

Negotiating Theory When Doing Practice:

A Systematic Review of Qualitative Research on Interventions to Reduce Homophobia

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Abstract

We performed a qualitative systematic review of interventions to reduce homophobia. Specifically, we conducted a thematic analysis of participant feedback given in 30 qualitative and mixed-methods studies. Participants often described interventions as ‘eye opening.’ However, they also criticized many interventions for their mismatch with the social, historical, or institutional context in which they were conducted. Some participants rejected the interventions altogether, describing them as offensive and disgusting. We drew three conclusions. First, participants were not only actively making sense of the interventions, but were often aware of philosophical and political tensions (esp., liberal vs. queer approaches). Second, participants sometimes used the perceived inadequacy of the intervention for the local context as an argument to resist change. Finally, tensions in participant feedback (eye-opening vs. disgusting) can be read as evidence that reducing homophobia is ‘dirty work’: such work is both vital for society and despised by many.

Keywords: Homophobia; Prejudice reduction; Qualitative systematic review; Diversity training

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The intergroup worker, coming home from the good-will meeting which he¹ helped to instigate... cannot help but feel elated by the general atmosphere and the words of praise from his friends all around. Still, a few days later, when the next case of discrimination becomes known he often wonders whether all this was more than a white-wash and whether he is right in accepting the acknowledgment of his friends as a measuring stick for the progress of his work.... Under these circumstances, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with his own achievement becomes mainly a question of temperament. (Lewin, 1946, p. 35)

Those ‘intergroup workers’ who are today striving against homophobia are arguably given much reason for optimism. Numerous experiments have shown that contact with LGB people can reduce homophobia (for a meta-analysis, see Smith, Axelton, & Saucier, 2009). A recent systematic review (Bartos, Berger, & Hegarty, 2014) has found that education was as effective as contact, and other approaches also yielded promising results. Laws in many countries have also undergone radical changes in favor of gay rights. In the US, recent Supreme Court decisions have struck down both sodomy laws (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003) and legal barriers to same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). More broadly, public opinion research shows substantial decreases in homophobia in many countries (World Values Survey, 2015).

With legal reform, a shift in public opinion and a set of effective strategies to change attitudes, those who work to reduce homophobia seem entitled to ‘feel elated by the general atmosphere’. However, homosexuality is still punishable by death in many countries (ILGA 2016), and homophobic hate crime is on the rise in many places (e.g., by 29 % in the UK; Home Office, 2016). The ‘measuring stick’ for success is also controversial: as we explain in the next

section, homophobia (and its much desired absence) can be conceptualized in a number of ways that are in tension with each other. The issue raised by Lewin 70 years ago remains timely: should ‘intergroup workers’ arrive at a sense of ‘satisfaction or dissatisfaction with [their] own achievement’? To answer this question, we review the literature on the feedback received by anti-homophobia interventions. In the rest of this Introduction, we overview the theoretical background necessary to understand research on reducing homophobia. We then proceed to perform a systematic review of the literature.

Homophobia Research: Prejudice and Beyond

All of the accomplishments listed above stem from an understanding of homophobia as a form of *prejudice*. Allport (1954) popularized the term in the 1950s, and it was applied to the marginalization of LGB people from the 1970s onward. On the one hand, ‘prejudice’ allowed for the description and measurement of the homophobe. Following the work of Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) on the authoritarian personality, researchers tried to identify types of people ‘whose structure is such as to render [them] particularly susceptible’ (p. 1) to homophobia. Kenneth Smith (1971) created the first scale to measure homophobia, followed by many others (most notably, Herek, 1984; and Morrison & Morrison, 2002). On the other hand, if homophobia is a form of prejudice, then remedies exist against it. This is proven by the very rich literature on interventions to reduce homophobia, which present many successful strategies such as education and contact with LGB people (Bartos et al., 2014).

Homophobia research within a prejudice framework has been challenged from various theoretical standpoints, such as queer theory (Warner, 1993), radical feminism (Kitzinger, 1987), and social psychology itself (Hegarty & Massey, 2006; see also Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012). In spite of the philosophical tensions between these approaches (for a

discussion, see Hegarty & Massey, 2006), their critique of homophobia research converges in a few essential points.

First, homophobia scales delineate a narrow set of beliefs that are acceptable, i.e., not homophobic. One must believe ‘that homosexuals are no different from heterosexuals... that homosexuality is as natural, normal, and healthy as heterosexuality; and, finally, that homosexuals can be integrated into and contribute to society as a whole.’ (Kitzinger, 1987, p. 59) These propositions *normalize* homosexuality, and thus fail to challenge the very notion of *normality*. For example, same-gender couples are now allowed to marry or otherwise legalize their relationship in many Western countries; such policies offer LGB people some legal protection, but preclude a more substantial questioning of traditional matrimonial and familial institutions (Clarke, 2002).

Second, quantitative research tends to *essentialize* both the targets and the beholders of homophobia: ‘gays’ and ‘homophobes’ are treated as two well-defined, relatively coherent categories of people. In Foucault’s (1976) often-cited words, ‘the homosexual is now a species’ (p. 59). Such essentialism has both fuelled homophobia and helped crystallize LGB identities (Butler, 1991; Bourdieu, 2000), but the opportunities and dangers of such a perspective are highly disputed today. Some argue that a *strategic* essentialism (Spivak, 1985/1988) can still be a rallying point for LGB rights movements (Herek, 2004; see also Bourdieu, 2000); while others fear that a well-circumscribed identity turns LGB people into a small and potentially ignorable minority (Hegarty & Massey, 2006; Sedgwick, 1990).

Finally, quantitative research offers ‘an individuocentric explanation of a sociopolitical phenomenon’ (Kitzinger, 1987, p. 61). Thus, the social and institutional dimensions of homophobia are ignored; the problem is entirely attributed to the ‘sick homophobe’ (Kitzinger,

1987, p. 57), who, ironically, becomes as much of a ‘species’ as the homosexual (Plummer, 1981). Since homophobia is thus construed as the problem of individuals, social explanations and solutions are neglected. (Sedgwick, 1991/1994). Indeed, Dixon et al. (2012) found that attempts to address prejudice as a psychological problem may inhibit collective action for broader social change.

