

A Queer Life for a Straight Guy

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When I was growing up in the 1950s, the word “queer” was used in a pejorative way to label someone we suspected was gay, as in “he’s queer.” Today, as I understand it, some people use “queer” in a very positive and political way to claim an identity that is not simply gay or straight, or even male or female. “Queering” something has come to mean the process of challenging what is considered normal. Now, there’s lots of variation in what someone might consider “normal” when it comes to gender and sexual orientation. But the point is that some people identify themselves as “queer” as a way to say, “I’m not buying into what this society thinks I’m supposed to be or do, simply because of what my gender or sexual orientation appears to be.”

I don’t identify as “queer,” but I’d be fine if someone decided that I was. In spite of the many mistakes I’ve made in my life, I’m proud of some of the ways that I’ve challenged traditional expectations of what a 55-year-old heterosexual white man like me is supposed to be. I like the idea of a queer identity. And I like the idea that straight men might become a little queer in the sense of our not buying into social expectations of what we’re supposed to be like simply because we’re heterosexual and male. For heterosexual men to have a queer life might be good for all of us – not just us guys.

I suspect – in fact, I’m pretty sure – that my attention to the issues of oppression over the years was not typical of a heterosexual white man like me. I didn’t know many heterosexual white men doing what I was doing. In spite of all the support for my work from so many lesbians and gays, heterosexual women and people of color, I sometimes kept quiet about my activism. I feared that others – especially heterosexual white men – would not like what I was doing, or at a minimum think it was strange. From their perspective – and maybe from mine as well – my life must have seemed like a queer life for a straight guy.

I now live in Germany – a relatively gay-friendly country where lesbian and gay couples sometimes walk down the street holding hands and where having a same-sex partner is legal – and I don’t think about homophobia as much. When I’m consulting in the U.S., I spend most of my time in Boston, also a relatively gay-friendly place. Some of my lesbian and gay friends are now legally married in Massachusetts. The organizations I consult to are somewhat forward thinking, or else they wouldn’t be investing resources in creating multicultural organizations. For example, in one organization, the heterosexual male CEO frequently asks, “how are the lesbian and gay employees doing here?”

While there may be some increased acceptance of lesbian and gay people in all facets of U.S. society (especially within families), I’m keenly aware of the current backlash and the movement to pass a constitutional amendment that prevents lesbians and gays from having the right to marry. There is still plenty of gay-bashing (verbal, if not physical).

The right of same-sex partners to live their lives openly and fully is in no way guaranteed. Oppression of lesbian and gay people is alive and well in the U.S.

Since other authors in this issue of *The Diversity Factor* will say more about the impact of homophobia on lesbian and gay people, I want to focus on the impact of homophobia on heterosexuals, particularly heterosexual men like myself. To address this perspective, I'll focus on my experiences over the last few years at the organization where the CEO asks about the well being of lesbian and gay employees.

In this organization, lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees and clients work together. There may also be transgendered employees and clients. In general, the identity of these employees is a "secret," in the sense that they are not "out" to their colleagues. If they are "out" in some way, other employees probably don't know much about their lives outside of work.

I believe the CEO understands the cost of these "secrets" to the business. When some employees can't bring themselves fully to work, are afraid their "secret" will be discovered, or are mistreated and disrespected, there is a loss of creativity and productivity. This clearly impacts all employees, not only lesbian and gay employees. In addition, when lesbian and gay employees are being treated in a disrespectful or discriminatory way at work, some heterosexuals are keenly aware of the sadness and anger they feel. This means that they must spend energy to manage and respond to these feelings. I believe that the CEO and other heterosexual employees in this organization feel this sadness and anger.

There is at least one more way that homophobia has a negative impact on heterosexuals – how it affects the psyche of heterosexual men and their relationships with others. I want to use the rest of this article to focus on that.

White Men and Accepting Support

I recently ran into an employee in this organization who I've had a little contact with, but not much. He's a friendly guy. I also like to be friendly and I tend to touch people. As I greet him, I casually place my hand on his arm. He looks down at my hand and says, "You know, I'll have to go into therapy because of that." He's joking, of course. He's not going to go into therapy, and I know that his comment is actually a statement of his comfort with me. He's messing with me, just like he thought I was messing with him by touching him. But maybe some part of him is not all that comfortable with my touching him. The truth is, most heterosexual men I know are not particularly comfortable with casually being touched by another man, certainly not in the workplace. And if it's true that a man is uncomfortable with being touched, what then?

As part of the organization's diversity initiative, there are various support groups for employees, including one for white men. I've had lots of experience over the years with all-male groups, both as a participant and a leader, and this particular group is similar in at least one key respect: it's hard to get men to attend. Across the organization, five to ten percent of the white male employees have attended at least one session of the group.

Those few who do find the experience valuable are committed to regularly attending, but most men haven't shown any interest in the group. This is in spite of the fact that attendance at the group is encouraged by the CEO and COO, who themselves participate in the group and who consider participation in diversity-related activities to be "work."

What prevents greater participation and interest? Some men have told me that their "work" (which includes realities such as out-of-town travel, deadlines and unanticipated crises) takes priority. I'm sure that's true, and I think there's more to it. At one point, some members of the group speculated that some men might have some fears about attending with the CEO there, and so we announced that he wouldn't attend a few sessions to encourage others to come. It didn't help. When I shared this essay with one of the guys in the group, he told me, "don't underestimate the courage it takes to come to our little group. We white men in corporate environments are scared."

The word that keeps coming to my mind as I write this, and that I keep hesitating to write down, is "intimacy," as in "men seem to be afraid of intimacy." I hesitate, of course, because no one, including myself, really expects a group of men at work to be intimate with each other. And intimacy – especially for men – implies sexuality, and that's not at all what the group is for. But why not intimacy? This is a support group, and these men do sometimes talk very personally about the conflicts they experience. They share how they try to balance work and family life, their fears about performance at work, how they measure up against other employees and of the loss of colleagues who leave the organization.

