



A Double Edged Sword

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Mike, a black college student, makes no bones about it. He dislikes homosexuals and wants nothing to do with them. "If I found out that one of my friends was one I would stop speaking to them," he said. Ask Mike why he reacts this way and he might reply that homosexuality is abnormal or perverted. His answers might become vague, tinged with an emotional overtone of fear and anxiety. Mike is a victim of homophobia.

Mike is an intelligent man, yet when pressed for a rationale behind his attitudes towards gays it is neither sound nor new. Would he react the same if he found out that one of his friends was diabetic, or suffered from cancer? Probably not, because he might understand those conditions and not feel threatened by them, threatened by the fear of the unknown.

Mike is not alone. An overwhelming number of blacks suffer from homophobia - a fear of homosexuals. Homophobia, as in other phobias, is rooted in the fear of the unknown. People generally fear something which escapes their understanding or which they lack sufficient information to adequately judge. The over-abundance of erroneous information on homosexuality only serves to further confuse and complicate the issue.

The importance of masculinity and the role of the family appear to be the underlying causes of homophobia in the black community. These issues deserve further exploration.

Masculinity, or machismo, is highly valued in the black community as an indication of the male sex role. In a recent interview comedian Richard Pryor said, "Straight black people often

have a hard time dealing with gays. All my life I've seen that macho sh*t in the black neighborhoods, where you try to eliminate someone mentally, to get out of dealing with them by saying, "Oh, you're a faggot, you don't know from nothing." In a recent article John Soares wrote, "Too many believe that (the street sissy) is the only gay role available to them because it is the only one they are fully aware of."

A large percentage of black males see homosexuality as a threat to their masculinity. According to gay men, straight males are very insecure in their masculinity and assume that being gay automatically makes them less of a man and detracts from their maleness.

On the other hand homosexuality need not affect one's sense of masculinity. Sexual preference is but one characteristic constituting the total person. Soares writes, "Perhaps too many reject being gay as a real option because their cultural screen prevents them from seeing that 'gay' is defined by sexual preferences only, and not any particular lifestyle."

It seems the very concept of what constitutes masculinity is on very shaky ground. Adherence to sexual stereotyping and rigid sex roles is partially responsible for the fear of homosexuality.

The issue concerning the affect of homosexuality on the structure of the black family is also a concern. The family holds an important role in the community.

Among members of the black community there is the contention that homosexuality is detrimental to family life. The idea of procreation is very important in the black family.

Black gay activist Billy Jones said, "Many Blacks see the whole Gay movement as a means of destroying the Black family. When they talk about Gay

men they see it as unmanly, weak. They don't think of Gays as being family people, as having children."

Within the community homosexuals are seen as degrading. Many blacks not only cannot see them as having children but also as providing negative role models for black youth.

However, when one investigates individual families a different picture emerges. In direct contrast to the larger community, the family is more accepting of family members who announce their sexual orientation.

On an individual basis "Black families tend to be very accepting of family members who identify themselves as sexual minorities. They really make an effort to try to understand them and the love stays there," said Jones. Although in middle-class families there is a certain amount of difficulty in the acceptance of gay family members. For the majority of working-class black people, gay lovers and steadies are accepted by, or even into, the family with a lack of flag-waving and statement making.

When confronted with homosexuality in their own families blacks are far more understanding and accepting than on the larger scale of the community. And the homophobia subsides as individual families begin to understand the unknown.

Whether we like it or not, right or wrong, black homosexuality is not going to disappear across the horizon. As black people continue to struggle for their basic human rights they cannot afford to ignore the basic rights of a group within their own ranks for sexual preference. Divesting themselves of the irrational fears and ignorance on the issue of homosexuality, they will discover there are far fewer differences in their brothers and sisters apart from a failure to mirror the larger community's sexual preferences.