

More Than Meets the Eye: An Ecological Perspective on Homophobia within the Black America

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Abstract

Through secondary data analysis of a semiquota sample of residents in an urban city, this study takes an ecological theoretical approach to explore the impact that individual, structural, and environmental characteristics have on the level of homophobic attitudes within the black community. We found a positive association between concepts reproducing the social-moral bonds and levels of homophobia. Conversely, we found that a liberal mentality about life and a disenfranchisement from the sexist ideology are negatively correlated with our measure of homophobic attitudes. For both relationships, we found that the most powerful predictor was the multiplicative effects of individual and structural characteristics (social-moral bonds).

Introduction

Over the past few years, scholars have expressed a growing concern regarding the effects of homophobia. Within the black community, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBTs) are subjected to two unique and simultaneous forms of oppression—first, as racial minorities and, second, as sexual minorities (Robinson 2009). The “same-sex relationship taboo” present in the larger society toward LGBTs also exists along racial lines, thus generating the idea that black homosexuality tarnishes the image of the overall community (Boykin 1996, 2005; Stokes et al. 1996). Arguably, the resulting stigma hinders a healthy identity development and can produce a context of isolation and stress (Cohen 1999; Lewis 2003).

That homophobia is a thread in a national fabric that rewards certain morals and values is not an issue. For example, most researchers would agree

that a society arranged around the model of the heterosexual family reproduces such prejudice (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1993; Pinar 2001; Seidman 2003; Onwuachi-Willig 2005; Franke 2008).¹ Instead, the question is whether this institutional homophobia manifests with equal strength in the overall society or whether individuals in different social contexts express varying attitudes on homosexuality. Although this might appear to be a simple question, the answer is quite complex since it requires one to go beyond the general concept of family and the relative roles in it. At its core, the problem raises questions around ideologies of masculinity and femininity, as well as the rigidity or flexibility of those concepts.

From this perspective, our research is an attempt to think, in more complex ways, about homophobic attitudes within Black America. In short, we adopt a “mesoapproach” in which we consider the individual as the center of personal dispositions (self), influenced by and interacting with the surrounding environment. Doing so allows us to investigate not only the nature of an action but also the meaning and interpretation of it, thus allowing us to employ theories that would otherwise seem incompatible. Because we take the position that attitudes reproduce individual, structural, and environmental individual features, our three-part conceptual approach is then translated into an ecological model to better understand homophobia.² Below, we unravel the mesoapproach used in the present work, highlighting other pertinent studies on homophobia. From there, we present the more quantitative portions of our work.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Theory

Durkheim saw society as a moral phenomenon and “morality” itself as a social phenomenon with its own recognizable characteristics (Durkheim 1997). Moral norms interwoven with juridical rules regulate interactions, reinforcing the ties between individuals and the larger group. The progress of the division of labor, he argued, increased the number of social relationships affecting the organization of the whole society. In fact, in traditional societies (marked by mechanical solidarity), functions were distributed according to kinship and clan relationships; in contrast, in modern societies (based on organic solidarity), the central state and institutions attract those functions governing life in general (Durkheim 1997). As a result, individuals develop a similar consciousness.

Social institutions—a formalized set of behaviors and social relationships internalized through socialization—are in this way “interwoven with a system of common moral sentiments which in turn define what one has the ‘right to expect’ of a person in a certain position” (Parsons 1949, 276). Therefore, according to Parsons, social institutions (1) represent the totality of morally sanctioned statuses and roles, (2) locate individuals within the social structure defining “legitimate expectations of their attitude and behavior,” and, consequently, (3) act as agencies of control of human behavior.

Thinking about minority groups, the different modes of behavior and outlook held by such groups depend on the degree of their isolation from the rest of society, the resources they control and the privileges they derive from these resources, the experiences accumulated through time as a result of specific economic and political arrangements, and the influence they exercise as consequence of those arrangements. Therefore, one would expect that the “total culture” of different subgroups includes a predominance of mainstream elements but also minority group-specific elements (Anderson 1990; Robinson 2007).

