

INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA IN EACH ONE OF US

Most often, it is simpler for us to deal with the social homophobia rather than with the homophobia that we are personally filled with. It is safer to criticize that “external factor” which serves as “an official enemy” and objectively and obviously threatens and conveys these threats into action. Homophobia lurks within lesbians and is oftentimes substituted with the homophobia coming from the outside or if it becomes recognizable with the individual it is not “fashionable” (i.e. popular or politically correct) to directly open this topic with others, e.g. in the activists’ circles or in the lesbian community. It is a huge step from “the surrounding is homophobic” to “I am homophobic”. Sometimes girls and women start with “well, how can I be a homophobe if I’m lesbian” ascribing most frequently homophobia to those that are heterosexual.

The internalized homophobia is a feeling that brings most of the insecurity with lesbian women and girls and this includes intolerance of oneself. It is difficult to “acknowledge” its presence. The usual definition states this fear comes from one’s own sexuality and/or self-hatred due to one’s sexual diversity. The internalized homophobia originates in anti-gay society’s hatred which is directed towards the sexually different and, if one is a lesbian, eventually towards the hatred of oneself. The internalized homophobia arises because of an intensive:

- Social homophobia or, in other words, heterosexism, which explicitly or implicitly supposes everyone, is heterosexual;
- Institutionalized homophobia, which leaves deep markings on the personal level through growing up, the messages sent within the surrounding (the family and different institutions that form each individual in the course of growing up and in adulthood)
- Explicit homophobia which adds up through objective experiences of discrimination and surviving incidents of violence due to one’s sexual diversity.

The function of internalized homophobia is to keep lesbians «hidden and invisible», that is «under control». Girls and women of lesbian orientation most often convey that they had formed internalized homophobia through: personal prehistory (within the primary family), negative experiences with their previous coming-outs and objective circumstances in the society we live in.

This manifests itself through denying one’s sexual orientation, judging oneself, which actually gives validity to the judgment that the majority holds against the sexually diverse. As if one tells the majority, «you are right, being lesbian is not ok. » It is also manifested through the feeling of guilt, shame, shyness; it affects health (anxiousness, depression, self-inflicted injuries, suicide attempts, etc), long-term avoidance to call oneself lesbian, searching for definitions “am I lesbian/bisexual” (i.e. “I do hope I’m not” or “I’m not even sure whether I want to know, because what am I going to do if this is true”, emotional relationships (if one is “out” and the other woman is not, or if both women have not come out), the need to escape “onto another planet” due to the existing secrecy or the feeling of disgust towards oneself, etc. One of the conditioning factors for violence within the lesbian relationships is precisely the internalized homophobia.

It is a logical need to locate additional understandings on different sexual orientations, since oppressive strategies include withholding any information and understanding of sexual diversity (these strategies especially obstruct the presentation of good practice examples with much needed role models left out) and provides misinformation that mostly form and impel prejudices and stereotypes. There are few opportunities to read, listen... about lesbian orientation and existence. Because of this, the request for the readings that would give answers to questions “how can I know whether I’m lesbian/bisexual” is not uncommon.

One of the situations often encountered in my work has to do with the similar questions put forward by women and girls that are at the given moment going through e.g. not sufficiently functional heterosexual relationship. They oftentimes directly and out loud express the concern of what if “they happen to be” lesbians and that it would fully confirm everything that is said about lesbians being frustrated, etc. Acknowledging the fear that it is actually about authentic lesbian sexual orientation is often made more

difficult by the repetition of social imperatives and by the temporary forgetting that within the countries, that do not recognize the right to sexual diversity (neither the law nor the level of awareness in people allow this), it is “learned” to be heterosexual. Through this, one has not had equal possibility to orientate oneself in favor of another sexual preference. Instead of awareness within the described setting, the repetition of stereotypes’ multitude is at work (e.g. “why haven’t you found a ‘proper’ man) and self-stigmatization. There is a threat that pertaining towards the majority (in other words, the safe) category is being replaced by the minority one and it will always be attacked by the majority... Not accepting oneself (within the, so called, “one’s own household”, that is the diversity of one’s own identities) complements itself with the anticipation of not being accepted by the people from the surrounding, but it can be reverse as well.