The Present Review

The critique of normalization, essentialism and individuocentric interventions does not simply serve as our methodological tool, but it is part of the very constructions we analyze. Many participants and researchers were aware of such concepts as normalization and essentialism, and of the philosophical and political tensions that surround them (e.g., DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Moreover, discussing these concepts and these debates was sometimes part of the interventions’ curriculum (e.g., Peel, 2010). In this paper, we do not aim to settle any of these debates, but rather to understand how accepting, critiquing or defending certain philosophical and political positions shapes the course of anti-homophobia workshops. We conduct a systematic review of qualitative research on the feedback participants give after taking part in anti-homophobia courses and workshops in order to understand how researchers and research participants negotiate their sense of success or failure in interventions that aim to reduce homophobia.

Method

Finding and Selecting Studies

We assembled a list of keywords referring to homophobia (e.g., heterosexism, sexual prejudice, homonegativity) and to psychological interventions (e.g., education, modification, reduction). Using these keywords, we searched ten bibliographical databases for relevant studies:

PsycINFO, Medline, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, International Bibliography of Social Sciences, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, ScienceDirect, Scopus, ERIC, and ISWE Web of Knowledge. Although keywords were translated into French, German, and Spanish, only English-language reports were retrieved by this search.

Reports were included in the corpus only if they (1) described an intervention aiming to counter homophobia, and (2) collected some qualitative feedback from participants. We only included paper on participants' feedback *after* anti-homophobia interventions, not their reactions *during* these interventions. Responses during studies typically reflect participants' pre-intervention attitudes and their (initial) inertia; this topic is plentifully covered in the work of Elizabeth Peel (2001; 2005; 2009). As for the time period covered, we collected our data in July 2014 and did not set time limits. Studies on reducing homophobia were only published after 1972 (Bartos et al., 2014), and the historical evolution of these interventions is potentially relevant (see the *Discussion* and the *Conclusion*).

Characteristics of the Corpus

We identified 30 relevant publications, including 24 peer-reviewed papers, five unpublished dissertations and one unpublished report. Each report described only one study. Table 1 offers an overview of these studies.

Participants. Most studies engaged only a few dozen participants. Ten employed volunteers, and 20 were performed on students in classrooms or on professionals engaged in mandatory training. Most student participants were undergraduates studying psychology, education, sociology, social work or health care, but six studies took place during optional human sexuality courses. In rare cases, participants were high-school students (e.g., Boulden, 2005) or professionals such as social workers (Dugmore & Cocker, 2008). As with purely

quantitative studies of interventions to reduce homophobia, these samples raise the concern that qualitative and mixed-methods studies have largely involved people who are less prejudiced than the general population (Bartos et al., 2014). Ironically, this body of research focusing on the importance of local contexts (see below) has been performed mostly in the US. The question therefore remains open whether the interventions would have a similar impact in places with stronger pro-gay policies (like the UK), or with higher levels of societal homophobia (like Eastern Europe). Finally, it must be noted that the studies do not give voice only to participants, but also to the facilitators of the interventions and, obviously, the researchers who wrote the report. We will return to the interplay of these voices in the *Discussion*.

Interventions. The interventions investigated were very diverse. The most commonly researched intervention involved a combination of education and contact with LGB people, esp. the presentation of information on human sexuality, stigma, and oppression by guest lecturers, panel members or teachers who came out as LGB themselves (e.g., Cain, 1996). Most studies assessed change over a term or semester (e.g., Hegarty, 2010), but some assessed the impact of specific shorter activities. For example, Hillman and Martin (2002) designed a classroom activity they named the ‘spaceship exercise,’ whereby students imagined arriving to an alien world where all romantic and sexual manifestations were illegal; after the students had expressed their feelings about such oppression, the facilitator² pointed out the similarity to homophobia. Edwards (2010) asked her Sociology 101 students to paint each other’s nails and sport the resulting manicure for 24 hours, an exercise that allowed the men in her class to briefly experience homophobia. Other researchers focused on specific media, such as theatre (*The Laramie Project*, Kaufman, 2001, in Elsbree & Wong, 2007), music (a performance of the Gay

Men's Chorus of Los Angeles, in Knotts & Gregorio, 2011), or film (*Vir amat*, Sutton, 1971, in Goldberg, 1982).

Qualitative Feedback. Responses during interventions typically reflect participants' pre-intervention attitudes and their (initial) inertia (e.g., Peel, 2001). As we aimed to uncover how interventions moved people, we analyzed the comments that participants made *after* anti-homophobic interventions had occurred, as well as researchers' interpretations of participants' comments. Researchers used diverse methods to elicit such data, with feedback most often collected anonymously in writing. Some participants filled in pre- and post-intervention surveys (e.g., Smith, 1994), while others provided only brief comments at the end of quantitative questionnaires (e.g., Edwards, 2010). Classroom discussions (e.g., Deeb-Sossa & Kane, 2007), exam papers (e.g., Taylor, 1982) and diaries (e.g., Peel, 2010) were occasionally used.

The Analytic Process

Unlike quantitative systematic reviews and meta-analyses, qualitative reviewers develop their own protocol based on extant guidelines and the specific requirements of the project (Hannes & Lockwood, 2011). We followed Thomas and Harden's (2008) recommendations to treat results sections in their entirety as data, including both quotes from participants and researchers' analyses of those quotes. By so doing, we aimed for a 'symmetrical' analysis (Bloor, 1976), that would grant a more equal ontological status to the sense that researchers and participants made of the intervention. Within the thematic analysis that makes of the Results, the voices of the participants are primarily heard; the researchers' voices receive more consideration in the Discussion (esp. in *Negotiating success: The voice of the researcher*).