One must consider not only how culture is sustained but also how it is modified through social interaction within specific minorities or (sub) groups. In this sense, people’s attitudes and behavior do not simply reproduce cultural-institutional expectations. Individuals in society are not simply the medium through which elements like social structure, social system, norms, values, etc., operate. Further, people’s interactions are not just an expression of such factors. Humans act in conditions in which institutions already provide a standardized set of solutions; however, individuals (re) interpret those solutions in order to face their personal situations (Blumer 1969). Therefore, the focus shifts on the “self” and the ability of humans to act toward themselves as well as toward others, in a continuous process of self-indication through which individuals construct their conscious actions (Mead 1934).

Regardless of the situation in which the social actor is involved, she or he pays attention to what has to be taken into account during the course of her or his actions. As Blumer (1971) argues, “[S/]he has to note what [s/]he wants to do and how [s/]he is to do it; [s/]he has to point out to [her/]himself the various conditions which may be instrumental to [her/]his action and those which may obstruct [her/]his action; [s/]he has to take into account of the demands, the expectations, the prohibitions, and the threats as they may arise in the situation in which [s/]he is acting” (81). The consequence is that an attitude is the result of structural and environmental influences, on

the one hand, and the combination of those influences within an individual with her or his own personal features, on the other.

Therefore, attitudes—including homophobia—are best viewed in a theoretical context that includes micro/personal/individual characteristics, as well as structural/macro features, and the action exerted by the immediate surrounding environment where the individual acts but over which has little control. Further, such a model, by incorporating how these domains interact, can suggest new directions for understanding homophobia. More specifically, it would allow for the inclusion and decomposition of historical and familial levels as additional variables of analysis.

Literature Review

Homophobia—an integral part of a society organized around the norm of heterosexuality (Seidman 2003; Onwuachi-Willig 2005; Franke 2008)—keeps individuals exaggerating their adherence to traditional norms (Kimmel, cited in Pinar 2001, 849). Accordingly, heterosexism—those social structures that prescribe heterosexuality as the “natural” sexual interest and the centrality of the man-woman coupling in society—can be considered a passive form of discrimination by omission and/or distortion (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1993). Further, homophobia—“the fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex” (Blumenfeld 1992, 283)—unveils the active intent of feeling negatively toward LGBT people. Therefore, homophobia encompasses the concept of heterosexism since, when practiced, it “not only announces that one is heterosexual but declares that heterosexuality is good and homosexuality is bad” (Seidman 2003, 50).

Homophobia has roots in sexism and the gender ideology held within society. Fuchs Epstein (1988) argues that the psychological and social differences between (assertive) men and (submissive) women are already written into the structure of sex itself. Thus, Herek and Glunt (1993) claim that such gender ideology led heterosexual men to hold a greater negative attitude toward homosexuals (men and women) than toward heterosexuals (men or women). The stigma attached to homosexuality affects not only LGBTs but also those people associated with them. For example, social workers observe that, when parents are informed their daughter or son is homosexual, the first reaction is shock and disbelief of having an imperfect child. After a phase of rage and anger, replaced subsequently by sadness, “parents enter the coping stage—that is, they learn to cope with their shame and embarrassment over having such a child” (Appleby and Anastas 1998, 26).

From an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Germain 1991),

we can distinguish between institutional and individual dimensions of homophobia. On the institutional level, for example, in law and religion, cultural homophobia refers to the social norms or codes of behavior that, written into policy, work within society to legitimize oppression, thus reinforcing control by a system of rewards and punishment. Kantor (1998) presents several different institutional homophobic models of homosexuality: (1) the medical model, where homosexuality is considered a sickness; (2) the religious model, which defines homosexuality as a sin; (3) the criminal model, that considers homosexuals criminals; (4) the sociocultural model in which homosexuality is labeled as deviance; and (5) the political model “where homophobes view homosexuality as a useful tool for politicians trying to seize or maintain power by making gays and lesbians . . . political fodder in an election day” (17).³