Making one’s own sexual orientation welcome to all of the identities that each person possesses (the identity of a student, daughter, sportswoman, sister, good organizer, hairdresser, journalist, etc.) can become much easier if, instead of socially rigid and outspokenly (un)wanted categories we pose sexuality and sexual identity, we pose these as a continuum where everybody can be found. The continuum is imagined as a straight line at one end of which it is written “heterosexuality” and at the other one “homosexuality”. Along the entire length of this line – “from – to” – we can imagine our surrounding, and ourselves. The context, which is most certainly much helpful in understanding and accepting oneself, is seeing one’s own sexual identity as the continuum that has realistic possibilities to safely reach any of the identities on the imagined line. The person can also move along this line, as well as be encouraged to take different identities out of which all have social permit. In any case, within the context of respecting human rights, and contrary to all that we have learned in this society and to what we have been exposed, this context acknowledges democracy, that is the right to be different.

Primary family and the conflict of loyalty

(Consult the authoress article dated January, 2004 where she discusses the specificity of parent separation process during adolescence)

Internalized homophobia is often most clearly shown within the relation to the primary family. The decision of “whether to tell or not” that one is a lesbian appears as crucial for the personal growth of women and girls lesbians. The dynamic that describes both gender roles and all of the striving for patriarchal values, power and the state is very interesting. Let us, for example, consider the situation when a girl conveys that her mother is suspicious or is, somehow, already aware of girl’s falling in love with other girls. With this the realistic possibility of the father’s knowing the same information and a certain kind of an automatic response to this would be the daughter’s plea to the mother “not to tell daddy” or mother’s suggestion “I won’t tell daddy, if...” I record the cases when such conditioning on the practical level means: 1) recurrence of secrecy (until the moment of coming out a daughter had already lived her identity in secrecy and fear, and the exchange between the mother and daughter is being kept as a dirty secret, i.e. the message to the daughter is “you are dirty”) or 2) a form of blackmail “I won’t tell daddy if you stop this, if you find a boyfriend, if you seek help, etc”. Here we see mothers as the relentless keepers of “the head of the family”, the father, who at this time they “don’t want to bother”, but they use power from their role of “the family pillar” and they try to take care of everybody. Some cases are more concrete in the way mother’s demand of finding professional help within the form “heterosexual therapist employed within the state institution sought”. At this moment it is important to notice the girl’s internalized homophobia through the repetitive fear that the therapist who does not work in the state institution would not be credible in the line of work she is expert in, and even this goes further to suppose that it is “obvious” she is not heterosexual. The fear is also intensified by the mother’s possible demand that they visit a therapist together and this practically means the mother will take the daughter and have the opportunity to meet the expert providing counseling.

Consistently, I have been noting that girls and women of lesbian orientation had themselves consulted different health institutions having numerous questions regarding their own sexual orientation and had often given up therapy after certain time. Many of them have sought therapy and conveyed other contents as

acute problems, waiting for a sufficient level of trust in the help giver so that they would be able to express what they have actually come for. The experiences are different. The negative experiences certainly further “copy” poor feelings towards oneself.

Women and girls often fear that “something will happen to them” should their parents learn their daughter is a lesbian. Actual formulations are that the parents will be hurt, that it will affect their health (or especially the health of one parent who may be chronically suffering from some illness). It is important to consider what this phantasm is actually made of and what is “the worst case scenario”. Developing this phantasm in the degree of “101%” is important through the answering of the questions: what is really going to happen when you come out, what do you base your fears on, what kind of communication have you had in your family on some controversial topics (that concerned you personally), what does their negative reaction personally mean to you, for how long (according to your most negative prediction) their reaction can take place (“time does not stand still”), how are you going to deal with this, what are you going to do in your everyday-life during this time (“would I be able to live with this”), what exactly would change in your everyday-life (e.g. is there economical dependency from parents or any other relevant attachment), how long you believe your feelings would last and what intensity you predict (most often girls predict the feelings of rejection, being unloved and similar), have you ever heard about the examples of bad/good practice when coming out to parents, do you personally remember an example of bad/good practice when you came out to somebody as lesbians, what do you consider affected that person’s (non)acceptance...