We used thematic analysis as an analytic strategy because it has few philosophical constraints (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and it thus accommodates the theoretical and

methodological diversity of the corpus. The first author performed the analysis in six stages, and consulted with the second author at each stage of the analysis. The first author initially read the results sections of the 30 papers, creating record cards with bullet-pointed summaries and initial observations. Second, he generated initial codes, by identifying and labelling sentences across different documents that seemed to convey similar ideas. For example, he noted that the phrase ‘eye opening’ was used in several papers. At this stage, he also started collating data, by copying related pieces of text into a dedicated document. Third, he started searching for themes across studies. For instance, all the crassly-phrased feedback (using words such as ‘stupid,’ ‘offensive,’ and ‘disgusting’) were grouped together, and are now reported below as Theme 7. Fourth, he revised the themes, by re-reading the data and readjusting the groupings and connections between the quotes. We thus identified the seven themes presented in the rest of this paper. Fifth, we named the themes, and made a decision to use participants’ quotes to convey their expressive, affective, and metaphorical meaning, such as “Nothing really blew my mind” as uttered by a student in Huffey (1997). Finally, all of these stages were iterated several times, based on our own re-reading of the data and our colleagues’ feedback (see the Acknowledgements).

Results: Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: “An Eye Opener”

Since most interventions were educational, it is not surprising that the most consistent theme was that learning occurred. Participants in virtually all studies acknowledged some learning. This is in line with meta-analytic findings that interventions have a particularly strong effect on participants’ factual knowledge (Bartos et al., 2014). Newly acquired knowledge was often contrasted with previous ignorance: interventions “dispel[led] some myths and stereotypes”³ (Geasler, Croteau, Heineman, & Edlund, 1995, p. 485), and they were an “eye

opener” (Edwards, 2010, p. 368). It must be noted that the metaphor of *opening one's eyes* was particularly common (Edwards, 2010; Eyre, 1993; Foreman & Quinlan, 2008; Geasler et al., 1995; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Goldberg, 1982; Knotts & Gregorio, 2011; Payne & Smith, 2011).

A corollary of this sense of enlightenment is an increased awareness of both others' and one's own prejudice. One of Boulden's (2005) participants put this very simply: “I learned how ignorant I was on the subject.” (p. 32); another participant in the same study “learned that people that are homosexual have it harder than others” (p. 34). Moreover, participants also acquired an ‘increased sense of their capacity to make a difference’ (Boulden, 2005, p. 33), and many of them spoke of their determination to support LGB rights in the future. Getz and Kirkley's (2006) participants reported actual incidents where students were challenged by their peers for making homophobic jokes or comments.

We are mindful, however, that many participants may give feedback along the lines expected by the researchers, and the latter may be more or less willing to address the role of social desirability in these positive responses. It is usually not clear which comments were mere rehearsals of the curriculum and which ones capture the participants' added reflection. For example, when one of Boulden's (2005) participants says “I learned that you can't always tell at first sight someone's sexual orientation,” (p. 33) it is difficult to determine whether this statements reflects a shift in personal opinions or a polite reflection of an idea discussed in the course.

Theme 2: “Not Just Weirdoes”

When LGB people were involved in the intervention, participants almost always commented on their demeanor. Peel (2001; 2002) found that facilitators were acutely aware of their role in managing participants' LGB stereotypes, to the extent of describing themselves as

“walking visual aids” (2001, p. 51). This suggests participants have strong expectations from LGB facilitators, which the facilitators themselves may experience as burdensome.

Most of participants’ comments on LGB facilitators revolved around the theme that ‘gays are like other people’ (Huffey, 1997, p. 68, Table 12). Participants were ‘impressed that the speaker was gay and appeared normal’ (Goldberg, 1982, p. 264). While LGB people were often normalized after the intervention, the normal-abnormal binary became very sharp: “I realized that the panel members were real people, with real experiences, not just weirdoes” (Reinhardt, 1995, p. 117).

In line with normalization, the counter-stereotypical appearance of LGB speakers was frequently highlighted. “I could not have ‘guessed by looking at them’”, said one of Reinhardt’s (1995, p. 119) students about gay and lesbian panelists, while one of Boulden’s (2005) students “learned how you can’t judge a book by its cover” (p. 33). After watching a performance of the Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles, one of Knotts and Gregorio’s (2011) students said it was “cool to see gay guys who can sing but look like dudes” (p. 76). In a similar vein, one of Geasler et al.’s (1995) students was surprised that “even very attractive women are lesbians” (p. 486). As with normalization, challenging stereotypes can be seen as a positive accomplishment, while the implicit condemnation of gender nonconformity speaks of participants’ continuing misogyny (as pointed out by Knotts & Gregorio, 2011) and cisgenderism. However, not all stereotypes were so strongly related to traditional gender roles. A gay lecturer’s coming out convinced one student that “not all gay men are flaky artists or interior decorators” (Cain, 1996, Discussion, para. 4). Another student was surprised that LGB panelists “are not totally concentrated on sex... They have normal relationships.” (Geasler et al., 1995, p. 485)

Unlike participants, facilitators saw their appearance as performative, and often made conscious decisions about either embodying or disconfirming a stereotype (Peel, 2001; 2002). Their choices did not always revolve around the normalization of sexuality. Specifically, they appreciated that a ‘camp’ self-presentations may feel authentic and make a stance against LGB invisibility, while a ‘normal’ outfit may suggest professionalism.

LGB speakers sometimes received praise not just for their counter-stereotypical appearance, but also for avoiding political controversy. Reinhardt’s (1995) students listed “middle-of-the-ground” (p. 121) as a key characteristic of likeable panelists. Curran, Chiarolli, and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2009) also remarked that students moved from considering gay issues ‘controversial’ to considering them ‘normal’ (p. 162). Cain (1996) expressed concern that his coming out to his students may have been too reserved and non-confrontational; at the same time, some of the students stated that they only engaged with his presentation because they found its tone more moderate than mainstream gay-rights discourse (see also Theme 4).