On the individual level, we can talk in terms of “psychological homophobia” that, in its manifest form, is revealed as distortions of reality, biased attitudes, prejudices, and behaviors oriented toward LGBT people (Appleby and Anastas 1998); and, on the other hand, it is (re)affirmed as nonviolation of gender (marital and reproductive) roles with the relative (gender) identities, expectations, norms, and values they entail that are internalized in early life during the processes of socialization. In more explicit terms, we can think to when LGBTs engage in behaviors that parallel those of heterosexuals: the latter, for example, can perceive themselves as wives or husbands, mothers or fathers.⁴ LGBTs, conversely, are negated those identities (and the relative institutions supporting those identities) and are, therefore, defined in terms of their socioerotic individuality, which—Herek (1990) argues—consigns them to an unequal status, setting them in opposition to the dominant group, and discloses something that is regarded as private, that is, sexuality.⁵

From a general point of view, some researchers argue that those guilty of antigay/lesbian violence rationalize their actions by referring to parental expectations, religious teachers, and everyday social standards. Motivations for, and variables related to, homophobia are equally complex. For example, the disapproval of homophobic violence appears to be milder or absent if compared to the blame expressed toward other types of crime (Comstock 1991). While some research argues that male offenders of violent crimes tend to be the most homophobic (Comstock 1991), other researchers contend that people assaulting homosexuals are, in high school and involved in school and community activities, generally enrolled in college-preparatory programs in high school or are enrolled in college (Pinar 2001). However,

we fully recognize that someone who commits a violent crime could also (easily) be in school.

Age and education are significantly correlated with homophobia. In particular, Seltzer (1992) and Kite and Whitley (1996) found that older respondents were more conservative regarding homosexuality and held stronger homophobic feelings than do their younger counterparts. Individuals with higher levels of education have more positive attitudes toward LGBT people (Seltzer 1992; Kite and Whitley 1996).

Homophobia seems to decrease as a result of exposure to homosexuals and homosexuality. Researches show that heterosexuals who reported interpersonal contact with LGBTs express more positive feelings toward them (Herek and Glunt 1993; Herek and Capitanio 1995). But others stress that it is also important to consider the nature of such exposure and how it impacts on individuals' feelings: "if one has a negative experience with a homosexual, negative feelings are likely to occur" (Hensley et al. 2002, 298).

Literature on black-white differences toward homosexuality also produces provocative findings (Boykin 1996; Lewis 2003; McBride 2005). For example, many black LGBTs experience racism in their interactions with white LGBT people. It has also been suggested that black LGBT individuals feel more pressure than whites to hide their homosexual behavior (Cohen 1999). Among men who have sex with men (MSM), blacks are more likely than whites to think their friends and neighbors disapprove of homosexuality (Stokes et al. 1996; Collins 2004).⁶

Some researchers have argued that homophobia within the black community produces consequences that affect not only the development of a healthy sexual identity of black LGBTs but also jeopardizes the public health of the overall community. In fact, on the one hand, many black LGBTs do not identify as gay as a response to the blame of the community, which, in turn, challenges the legitimacy of the whole gay rights movement (Lewis 2003). On the other hand, homophobia constitutes a further aspect that slows black mobilization against the spread of AIDS (House and Walker 1993; Brandt 1999; Ford et al. 2007; Davidson 2010). On this last point, Cohen (1999) asserts that the black middle-class and their political leaders neglected to embrace AIDS as an issue for the community because that "might indicate acceptance of homosexuality and injection drug use, feeding into racist images about uncontrolled black sexuality" (33–34).

Boykin (1996) argues that homophobia extends its influence to every corner of black society. It is expressed in the rhetoric of intellectuals, public figures, and ordinary people; further, it is reproduced in institutions and

popular culture. Some have emphasized that these homophobic attitudes are reinforced by the masculine ideology existing in the culture, either reproducing an image of a virile black manliness (Ross 1998) or condemning homosexual behaviors in mass media (Tatchell 2002; Wright 2009). Both men and women internalize and reproduce this sexist attitude. In fact, notwithstanding the general belief that, within the black community, the homophobia has mainly a male imprint, "black women are often homophobic too" (Boykin 1996, 161). Boykin presents two explanations for female homophobia: first, LGBT people are considered a threat for the heterosexual family since there are fewer men than women in the community and, second, the acceptance of the male domination leads women to believe that homosexuals weakens the image of the whole community: "If outsiders are to judge the entire black community by its men, then some heterosexual black women want stereotypically strong heterosexual black men to represent the race" (Boykin 1996, 171–72).