In addition to facilitating groups like this, I also provide coaching on issues related to diversity. Over the years I've noticed that women and people of color are much more likely to ask for coaching from me. By writing this article I became aware that, in general, I am more comfortable as a consultant offering coaching to women and people of color. I find it easier to check in with them, offer my support or even share aspects of my personal life, like my recent marriage or the death of my mother, as a way to connect with them emotionally around their concerns.

It's not like I don't do any of that with the men at this organization. I do. But, I'm not as comfortable initiating contact, and when I do make contact I'm typically more guarded and cautious. I'm less likely to "push" if they say "no" or seem hesitant in accepting my offer to talk. I'm more likely to keep the conversation focused on work, instead of showing pictures of the wedding or sharing my sadness about the recent death of my mom. With the men, in the back of my head are the questions: "Will they be scared off by my contact with them? Will I be seen as being too "personal?" Is this too "intimate?"

In addition to my hesitancy in reaching out to the men, they also seem hesitant to reach out to me. What I do know for sure is that they make far fewer requests for coaching from me. One reason for this is that women and people of color experience the negative impact of oppression far more than the white men in this organization (and most organizations). Another reason is that these men don't feel comfortable with men or they see me as an outsider who can't understand the nature of their work.

While all of those reasons are probably true to some extent, I'm inclined to believe that a more significant reason why they don't reach out is because they are conditioned to be "the expert" and don't want to be seen as "not knowing." I was certainly conditioned to do this. I'm struck by how seldom they – and I – ask open-ended questions for information or to understand another person's point of view. We're much more likely to tell others what we think and what we think we know. Are we afraid to be vulnerable?

The theme that resonates for me in these examples is our inability to build and value relationships. I am aware that some of us men have developed the skills to work on teams. We can put our personal feelings aside in service of a team goal; leave personal issues at the door when we work on a project; and "get past" our interpersonal conflicts so that we can focus on the objectives. And I'm aware that there are ways that women are sometimes seen as being more competitive with each other when compared to men. I think that can be true, and if it is, I believe that it's a reaction to how women are marginalized at work and in society.

In any case, I ask you to "try on" the idea that men, in general, do have some difficulty (or a lot of difficulty) building and valuing relationships, and that this inability is simply a reflection of our socialization. From my perspective, this socialization includes the ways that we have been taught from an early age to be independent, to place work above relationships, to believe that what we accomplish is more important than who we are.

Sexism or Homophobia?

I don't know if our inability to build and value relationships comes from our conditioning as men or as heterosexuals. Said another way, and more dramatically, I don't know if our fear of intimacy comes from sexism or homophobia. Years ago, I learned from some lesbians that sexism and homophobia are interconnected, that one supports the other. "Feminized" men are suspected of being gay; gay men are seen as "less than male." So let's just assume that both sexism and homophobia are involved.

What I'm reasonably sure of – based on my experiences with other men and my own self reflection – is that we are afraid of how other men will judge us if we express too many (or any) of the "feminine" feelings like fear and sadness; if we get too close to other men; if we don't act "male" enough; or if we seem too vulnerable. And I'm reasonably sure that we come by this fear honestly. As boys, most of us paid a price for not living up to someone's expectation of what it means to be masculine, therefore we made decisions to not act "queer." That sounds like homophobia to me.

In Closing

Despite the challenges of being a consultant in this organization, it has been exciting for me to see how some heterosexual men are willing to express intimacy. For example, in the men's support group we start each session with a feelings check-in. Each man is invited to talk about one or more feelings he's aware of that day. While "excited" and "confident" are certainly feelings that have been mentioned, more frequently the men use this opportunity to talk about their sadness, anger and especially fear. In fact, fear is

probably the most common feeling mentioned in the group, and there is often a sense of relief in the room as a man lets go of the burden of thinking that he is the only one who is scared, angry or sad about something that has happened in the workplace or at home. Men have cried and received support from each other in the group. They've talked about issues that concerned them, that they haven't felt safe talking about anywhere else in the organization.

To be sure, talking about feelings does not come naturally to these guys. They say that they don't typically share their feelings with colleagues. And even though they comply with our request to do a feelings check-in, it is still a "stretch" for some of them. As one of the men said, "We could do this activity for the next two years and it would still be weird to me." I'm sure that our guideline of confidentiality – that what gets said in the group stays in the group – helps these men open up. But I also believe that the men who attend really do want to share their feelings, and, in some way, want to be closer to one another. This is one place where they can do that.

So, even if what I'm saying is true, why does this matter in the workplace? Let me ask the question in other ways:

- What might be the benefit of men having greater competence in building and maintaining relationships at work?
- What might be the benefit of men being more comfortable sharing their feelings at work?
- What might be the benefit of men seeking out the expertise of others and being able to say that we don't know something?

I suspect that many of you reading this have some great answers to that question, and so I encourage you to answer that for yourself. The one thing that I do want to say is this: I believe that if we men are more able to understand and value our own feelings and relationships with each other – if we can be more intimate with ourselves and one another – then we will be better able to understand and support our colleagues who are experiencing sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of oppression. And I think that we will be healthier, both physically and psychologically.

Having men share their feelings may seem like a small step in overcoming oppression. I believe that it is a small step and, at the same time, a very important and necessary step. The sharing of feelings is the basis for intimacy in relationships. As we create more equitable and fair structures and policies in our organizations and communities, we also need to create strong relationships across our differences. If we don't, then how can we create a society where we can work and live together, fully respecting and appreciating our differences?