What is most common in all these fears is of course the well-known anxiety of parents’ terminating all contacts (or the punishment would go in some other way), that they would reject the daughter – actually, not love her anymore. It is important to deconstruct paralysis when coming out is delayed due to the real danger for the parent’s health in informing oneself more of the predicted aftereffects through examining exact data on the previous alike cases as well as on the parent’s illness itself. Nobody can argue with the persons with internalized homophobia since this is the process that the person herself needs to go through. The power of internalized homophobia is fully seen in aborting the process in its initial steps strengthening the person in her fear and not allowing her to perceive the entirety of her life where the relationship with the parents is just one of the issues during adulthood. Some of the above posed questions can assist in establishing the real, instead of “the worst case” scenario. The importance of traversing the entire phantasm lies in the more precise location of the reality.

Coming out to one’s parents is certainly connected to some concrete unpredictable outcomes. The paralysis, often present for many years, has to do to great extent with the **conflict of loyalty**. Looking at this in a simplified and more “potable” way, the person sees her sexual identity and her family as opposed. As a child she learns about all her parent’s expectations; out of many are the obedience, being pertinent etc. These expectations also condition that one must not be much different from the context one originates from, that is one is allowed to have some “desirable differences” e.g. to acquire higher education which is allowed to be higher than your parents’ (which will also create certain dynamics on the parent – child relation), but this is also something through which the parents affirm their parenthood as successful and the achieved child’s identity is in concordance with it.

Different sexual orientation from the majority one poses great challenge for the system of family values and the basic question that the child needs to deal with is “can I be that different”. Another question is “can you be your own (autonomous) self”, and children go through this in their relationship with the parents when choosing friends, profession, appearance, partners etc. Should some of the autonomous segments come to oppose the family values, problematic situations may arise. To be autonomous means to realize one’s own identities. The generation of our parents often did not succeed in achieving this goal and one can often hear how they wished to be or to do “this or that”, but some circumstances did not allow it, they claim to have sacrificed themselves for the children, often their dirge directs as “If only had I...!” All this adds up to the heritage children need to deal with. The decision to “be one’s own (autonomous)” often means to “be better than one’s parents” which is very difficult to give oneself the right to, given the described conflict of loyalty. Not acknowledging this process with girls and women lesbians, long-term paralysis occurs, with bad

feelings towards oneself intensifying. The decision to allow oneself to be what she is becomes difficult to make and this process is surely not occurring in its entirety on the conscious level.

Some of the questions that may help estimate the stage one is currently going through follow:

- Can I live with the fact that I would be free with what I am, which my parents (mother/father) never were?
- Is my goal to keep a secret or to allow myself to enter the process that would bring about my coming out to people around me?
- When I imagine myself as a 40-year old lesbian, how do I see the relationship with my parents at that moment? (In this mini phantasm “when will I be ready to be openly lesbian?” the age can slide upwards e.g. 5 or 10 years from the current age of the reader).

Coming out and internalized homophobia

Realizing coming out as a long-term process, lasting on the average from 10 to 14 years helps in assessing one’s own tempo within the process and how big an impact the internalized homophobia has on your tempo. However, it is also important to discern whether one is “stuck” into one of the phases as well as to know that some women and girls will never achieve integration, i.e. the synthesis of identities as an outcome of this process.

Vivienne Cass suggests a coming out model that is comprised out of six phases:

The first phase: **Identity Confusion**. General feeling of one’s being different.

The second phase: **Comparing Identities**. Having awareness of the homosexual feelings. Still, the person believes that this can be a phase or this is about the feelings for one particular person.

The third phase: **Tolerating identity**. Stronger homosexual identity and starting one’s search for other homosexuals.

The fourth phase: **Accepting the identity**. Intensified contact and connecting with other homosexuals.

The fifth phase: **Pride of one’s identity**. The phase “These are my folks (this is me)” during which the person starts to come out to increasing number of people and often feels angry with heterosexuals with little appreciation of their institutions/categories.