However, alongside this critique of homophobia within the black community, we also acknowledge the role of external force in inciting homophobia. More specifically, by holding homosexuality as a (biblical) sin, black churches fostered a symbolic assault on LGBTs as theological practice enhancing de facto masculinist attitudes in the community (Boykin 2005; Ward 2005). From a different position, some authors have argued the incompatibility between homosexuality and Afrocentricity: "Homosexuality and lesbianism are deviation from Afrocentric thought because they often make the person evaluate his or her own physical need above the teachings of national consciousness" (Asante 2003, 72).⁷ We believe that, by implication, this also supports what others have discussed about how the political right stirs homophobia in the black community for political gain (Chideya 1993).

From this perspective, a liberal view of life influences views on sexual morality in the opposite direction of the institutional prescriptions on such matters. The problem lies in the fact that liberalism ought not to be conceived as a single unitary attitude, but rather as an ideological system consisting of various trends expressed with different levels of intensity. In other words, a person may not actively seek a progressive social change yet may still be opposed to numerous conservative values and beliefs. The goal here is to get behind specific issues, in order to move from a political to a more psychological dimension, as a means to distinguish different patterns in people's attitudes. Therefore, we argue that liberalism, measured in terms of political preference, has a sensitive impact on morality in regard to the broader perspective that people hold about society; on the other hand, the concept

of “moral liberalism” (Reiman 1997) seems more suitable to cover those attitudes related with issues, which approximate the personal sphere.

Moral liberalism—a set of beliefs that pertain to a particular vision of the good life (moral dimension)—is based on the idea of individual freedom. Connected with this is the thought that people should be free to determine their own destiny and to govern their own lives (liberal dimension). In more practical terms, individuals would hold what has been called “situation ethics” (Luker 1985); that is, people would use a different basis for their moral reasoning, doubting that a single moral code can serve everyone or is suitable to evaluate every issue, everywhere, and at all times. Thus, morality consists of individuals weighing competing situations and rights, while these same individuals try to reconcile them internally—not under mandatory moral rules, but rather by personal principles.

That being said, the approach used in the present study offers an analysis of homophobia in the black community by linking structural variables, those associated with the personal sphere, and accounts related to the settings “containing the individuals.” In this sense, by overcoming the rigid opposition between structure and agency, a greater understanding of the combined influence of such sets of variables on homophobia is offered. More specifically, our model explains how, notwithstanding the general cultural expectations, in some geographical areas an increasing number of heterosexual individuals have come to accept and understand the diversity in sexual identities. We contend that examining and better understanding this phenomenon and such processes are important elements in terms of social change. With this model as a foundation, the present research explores the effect that individual features, macro/structural elements and the surrounding environment (that is, the symbolic perception of homophobia in the community of belonging) have on homophobia.

Data and Methods

The present research is based on secondary data belonging to the attitudinal survey “Researching New York City: One Life at a Time” sponsored by the Department of Sociology at Hunter College at City University of New York. The explicit aim of such a survey was to investigate people’s attitudes toward different populations. Due to its rich ethnic, racial, and gender diversity, which was critical given the nature of the questions examined in the study, a sample of convenience (that is, nonrandom) of New York City (NYC) residents was used for this research. The data were collected throughout the city’s

five boroughs during the spring of 2004. Using the United States Bureau of Census data as the primary source for the sampling frame, efforts were made to develop a semiquota sample that reflected NYC based on race, gender, and borough diversity. Ultimately a total of 1,172 respondents participated, and the final sample contained significant diversity within the targeted variables. From our original sample, the subset of blacks (N = 198, about 17 percent of the larger sample) was selected for analysis.