As explained in the Introduction, many researchers take issue with normalization: they argue that LGB people being normalized reinforces narrow and oppressive ideas of normality (Warner, 2004). If many participants made normalizing statements, others said that the interventions had taught them otherwise. For example, one straight man in Hegarty’s (2010) class was prompted to “think of sex, gender and sexual orientation as much more fluid concepts” (p. 14). Similarly, one of Peel’s (2010) students wrote in her diary:

It seems that as a society we are in a constant battle to normalize everything to make it fit with our taken for granted knowledge. The whole concept of this taken for granted knowledge is something that I will definitely take away with me from this module. (p. 227)

Theme 3: “Nothing Really Blew My Mind”

Some participants characterized the intervention as irrelevant or unconvincing. They often voiced agreement with the facilitators’ message, but thought they already had the knowledge or attitudes the intervention aimed to develop. One of Bateman’s (1995) participants said: “I was already diverse”; and one of Geasler et al.’s (1995) students stated: “I have always been open minded and have not changed.” (p. 488) Like Theme 1, this type of feedback confirms that participants expected to learn something from the intervention.

Some participants distanced themselves from the intervention, by saying there was “nothing impactful” (Huffey, 1997, p. 68), or by simply refusing to comment. A student in Smith’s (1994) literature class described lessons on LGB novels as “talking about a lot of very general ... things.” (p. 5) In a similar vein, one teacher trainee appreciated that *The Laramie Project*⁴ was not particularly relevant for the math curriculum (Elsbree & Wong, 2007). Another teacher trainee postponed forming an opinion on LGB people “until more evidence is verified” (Bateman, 1995, p. 67), and a high school student commented on an encounter with gay men by writing down a single question mark (Knotts & Gregorio, 2011, p. 75). As one of Huffey’s (1997) participants put it, “nothing really blew my mind”. (p. 68)

Certain participants described their (often deeply positive) reactions and simultaneously denied the effect of the intervention. Researchers and facilitators seem particularly keen to deconstruct this type of feedback. Geasler et al.’s (1995) notion of ‘unacknowledged student change’ (p. 487) is possibly the most sophisticated (and most psychologizing) interpretive tool used in the corpus examined here. For example, some of Bateman’s (1995) participants admitted that the intervention made them question their previous opinions, without actually admitting to any change. Several students cited by Geasler et al. made such specific disclaimers as “It hasn’t

changed my attitude” or “I left class thinking the same thing”, only to continue with such acknowledgements as “I found out many things I had some misconceptions about.” (p. 488) LGB participants may also find the content of anti-homophobia education interesting, even though not novel. A bisexual man in Hegarty’s (2010) class appreciated that his personal experience had already taught him everything that was on the course, but admitted that it “has given [him] tools to argue back [against homophobia].” (p. 14)

Theme 4: “Just Keep It Light”

While many participants found the interventions underwhelming, others appreciated that the interventions were too daring and ‘moved beyond’ certain limits. For some, the excess was the emotional discomfort they experienced. Unsurprisingly, there were participants for whom a discussions of homosexuality were inherently unpleasant (Elsbree & Wong, 2007). The issue of stigma was also distressing to some: After Hillman and Martin’s (2002) spaceship exercise, one student commented: “Just keep it light. This topic can get a little depressing” (p. 310). These remarks suggest that participants expected the interventions to be relatively non-confrontational and marked by positive emotions.

For others, the excess was political. For example, one of Deeb-Sossa and Kane’s (2007) students stated that “things are equal now” (p. 153). A more crystallized call to tone down the intervention emerged from DePalma and Atkinson’s (2009) participatory action research. One primary school teacher in this project insisted that, for the time being, mere visibility was radical enough; there was no need to do more than expose children to such stories as *And Tango Makes Three*⁵. ‘The debate over whether or not we need to “move beyond gay penguins” is one manifestation of the tensions between strategic essentialist and queer approaches’ (p. 851) Similar debates have taken place in other classes: Young’s (2009) students discussed the

difference between tolerance and support for LGB people, while teacher's in Dessel's (2010) training program discussed 'stopping anti-gay harassment versus teaching or voicing affirmation' (p. 575).

Theme 5: "There's a Huge Gap Between Training and the Workplace"

Teachers interviewed by Dessel (2010) feared parents' and administrators' reactions to any pro-gay action in school, referring to something Dessel described as 'regionally based resistance' (p. 575). This theme mirrors participant's occasional enthusiasm in the 'opening eyes' theme for translating their learning into practice, but brings in a darker side of desired but unattainable change. This is not surprising, since LGB allies can become victims of homophobia themselves (Peel & Coyle, 2004). Consequently, Eyre (1993) doubts 'the possibility of liberatory pedagogy ... when prospective teachers ... are concerned about job security.' (p. 273)

Since change is seen as desirable but risky, teachers and other professionals tread carefully. One teacher trainee insisted that "the actual curricular implementation [of anti-homophobia education] would absolutely depend upon the community and [school] district" (Elsbree & Wong, 2007, p. 105). To navigate tensions with local communities and governance, some teachers were looking at national policies for a more generous (though still rigid) framework: 'most teachers have felt themselves to be in no position to go very far beyond what they could justify in terms of government policy' (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 846). Both teachers (Payne & Smith, 2011) and students (Young, 2009) have referred to pro-gay initiatives in schools as "rocking the boat" -- suggesting it is something fundamentally hazardous. Young (2009) further analyzed this metaphor, and found that the "rocking" could be performed by two agents: the school, whom the students saw as incompetent in this matter; and by "we", the

students themselves. The school governance was also seen as an obstacle; backlash from them was the risk that made gay rights activism seem hazardous.