The sixth phase: Synthesis of the identity. The intense anger from the fifth phase is gone and the person starts to see less of the dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual world while keeping the pride of lesbians and gays.

Eli Coleman suggests coming out model, which is comprised of five phases and is focused on romantic relationships.

The first phase: **Pre-coming out**. General feeling of one’s being different.

The second phase: **Coming out**. The person becomes aware of homosexual thoughts and phantasms and begins to establish contact with other homosexuals but at the same time keeps her/his sexual identity secret from her friends.

The third phase: **Exploration**. The person «experiments» through new social interactions at the same time improving the notion of oneself.

The fourth phase: **The first romance**. After a period of sexual experimenting, the person may wish for a

more stable relationship that requires commitment.

The fifth phase: **Integration**. The person's «public and private identities become a unified and integrated notion of oneself... the emotional attachments are often characterized by a lesser degree of possessiveness, truthfulness, and mutual trust, and can be more successful than the first ones».

Some real life situations that illustrate the way internalized homophobia can slow down the coming out process:

- a) **FEARS OF DISCLOSURE** – Two working women are in a long-term emotional partnership. One of them believes that her family knows about her lesbianism. Every time her parents visit with them the other, one moves out to the guest bedroom and the apartment is arranged in such a manner that in no way lesbianism can be observed. The same situation can reoccur when other woman's parents visit. Both of them believe that their parents perceive them only as good roommates.
- b) **UNEASINESS IN PRESENCE OF "OBVIOUS" LESBIANS** – A girl does not like to mingle on the "lesbian scene", she is concerned that somebody can see her coming in or out of the cafes she heard of being gay meeting places. There is a woman in the company she works for she would rather not be seen together since, "she is so obvious in her looks and behavior that somebody could start adding two and two together".
- c) **REJECTION AND CRITICIZING ALL HETEROSEXUALS (HETEROPHOBIA)** – A woman who is actively involved in the lesbian community and is working on the lesbian SOS Hotline rents a flat with another two lesbians. Whenever possible she avoids contact with heterosexual persons and men. She criticizes some heterosexual women she knows because of their relationships with men.
- d) **BELIEF THAT LESBIANS ARE NOT DIFFERENT FROM HETEROSEXUALS** – A schoolteacher in a small primary school has been living for 15 years with her lesbian partner. They do not socialize within the lesbian community but have many friends, mostly heterosexual, that they regularly visit with. They believe that lesbians show their sexuality far too much and what one does in bed is one's private business and should not be of anybody else's concern.
- e) **ATTRACTION FOR INACCESSIBLE WOMEN** – A girl is in love with her best friend "who is straight". The friend suggests moving in together and assisting with paying high rent on the apartment. The girl has serious mood shifts. If the friend is OK with her, she feels exhilarated. If the friend ignores her or brings a boy home, she is devastated. The girl believes if she is patient enough her friend will "settle down" and at one point would desire to be with her. The friend seems completely unburdened by any difficulties whatsoever that would concern her own sexuality and appears to be very content with her heterosexuality. (This example can include at one point an open confession of love to a friend after which all runs "as if nothing had happened".)
- f) **"SHORT-TERM RELATIONSHIPS", VISIBILITY AND POTENTIALLY HIGHER RISK OF DISCRIMINATION** – An employed woman who is working on a well paid position within a firm. She works overtime and has both an exciting job and social life. Just as her new lesbian partner has wished to get to know her better she pretends to be far too much occupied with work to be in a relationship and to prefer to "keep things simple".
- g) **SUPERIORITY CONCERNING HETEROSEXUALS** – Two friends who both feel very good about their lesbianism. One of them is in a humanist profession, while other is an artist. They feel very superior within their professions. The first one believes that her lesbianism has enabled her to be more sensitive for human sufferings, and the other considers homosexuals more creative from the heterosexuals. They both think: "We are better because we live harder lives".
- h) **BEING A SINGLE MOTHER AND RAISING A CHILD** - A woman, who knows she is a lesbian, decides to enter a marriage with a man because she thinks that a child needs parents of both sexes. Although this partnership has been dysfunctional for a long time, she feels she is not able to leave it, "since, the child needs a father".