Dependent Variable

The *Index of Homophobic Attitude* is a composite variable obtained by combining the standardized version of a set of original variables created to represent, respectively, the concepts of homophobia at both the institutional and personal levels. For example, to measure homophobia at the institutional level, we asked the question “Do you agree or disagree that homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another?” (from 1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree”). At the individual level, two sets of items were considered as operational definitions of what has been named “psychological homophobia”; that is, the respondent was encouraged to express her or his opinion about different situations involving homosexual relationships and homosexuals. First, we asked about the level of wrongfulness perceived by the respondent about “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” (from 1 “always wrong” to 4 “not wrong at all”). Then, we employed a total of twelve dichotomous variables with reversed code (0 “yes,” 1 “no”), aimed to register the level of comfortableness or social distance that the respondent had with gay (first six items) and lesbian (the other six items) people in different settings (e.g., “Would you be comfortable if a gay or a lesbian was: a family member?; your friend?; your neighbor?; your child’s teacher?; your doctor?; your representative in Congress?”).⁸ These twelve items were then added together. These partial measures were oriented to have the same semantic direction; because of the different unit of measure of all three, we standardized them before adding them together to create the final composite ($\alpha = .84$). As final operation, we rescaled such a composite to have its range starting from zero. On this variable, higher values indicate higher levels of homophobic attitude.

Independent Variables

Individual Characteristics

Male is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent is a male (coded 1, 46 percent) or female (coded 0).

Age of Respondent in Years is a continuous variable obtained by subtracting the respondent's year of birth from 2004—the year in which the data were collected.

Level of School Completed measures the level of formal education of the respondents (from 1 “less than high school” to 6 “advanced or professional degree”).

Household Income is a continuous measure assessing the household income of the respondent as to the year 2003; it ranges from 1 “less than \$10,000” to 10 “\$75,000 and more.”

Sexual Behavior since the Age of 18 Years is a dummy variable created using two original questions: “What is your sex?” and “Since your 18th birthday have your sexual partners been” with response categories: 1 “only men,” 2 “mostly men,” 3 “equally men and women,” 4 “mostly women,” and 5 “only women.” Respondents declaring to have had only partners of the opposite sex were categorized as “having had heterosexual behavior since the age of 18 years” (coded 0); instead, people who had partners mostly of the same sex or equally of both sexes were categorized as “having had at least some homosexual sex-behavior since the age of 18 years” (coded 1, 15 percent).

Structural Characteristics

Political View is a variable used to measure the respondent's level of political conservatism. It ranges from 1 “extremely liberal” to 6 “extremely conservative.”

Family Structure Nonconformity is a continuous composite obtained by averaging the scores of three Likert scales ($\alpha = .77$). All three measured the level of disagreement/agreement (from 0 “strongly disagree” to 3 “strongly agree”) on statements regarding single fathers (“In your opinion: (a) A single father can bring up a child as well as a two parent household can; (b) A single father can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with his children as a single mother can with her children; [or] (c) A single father can just as effectively run a household as a single mother can”).

Woman Work Engagement is a composite obtained by averaging four original variables measuring the attitude toward the workload considered appropriate (0 “not at all,” 1 “part-time,” and 2 “full-time”) for women in different circumstances; that is: (a) “After marrying and before there are children,” (b) “When there is a child under school age,” (c) “After the youngest child starts school,” or (d) “After the children leave home.” On the resulting measure ($\alpha = .66$), higher scores reflect higher levels of work engagement.

Environmental Characteristics

Perceived Homophobia in the Community is a composite variable obtained by adding the standardized scores of two original variables used to measure how black respondents think other black people feel about “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” (from 1 “always wrong” to 4 “not wrong at all”) and how the respondent thinks other black people feel about same-sex marriage (from 1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree”). This measure was coded such that higher scores reflect a perception of higher levels of homophobia in the black community.