Some participants were even more pessimistic, rejecting their anti-homophobia training as unrealistic and leading to disappointment. One social worker in Dugmore and Cocker's (2008) study was positive about the contents of the training, but skeptical about the possibility of implementing it: "You get excited about the prospect of change and then it doesn't go anywhere.... There's a huge gap between training and the workplace" (p. 164). One of Eyre's (1993) pre-service health teachers voiced similar concerns:

I do not think that students should be taught about homosexuality in schools because I do not feel that society is ready to accept it.... Can teachers honestly teach that homosexuality is acceptable when many people ... assault them [homosexuals] for this reason only? (p. 280)

Indeed, the perceived idealism of training programs sometimes came across as unacceptably patronizing. A teacher, when favorably comparing Payne and Smith's (2011) program to other, less agreeable training workshops, stated that "it's seen as a slap in the face if we're told what to do ... by someone that has not walked in our shoes" (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 187).

Worries about backlash were sometimes supported with stories about actual incidents. Edwards (2010) asked male students to experiment with nail polish as a course assignment on the sociology of gender; the students' experiences with harassment (as well as news stories about a homophobic murder) prompted her to turn this compulsory exercise into an optional one. One educator in Payne and Smith's (2011) professional development program recalled an incident in which a school principal made a teacher apologize to a student's parents for challenging the student's homophobic language. Young (2009) also offered a detailed account of the tensions

between a school official and the local Gay-Straight Alliance. In Eyre's (1993) class, some students preferred to remain silent while their peers voiced homophobic views: "I felt intimidated to speak up against the strong opinions raised by some... our silence did not mean we agreed with the negative responses" (p. 280).

Theme 6: "I Cannot Empathize"

While some participants found the interventions too ambitious for their institutions and communities, others found them too challenging even for their own values and convictions. One of Huffey's (1997) participants simply stated: "I am not ready to accept this" (p. 68). A student in Edwards's (2010) class was particularly articulate in making this point: "I cannot empathize as I am not one of them.... I do not feel that putting on nail polish in any way brings me close to feeling the way they do.... One cannot be taught to understand another's thought process" (p. 367). In a similar vein, one of Eyre's (1993) students defended her own ambivalence by stating that "it is difficult to change the way one has been socialized" (p. 279).

It is worth noting here that many participants insisted on asserting their own heterosexuality, and thus the difference between gay people and themselves. One of Nelson and Krieger's (1997) psychology undergraduates said: "Let them do what they want, I say, let them express themselves as they choose, but it is not for me" (p. 78). DeWilde and Hubbard's (2003) students anonymized their imaginary coming-out letters, hid them from others, and covered them in disclaimers: "NOTE: THIS IS AN ASSIGNMENT FOR A CLASS AND DOES NOT REFLECT MY PERSONAL SITUATION. THE LETTER THAT FOLLOWS IS FICTION" (p. 79, capitals in the original). Also, 'one student asked if she could "come out" to her dogs as liking cats better' (p. 78). Participants thus distance themselves from the exercise and trivialize it, likely in order to make it less threatening to their own heterosexual identities (Falomir-

Pichastor & Mugny, 2009; Hegarty & Massey, 2006). Contrary to the researchers' aims, some participants refused to challenge oppression even when they were targeted by it; moreover, they sometimes empathized with their oppressors: "I would have acted the same way," said one of Edwards's (2010, p. 365) students about those who had rebuked him for wearing nail polish.

Theme 7: "The Presentation Turned My Stomach"

Reactions to anti-homophobia education often amount to complete rejection. One student who participated in Hillman and Martin's (2002) spaceship exercise simply qualified it as "stupid", with no further explanation. Liddle and Stowe (2009) also faced strong emotional rejection from some of their students:

Many said that they believed the [lesbian] presenter was trying to "shove her opinion down their throats" and trying to "force them to believe what she believed." One student said she was so upset that after class she went home and called her mother and cried for an hour because she couldn't believe that she "had to listen to that in a class." Another said "I wasn't even going to participate in the exercise. I didn't want to get out of my seat. I couldn't believe she was having us think about such things. I don't agree with it and I didn't want to participate in it." (p. 103)

Some participants restated and defended their homophobic views. Two of Knotts and Gregorio's (2010) students were "offended" by their encounter with the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles, and another one invoked the Bible to argue that "this presentation is wrong" (p. 75). Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) provided an in-depth analysis of US sociology students' religious arguments; the key themes they identified were 'biblical literalism', 'sinful behavior', and 'love the sinner, hate the sin'. As one student put it, "the promotion of homosexuality [sic]... is against everything I have ever known and believed in Christianity" (p. 155).

Participants draw knowledge and social norms from sources other than their school or

workplace; anti-homophobia interventions may fail if they do not manage to compete (or constructively engage) with these sources.

Finally, participants might find their homophobia reinforced and even inflated after the training. One of Eyre's (1993) participants stated: "The presentation turned my stomach." (p. 79) Goldberg (1982) showed his students two sexually-explicit videos, presenting a gay and a lesbian couple respectively. While many participants found that the videos normalized same-gender intimacy, others reported their disgust to be augmented: "I only found homosexuality mildly repulsive, now I find it very repulsive" (p. 266).

Discussion: Cutting Across Themes

Our systematic review of participants' feedback on anti-homophobia interventions gives reason for qualified optimism. On the one hand, participants in anti-homophobia interventions typically felt they were learning and changing for the better. They reported they were more informed, more aware of their own prejudice, and more ready to challenge the unfair treatment of LGB people. On the other hand, some participants rejected the facilitators' message: they judged the goals of the intervention to be inadequate for the social context they lived in, being either too bold in a society unready for change, or too cautious where the context was ripe for more. Lewin's (1946) 'intergroup workers' can be confident that their work is 'more than a white-wash', but they need to manage broad participant criticism.

Up to this point, our reading of the corpus has been fairly descriptive, focusing on identifying themes. In the rest of the Discussion, we attempt to uncover the broad assumptions behind participants' comments, taking a more interpretive and critical stance. First, we examine the interplay of voices heard in the corpus, analyzing the stakes for both researchers and participants. Second, we look the ways participants invoked context sensitivity to critique the

interventions, thus uncovering their underlying theory about how social change does (and should) occur. Finally, we discuss the implications of participant feedback for the status of homophobia reduction as a field of research.

