columbia UP.

Mallon, G.P. (1997). Entering into a Collaborative Search for Meaning With Gay and Lesbian Youth in Out-of-Home Care: An Empowerment Based-Model for Training Child Welfare Professionals. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 14, p. 427-444

Homophobia is prejudice on an individual scale and describes “discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities, including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, evidenced in a deep-seated fear or hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex” (Sears & Williams, 1997, p.16). *Heterosexism*, on the other hand is systemic prejudice through the ideological belief of heterosexual superiority which stigmatizes non-heterosexual identities, behaviours, relationships and communities either by intentional exclusion, omission or attack and thereby renders non-heterosexuality invisible or undesirable.

Heterosexuality is a privileged status in Canadian society just like being white, middle-class or able-bodied. The majority of people who identify as heterosexual do not often think of their sexual orientation and struggle with grasping the privilege associated with heterosexuality because their orientation is taken for granted and their everyday societal interactions are not affected by their identity (Simoni & Walters, 2001. p.159). For members of minority groups, on the other hand, their everyday interactions or opportunities and resources afforded to them can be affected by their minority status. For example, if a disabled person or a lesbian is passed over for a job or promotion, they cannot help but wonder if it is because of their performance in the interview or if it is because of their ability or sexual orientation. Heterosexism forms the core of violence against gays, lesbians and bisexuals, which is directly correlated to peoples’ exposure and experiences with gays and lesbians (Simoni & Walters, 2001. p.161).

Heterosexism can be found in people from different classes, races and religions. Social workers are not exempt from this “ism” and it is vitally important that workers examine and unpack their own knapsack of privilege (McIntosh, 1998) when it comes to sexuality and gender roles in order to not further perpetuate heterosexism and the rigidity of these roles.

Cost to glb youth in care

Research literature has shown for many years that glb youth face a number of challenges because of homophobia and heterosexism. Glb youth are highly likely to experience disownment when they come out to their families, harassment, physical, verbal or sexual abuse, homophobia or heterosexism which leads to their disproportionate representation among homeless, runaway, foster-children and youth involved in the judicial system (Saewyc, Skay, Pettingell, Reis, Bearinger, Resnick, Murphy, & Combs, 2006, p. 209) as well as higher (than heterosexual youth) rates of suicide, depression, addictions, and prostitution (Saewyc et al, 2006, p. 199). There has been specific literature discussing the special needs and issues facing glb youth in care and specific strategies to ensure not only that their needs are met but also that they are protected from the violence perpetrated not only by society at large, but by other youth and staff in foster/group homes (Mallon, 2001, p. 65). Ninety-three percent of glb youth in care reported verbal harassment by their peers and fifty-two percent reported physical violence as a result of their orientation (Mallon, 2001, p.69-72). These youth are targeted for not conforming to society's views on gender roles, ignorance and misconception about AIDS being a 'gay disease' or because religion is used as a justification for violence against them (Mallon, 2001, p.70). Although this literature about front-line interventions is important and valid, heterosexism has to be evaluated from a systemic and institutional basis because uniform, large effective scale change cannot happen without the support of all levels.

Cost to heterosexual youth

Heterosexism does not grow in a vacuum; it is passed on consciously and unconsciously from parents and society. Children are a byproduct of their environment and they are shaped by what they perceive as being normal and acceptable, which is role-modeled by adults. A child

hearing a parent make a derogatory comment while watching the annual Gay Pride Parade internalizes the comment and makes the decision that sexual minorities are deviant and not acceptable in their world. This binary thinking of acceptable and non-acceptable identity formation affects children and can carry on into adulthood where fluidity of identity is highly discouraged. For example, we label clothes according to gender and society's heterosexism is so steeped in misogynist views that it is deemed acceptable for girls to dress up in "boys'" clothes, but not the other way around. Young boys' natural curiosity and exploration is closeted when they are prohibited from playing dress-up with girls' clothes, and then as adults this continues, since heterosexual men who choose to dress in female clothes are further stigmatized and pathologized (Cairns, 1997. p. 297).

Why is the ideology of hatred and violence towards another group based on sexuality acceptable or tolerated? In today's Canadian society, it is not acceptable to make derogatory comments towards people of another race; however, the words "fag" and "dyke" or other anti-gay comments are heard on average twenty-five times a day (United Nations, n.d., p.10) in schools in North America every day and although children may not know what it means exactly, they know to use the word in anger. This heterosexist behaviour often goes unchallenged by the school system where on average, teachers intervene three percent of the time (United Nation, n.d, p. 10). This lack of action and acknowledgement of discrimination teaches children that violence against certain groups is acceptable. As echoed in Dumbrill and Maiter's (1996) article on multiculturalism, this intentional invisibility of different identities teaches children that their world only contains certain socially-sanctioned groups.