Activists and internalized homophobia – Activists often state the lack of economical independency as a reason for not coming out to their family members or consider that the family already supposes or knows

but this is the topic which is not talked about. “Selective” coming out, e.g. to be out in a limited social circle and taking part in only certain activities within the lesbian community but not at her workplace within the state company, or to be “basically out”, but not being ready to appear in the media – all this can sometimes intensify the internalized homophobia (consult the authoress article dated January 2004 where the advantages and disadvantages of a ghetto are discussed).

The decision about coming out is up to each girl and woman of lesbian orientation who owes this decision to herself so that she can achieve personal growth. The object of personal review comes in a situation when an activist is economically independent, does not live in the same city with the members of her family and exists in a “free” lesbian existence. The long-term paralysis gives away an impression as if somebody put a spell on you and you feel as if there is nothing you can do but preserve the status quo. There is an impression as if your behavior in one of its basic parts is being controlled by somebody else; you do not control your life. Although any conversation on this matter can also make activists angry, it is oftentimes imposed as a paradox reminder of the activists being precisely the ones whose work, by definition, is in a public eye. The activist that deals with the issue of lesbianism becomes an activist because of those women who keep quiet about themselves. The question here imposes itself of how public work can be accomplished if one active in it is not out with her own identity?! Internalized homophobia here takes its specific toll by slowing down the dynamics of lesbian movement development.

It is interesting to look at the phenomenon of “women’s solidarity” within the lesbian community, and in the context of internalized homophobia. The friends – in our surrounding or part of the surrounding – that are not out, or can recognize themselves in some of the coming out phases (before the integration phase), are sometimes braver to encourage other in coming out as lesbians. Through this projection oftentimes “a battle of one’s own” is actually fought but with “consequences other than mine” outcome. It is many times seen that the community instantly makes “diagnostics” of family violence and proclaims it as “the arch enemy” against whom they should fight. It is correct that girls and women can be exposed to violence precisely because of their lesbian orientation. However, this is not always the case. When we discuss violence, it is necessary to care about the same person’s loyalty towards her own family and not to support her in “choosing sides”. It is advisable to listen well to the person’s readiness in given times and respect this. Especially in the situations of economical dependency, both before and after coming out, the family remains the only stronghold for women and girls. This standpoint is particularly visible when the disabled women, who make up a part of a lesbian community, are in question.

The fundamental question when trying to be a support for the person in her lesbian identity is “do I see a real person in front of me?” It is important to establish whether you have truly eluded the trap of projecting your own notions, images and concepts that are part of your lives and your fears and without careful listening to the person in front of you. The precious feelings that the person exerts bear responsibility to the therapist – they are about the person’s own life.

To conclude...

Internalized homophobia is a central clinical issue when working with lesbians.

Regardless of what other issues of lesbian existence are talked about, it is inevitable to touch upon internalized homophobia. Some of the suggested ways to overcome this deal with:

- the conversion of stigma (using the term «lesbian» for oneself and others, visiting meeting spots for lesbians, taking part in the work of lesbian organizations etc).;
- Coming out in different spheres of life;
- Adjust the way of life with one’s identity (sharing a life with a partner and openness about “no, we are not roommates, we are a couple”);
- Working on self-respect and self-esteem.

It is customary, in the developed democratic states, to have successful long-term strategies against social

homophobia, created by activists themselves – these are the strategies that would not support internalized homophobia and that are based on the questions and answers of girls and women of lesbian orientation (whether they are part of the community or not) about their “tiny”, BUT ONLY REAL LIVES. This leads to vitalization of the lesbian community from “in the closet” status into a strong lesbian movement.

This writing also suggests initiation of systematic good practice examples of coming out registration and realization of lesbian existence. Justifiably, most often negative experiences are quoted while positive ones certainly exist, but are less outspoken. All girls and women that have experienced positive coming outs can describe this in a written form and share it with others. What makes your coming out a good practice example and what do you believe to have influenced the person you came out to accept you? With this, the experience of every one of us becomes a part of a collection of experiences, women exchange mutual experiences and encourage each other, and the collection of good practice examples represents a powerful tool against internalized homophobia.

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