Concurring Voices: Researchers, Facilitators, and Participants

As noted earlier, the reports analyzed in this review reflect the voices of the participants as filtered through the interpretation of the researchers. We have tried to do justice to these concurring voices in the thematic analysis above, with an obvious focus on the participants. Facilitators (when they are not the same as the researchers) are most clearly heard in Theme 2, and have been previously given utmost attention in the work of Elizabeth Peel (e.g., 2001). In this section, we focus on the two voices that, for contrasting reasons, have been underplayed by the thematic analysis: on the one hand, researchers, whose filtering of participant feedback was too ubiquitous to be clearly examined; on the other hand, participants belonging to minorities (sexual or otherwise), who were only present in the report through brief remarks.

Negotiating success: The voice of the researcher.

Positive feedback appeared to be the preferred response to intervention; researchers often described such feedback rather than interpreting it, and those who qualified positive interpretations of positive feedback were exceptional. Curran et al. (2009, p. 163) noted that ‘As three activists, we celebrated the profound and immediate shifts in [students’] discourse the event created.... However, as academics/critical deconstructionists and educators, we reflected upon the process and problematized some issues’ (p. 163). Interpreting his students’ reactions to his coming out Cain (1996) conjectured that positive responses were affected by unwillingness to either criticize a lecturer or to express prejudiced views toward any group. Such reflections on the dual roles that researchers often held in these interventions are germane to many more

articles than the few that mentioned them. Participants often invoked power relations between facilitators, participants and the institutions in which intervention occurred in framing their negative feedback (see esp. Theme 5 above).

Researchers committed greater effort to interpreting participants' criticism, suggesting that such responses were not expected or preferred. Three broad strategies were visible in researchers' accounts of critical feedback. First, criticism may be challenged as an expression of participants' (unreformed) prejudice. For example, Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) dedicated their whole paper to challenging religious counterarguments to anti-homophobic education. Second, negative feedback may be read against itself and deconstructed. Geasler et al. (1995) observed a 'crack' (p. 488) in their participants' negative feedback. While these participants asserted their previous openness and knowledgeability, they often acknowledge some degree of learning and surprise: 'A female student who reported "no change" ... went on to speak of being surprised that gay men were "intelligent and comfortable with themselves" [...]' (p. 488). Third, criticism may be rerouted. When participants described a mismatch between researchers' ambitions for change and the reluctance of their own workplaces and communities, such remarks was often read by researchers as a critique directed at society and at decision makers rather than at the workshop itself. As with positive feedback, certain researchers explored competing accounts of negative feedback, placing it within broader theoretical and political debates (see DePalma & Atkinson's, 2009, 'gay penguin' discussion under Theme 4).

Negotiating identity: The voice of the minority participant.

Most LGB students had, unsurprisingly, a positive reaction to efforts to reduce homophobia, but others experienced emotional discomfort. On the one hand, a gay man in Smith's (1994) literature class said that he "became more proud and empowered by the novels"

(p. 5) that foregrounded sexuality. On the other hand, one lesbian student in Cain's (1996) class felt disturbed by the lecturer's coming out. She described this as "having issues". Her discomfort seemed to be due to the sense that the coming out of some gay people set a standard of openness unachievable for others: 'her first inclination after [the lecturer's] disclosure was to leave the room because she felt some pressure to come out to the class as well' (Student reactions, para. 6).

Unsurprisingly, facilitators and participants alike drew analogies between different forms of oppression. A straight man of color in Cain's (1993) class said he "felt less of a minority" (Shaping, para. 9) when the lecturer came out as gay. Conversely, a gay man in Young's (2009) study started reflecting on his privilege as a man apart from his disadvantage as a gay person: the discussion of one form of prejudice has occasioned reflection on other forms of privilege and oppression. Surprisingly little was said about the prejudices closely associated with homophobia, such as biphobia and cisgenderism. These two issues were usually clustered with the concerns of gay men and lesbians under such acronyms as "LGBT". Dessel (2010), however, explicitly addressed biphobia, while Romeo (2007) addressed cisgenderism. Most reports, however, are unclear on the extent to which bisexual and trans issues were covered in the interventions. Finally, members of some minorities may see their interests as competing with the rights of others. For example, one Black man in Deeb-Sossa and Kane's (2007) class sees sexual diversity as putting added strain on an already threatened Black masculinity: "It is hard enough for black men to be seen as 'real men' by the usual white middle class standards of good jobs and good pay." (p. 153) Such arguments question the viability of treating prejudice as a monolithic phenomenon, and undermine the possibility of challenging it en masse.

Context and Its Discontents

What participants (and sometimes researchers) question within their critical feedback is the appropriateness of the goal set for the intervention. Social change is seen as a progressive, somewhat linear pursuit. Interventions to reduce homophobia are expected to make a reasonable portion of this journey: goals may easily be seen as either too modest or too daring. Themes 4 and 5 both point at the interventions being too ambitious, although the latter has a more pessimistic undertone than the former. Some participants found the very idea of combating homophobia farfetched; their feedback is grouped under Themes 6 and 7. At the other end of this continuum, Theme 3 expresses the sense that interventions are moving more slowly than the organizations and communities where they are implemented (or at least for some people in those contexts). Finally, positive feedback is arguably placed in-between, affirming the timeliness of the intervention. Participants (as well as researchers) construe the utility and success of the intervention by placing it in a broader, progressivist narrative of social change (Foucault, 1978).

By arguing that anti-homophobia workshops are not appropriate for their communities and workplaces, participants effectively invoke context sensitivity to resist change. The practical and political concerns raised by these participants (see esp. Theme 5) may of course be valid, as institutional and societal resistance to anti-homophobia efforts can be very serious. Rhetorically, however, it is remarkable that the idea of putting matters in (cultural, historical, institutional etc.) context is hardly ever used to discuss improvements to the interventions, but rather to argue for postponing or cancelling them altogether. Participants argue that society or the workplace is not ready for changing homophobia, or that the topic does not belong in the classroom or in their specific subject area.