The consequences for this dichotomized thinking not only impacts the children who grow into heterosexist adults, but also the people who they interact with. Antigay hate crimes are often

carried out by men who are trying to prove their masculinity by attacking someone who does not fit society's gender norm since it provides immediate peer reinforcement of the attacker's masculinity and commitment to heterosexism (Harry, 1990, p352). A disturbing fact about heterosexism is that most antigay violence occurs in childhood where boys (straight or gay) who do not socially conform to strict gender roles are attacked by their peers, and this violence is once again peer endorsed and reaffirms the attacker's masculinity. These attacks "psychologically...serve the same function as do the more serious gay-bashings of adulthood" (Harry, 1990, p.354).

Are we doing the young men in our society justice by raising them to believe that they have to resort to violence to prove their masculinity and therefore their heterosexuality? For child welfare agencies, this is a vitally important question to ask because we work with youth in care who are faced with separation from their families of origin for reasons of abuse or neglect of some sort. They are susceptible to wanting to conform and be endorsed by their peers, and in a world where they do not have any control over their lives, they may harbour anger and resentment at this powerlessness, and try to achieve a sense of self and prove their masculinity in various ways, some of which may threaten others, be it through verbal, physical or sexual violence. Alternately, some young men who are gay, but experience internalized homophobia because of the effects of heterosexism, may lash out against other glb youth in an attempt to prove their masculinity and heterosexuality (Mallon, 2001, p.74). What is the long-term cost of endorsing this behaviour through a lack of attention to the roots of this behaviour? "Sociologist Johann Galtung once described violence as anything that prevents an individual from fully developing her or his full potential" (Ehrlich, 1990, p.364). Are we doing right by the youth in care who grow up with this binary thinking when our role, especially in the era of the

Transformation Agenda, is to be outcome based with improving overall child well-being? Are we raising socially-conscious and sexually healthy youth?

Role of child welfare agencies

Child welfare agencies have a vital role to play in pushing for the eradication of heterosexism both internally (within the agencies themselves) and externally within society in general. Agencies should follow the lead of forward thinking organizations such as the Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto who have developed a multi-layered approach to dealing with heterosexism. They advocate for internal change that is multi-faceted and layered right from the Board of Directors to the front-line staff to foster parents (Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto, 1995). The Board of Directors have to be educated on the importance of tackling this issue not only for glb youth, but for all the youth and families who enter the child welfare system, as well as for the well-being of families as a whole. It is not enough to have token representations of sexual diversity (such as glb positive posters); there should also be education on the effects of heterosexism, not only to glb youth, but also to straight youth and families. It is important not to endorse heterosexism consciously or unconsciously, just as workers would not want to advocate racism.

Not only do workers have to challenge themselves on their own heterosexism, it is important for the policies, procedures and language used in the agency to be reflective of inclusivity of all groups and families. For example, closer examination of tools such as the On-LAC assessment for youth 12-15, illustrates that the only question of sexuality is located in the health section and states, "Do you have any concerns with issues related to sexuality, such as sexual relations, contraception, pregnancy HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, or sexual orientation" (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1995, p.4). This solitary mention of sexual

orientation under a health section implies that it is a medical condition and it is stigmatized by assuming that there should be a “concern” with this issue.

Let our foster homes be places of safety for minority youth, indeed for all youth, especially when it comes to diversity. Foster-parents are surrogate role models and parental influences for youth in care and have to reflect what is acceptable and endorsed by the agency. They should also be challenged to examine their own assumptions and be provided with opportunities to learn about different relationships and sexual orientations, as well as the consequences of growing up in a heterosexist world.

In keeping with the multi-layered approach to dealing with heterosexism, it is important for agencies to be reflective of diversity and to have staff and foster-parents who are from minority groups, especially sexual minorities, since children’s attitudes towards minority groups depend not only on their exposure to these groups, but also to how their community embraces or interacts with minority groups.

On a societal level, it is imperative that child welfare agencies act as advocates for the inclusiveness of all minority groups especially for sexual minorities in areas where there is not a vocal glb community. A sense of community does not always exist for glb people in some small towns where people are closeted or choose not to get involved in glb initiatives for fear of backlash. In smaller cities, child welfare has a vital role in helping build a network of support to assist this community’s voice to be heard, as well as to advocate on their behalf, so that the onus is not on a marginalized population to advocate against their oppressors to eradicate their own oppression.

Conclusion

Heterosexism is an ideology that has very concrete consequences not only for glb youth, but all youth and families. It is pervasive in our culture, and it is almost like the air we breathe, for we cannot see it, but it exists, and we take it into us and it affects our well-being. Unlike air that is vital for life, heterosexism is not; we do not need to grow up in a binary world. Let us social workers, who are supposed to be agents of change, stand up and advocate not only for our glb youth, but for all children who deserve to live in a society where individuality and differences are embraced and not targeted.

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