As qualitative researchers are generally committed both to understanding local and individual variation in social phenomena and to promoting social change (see, e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), the use of context to resist change is an uneasy observation. One is reminded of a classical argument against philosophical relativism: putting everything in context amounts to an over-analysis that stops people from taking a moral stance and acting upon it (Parker, 1999). This is the argument of the teacher trainee who said that “the actual curricular implementation [of anti-homophobia education] would *absolutely depend* upon the community and [school] district” (Elsbree & Wong, 2007, p. 105; our emphasis). Conversely, the appeal to context can also be read as a realist, anti-relativist argument: Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter (1995) have remarked that “[r]eality can serve as a rhetoric for inaction (*be realistic... face the facts... come off it... you can't walk through rocks... you can't change reality...*) [italics and ellipses in the original] (p. 34) This may be the line of argument that seems to be taken by the teacher trainee who said that “it is difficult to change the way one has been socialized” (Eyre, 1993, p. 279). While we do not think that invoking ‘context’ always amounts to paralyzing over-analysis, this seems to be the case in our corpus. To use Edwards et al.’s (1995) metaphor, analyzing how a cake is made does not stop one from eating it; however, in the studies discussed here, analyzing the cake is, in effect, a way of not eating it.

Reducing Homophobia as Dirty Work

Defining success in anti-homophobia interventions seems particularly problematic in light of the finding that high-quality research is often underfunded and remains unpublished (Bartos et al., 2014). In a recent study, Irvine (2014) has argued that sexuality research is dirty work⁶, i.e., ‘an occupation that is simultaneously socially necessary and stigmatised’ (p. 632). The phrase was first defined by Chicago School work sociologist Everett C. Hughes: ‘There is a feeling

among prison guards and mental hospital attendants that society at large and their superiors hypocritically put upon them dirty work which they, society and the superiors in prison and hospital know is necessary but which they pretend is not necessary.' (Hughes, 1981/1958, p. 52). Based on biographies of sexologists, a survey of present day sexuality researchers and content analysis of sociological journals, Irvine has identified a similarly paradoxical attitude towards sexuality research. On the one hand, sex is the object of extensive social, political and clinical interest, as sexuality is 'the core essence of the modern self' (p. 650). On the other hand, researchers who focus on sex struggle to find funding, have their work published in less prestigious journals, and often face hostility from academic administrators, colleagues, students, and research participants.

We argue that the participant feedback reviewed in this paper supports the idea that reducing homophobia is also dirty work. Participants' feedback was not entirely critical, but rather it covered a broad spectrum, and it was often contradictory. The dirty work status of sexuality research is epitomized, in Irvine's (2014) view, by the sexologist's mail box. The most visible figures of 20th century sex research, such as Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson have all received a large number of both requests for help from people struggling with sexual issue, and abuse and threats from those who disapproved of their work. This ambivalent assessment, which is the very essence of dirty work, appears clearly in the feedback analyzed in this paper: anti-homophobic education is an 'eye opener' to some, it 'rocks the boat' a bit too much for others, and it 'turns the stomach' of yet others.

The relative paucity of qualitative data may also be due to the dirty work status of sexuality research. Many of the reports reviewed here did not prioritize describing or analyzing qualitative data. The 30 results sections that constituted our data were sometimes very thin. Almost half of

the studies used mixed methods, and the qualitative analysis was often ancillary to quantitative measures. Moreover, the analysis of participant feedback was often limited to acknowledging positive responses. For example, Anderson (1981) was content to remark that ‘the students were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the workshop’ (p. 66), without further details. This may also be due to the struggle of LGB research to gain recognition in predominantly positivistic social-science departments and organizations (Irvine, 2014); Rivers (2001) has pragmatically remarked that ‘quantitative analysis quietens the purists’ (p. 28), and Coyle (2000) has argued that ‘lesbian and gay psychology would not be advised to ally itself exclusively with qualitative methods because to do so would render the achievement of disciplinary legitimacy even more difficult than it already is’ (p. 4).

Conclusion

The ‘dirtiness’ of sex research, as well as the invocation of ‘context’ to reject change suggest that the progressive narrative is too simplistic. While (Western) attitudes towards sexuality in general have change substantially in the 20th century, these changes are not as linear as the common narrative of leaving ‘repressed’ Victorian views behind and becoming ‘liberated’ (Foucault, 1978). There was not enough data to identify historical trends. It is noteworthy, however, that older interventions, performed when societal homophobia was arguably higher, often received very positive feedback (Anderson, 1981; Taylor, 1982); and recent interventions, performed in the wake of widespread anti-discrimination policies, were still seen as too daring by some (Dessel, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2010). We therefore did not find, as one might expect, that anti-homophobia interventions have simply become an easier pursuit over time. The themes discussed above show the complexity of resistance to anti-homophobia efforts. The positive

feedback itself is sobering: after more than a century of steady progress towards a ‘liberated’ society, an introductory course on sexuality can be an ‘eye opener’.

The participant feedback analyzed in this paper holds three related lessons for those who wish to challenge homophobia. First, participants actively assess the interventions, and are conscious of the broader social and historical context in which attitudes to LGB people are evolving. Consequently, many participants have a sense of how timely an intervention is for their own situation. Second, ‘context’ is often invoked against efforts to reduce homophobia, effectively defending the status quo. It is thus important to note that context sensitivity, while constructive in general, also has a darker side. Finally, facilitators of anti-homophobia interventions still have much reason to be optimistic: many participants find these interventions to be a revelatory experience that improves their knowledge and their willingness to stand up to homophobia. The substantial critical feedback received by these interventions should not be read as a proof of their futility, but a symptom of systemic bias against sexuality research. We suggest, against Lewin (1946), that feeling successful in this field is not a matter of temperament, but of careful and balanced reflection.

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Footnotes

¹ Note that Lewin wrote long before the use of gender neutral language was a standard practice.

² We use the term ‘facilitator’ to refer to the person or people who have conducted an intervention, and ‘researcher’ for the author(s) of the report. The two roles were sometimes, but not always, fulfilled by the same people.

³ In order to avoid confusions, I opted to put statements belonging to researchers in between single inverted commas (‘’) and statements belonging to participants in between double inverted commas (“”). The source of block quotations is always clarified in the preceding paragraph.

⁴ A play about the real-life murder of a gay student (Kaufman, 2001).

⁵ A (children’s) picture book about two male penguins raising a chick (Parnell & Richardson, 2005).

Tables

Table 1

Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Analysis.

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Design</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
Anderson, 1981	64 female nursing students, volunteers, US	Human sexuality workshop with gay and lesbian speakers and explicit film; experimental and control groups	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Boulden, 2005	223 high-school students (18% not heterosexual), US	'Anytown Leadership Institute': 7-day residential educational program	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Bateman, 1996*	82 teacher trainees, US	Educational video, scientific paper, and reason analysis (i.e., explaining the reasons for one's opinions in writing)	Anonymous questionnaire (also quantitative measures)
Cain, 1996	71 social work students in optional sexuality course (4 lesbians, 1 bisexual man), Canada	Lecturer comes out to class as gay (1990 and 1991 classes)	Anonymous questionnaire (qualitative only)
Curran et al., 2009	Pre-service primary teachers, Australia	As a response to students' negative reaction to a sexuality-related reading, the lecturer invited the author and the protagonist of the chapter to class	Anonymous written feedback (qualitative only)
Deeb-Sossa & Kane, 2007	Undergraduate students, US	Various gender and sexuality courses	Classroom discussions, online forums (qualitative only)
De Welde & Hubbard, 2003	45 straight students in a gender and sexuality course, US	Straight students write an (imaginary) coming out letter and analyze it (optional assignment)	Written assignments and limited classroom discussion (qualitative only)

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Design</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
DePalma & Atkinson, 2009	15 primary-school teachers (diverse sexualities), UK	Participatory action research ('No Outsiders' project) challenging heteronormativity in schools	Online forum, plus interviews with 72 extra teachers (qualitative only)
Dessel, 2010	36 public school teachers, US	Complex training program including educational readings and films, and discussions with LGB people	Interviews (also quantitative measures)
Dugmore & Cocker, 2008	Social workers employed by a local authority, US	One-day training, diverse methods	Anonymous written feedback (qualitative only)
Edwards, 2010	19 sociology students, US	'Nail-polish exercise': straight male students had to wear nail polish for 24 hours (2006 to 2009 classes)	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Elsbree & Wong, 2007	89 pre-service teachers, US	Watching <i>The Laramie Project</i> (Kaufman, 2001), plus reading, video, and classroom discussion	Pre-and post-class surveys (also quantitative measures)
Eyre, 1993	Pre-service health education teachers, Canada	Various classroom discussions and presentations, esp. a speaker panel	Anonymous written feedback (qualitative only)
Foreman & Quinlan, 2008	Social work students, Ireland	Workshops with various activities	Anonymous written feedback (qualitative only)
Geasler et al., 1995	260 students in five sexuality and family courses (2% other than heterosexual), US	Regular speaker panels of LGB students and alumni	Anonymous written feedback (qualitative only)

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Design</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
Getz & Kirkley, 2006	20 people from a religiously-affiliated university, US	'Rainbow Educator' program, consisting of presentations for students and staff	Interviews; conclusions reviewed by 5 participants (qualitative only)
Goldberg, 1982	131 undergraduate students, US	Watching anti-homophobic and sexually-explicit videos	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Hegarty, 2010	37 psychology and sociology students in an optional course on LGBT psychology (4 bisexual, 1 lesbian/gay, 2 no label), UK	Course on varied topics, specifically avoiding biological/essentialist arguments (2008 and 2009 classes)	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Hillman & Martin, 2002	68 students in developmental psychology course (1 gay man), US	'Spaceship exercise'	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Huffey, 1997*	96 undergraduate students, US	Educational videotape and speaker panel	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Knotts & Gregorio, 2011	101 high school students, US	Class on stigmatized composers (including gay ones) taught by the GMCLA	Pre-and post-class surveys (qualitative only)
Liddle & Stowe, 2002	Undergraduate students in various health-related fields, US	Lesbian guest speaker in class	Classroom discussion (qualitative only)
Nelson & Krieger, 1997	190 psychology students, US	Lesbian and gay guest speakers in class	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Design</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
Payne & Smith, 2011	322 educators, US	'The Reduction of Stigma in Schools', complex professional development program	Field notes, interviews, questionnaires, phone logs (qualitative only)
Peel, 2010	Psychology students in an optional sexuality course, UK	Sexuality course informed by feminism, critical theory and diversity training; straight students were asked to focus on their own privilege (several successive cohorts)	Weekly entries in a reflective diary, based on guideline questions from the instructor (qualitative only)
Reinhardt, 1995*	320 undergraduate students in a sexuality course, US	Gay and lesbian speaker panel in class	Anonymous written feedback (also quantitative measures)
Romeo, 2007*	5 health-care professionals, US	Complex 8-session workshop	Discussions, interviews, journals and essays (qualitative only)
Smith, 1994*	11 undergraduate students (3 lesbians, 2 gay men), US	Reading and discussing LGB-themed young-adult novels	Entry and exist surveys, diaries, classroom discussions (qualitative only)
Taylor, 1982	25 undergraduate students in a sexuality course, US	Human sexuality course offered by a health department	Pre- and post-test questionnaires, exam essay, and interview (also quantitative measures)
Young, 2009*	High-school students in a Contemporary Issues class, US	Education, esp. critical literacy and multicultural issues; Gay-Straight Alliance, Day of Solidarity etc.	Discussions, interviews, field notes (qualitative only)

Note: References followed by an asterisk (*) are unpublished.