Considering the use of a convenience sample, we calculate the indices of kurtosis and skewness in order to have a sense of the distribution of both the dependent and independent variables. We found that the range for the index of kurtosis is between -1.40 – $.44$ while the range of the index of skewness is $-.75$ – $-.61$. All variables, except *Sexual Behavior since the Age of 18 Years*, were centered for two reasons: first, to give a more meaningful interpretation to the intercept in the multivariate analysis (Gelman and Hill 2007); second, to avoid multicollinearity between main effects and interaction terms (Jaccard et al. 1990).¹⁰

Models

To investigate the multivariate influence that individual, structural, and environmental measures have on the level of homophobic attitudes within the black community, four Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression models were employed. In the first model, we examined the influence of individual characteristics (demographics and sexual behavior). The second model added structural variables related to what we have termed social-moral bonds—political view, family structure nonconformity, and women work engagement. The third model presented two interaction terms, which combined individual and structural variables; in this case, the aim was to investigate (simultaneously) the conjoined effect of these variables on homophobia to examine more carefully the concept of moral liberalism. To accomplish this, the first interaction term was male with family structure nonconformity, while the second interaction term was education with women work engagement. Finally, in the fourth model, the composite “perceived homophobia in the black community”—our environmental measure—was added in order to examine more explicitly how the (result of the) process of interpretation of “environmental symbols” impacts homophobia.

Results

The descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and range) for the dependent and independent variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Variables for Blacks (N = 198)^a

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Dependent Variable			
Index of Homophobic Attitudes	1.29	0.89	0.00–2.57
Individual Variables			
Male	.46	.50	0–1
Age of Respondent in Years	39.27	14.14	18–90
Level of School Completed	3.22	1.43	1–6
Household Income	6.89	2.59	1–10
Sexual Behavior since Age 18	0.15	0.36	0–1
Structural Variables			
Political View	3.02	1.28	1–6
Family Structure Nonconformity	2.84	0.68	1–4
Women Work Engagement	1.43	0.44	0–2
Male Centered* Family Structure Nonconformity Centered	0.00	0.34	-0.99–0.86
Level of School Completed Centered *			
Women Work Engagement Centered	0.08	0.60	-2.10–2.62
Environmental Variable			
Perceived Homophobia in the Community	0.19	0.94	-1.70–1.31

^a Descriptive information above is based on a listwise deletion of cases.

Before finalizing the multivariate analysis, we checked if the assumptions of regression modeling were met. All continuous variables approximated a normal distribution (see our previous discussion on the range of skewness and kurtosis). We did not find any multicollinearity among predictors, and the centering strategy we adopted helped to minimize the correlation between main effects and interaction terms (see Appendix). However, since low bivariate correlations are not a sure sign of absence of multicollinearity, we also inspected the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) within all models and found that the highest VIF was equal to 1.3 for the level of education when the two interaction terms were included (one of which was “Level of School Completed Centered * Women Work Engagement Centered”).¹¹ Finally, the regression residuals showed a normal distribution (skewness and kurtosis

were respectively $-.04$ and $-.43$) and no correlation with any of the predictors (additional results available upon request).

Table 2 shows a significant change in the F-Statistic for all models. We recall that because of the way we centered the independent variables, the intercept represents the adjusted average level of homophobic attitude for the proportion of males who have had a heterosexual sex-behavior since the age of 18 years and are “average” on all continuous predictors.

In Model I (see Table 2), the only statistically significant predictors are age and sexual behavior since age of 18 years. On the one hand, for each year above the average age, the level of homophobia increased of 0.15 units (and the contrary held for each year of age below the mean); on the other hand, those who declared to have had some homosexual-sex behavior since their 18th birthday had, as expected, a lower level of homophobia. We noticed that, although not significant, the estimated parameter of the variable indicating the level of school education decreases the level of homophobic attitude for values above the average (that is, between associate’s and bachelor’s degree).

In Model II, we introduced the three main structural variables referring to the moral sphere in both its (socio-)political and personal dimension, and all of them are statistically significant. As the political views become more conservative (that is, scores above the average), the level of homophobia increases. Conversely, both family structure nonconformity and women’s work engagement have a negative impact on homophobia for values above average. When introducing these three measures, the variable regarding sexual behavior loses its statistical significance.

Next, we added the two interaction terms, both of which were statistically significant. Family structure nonconformity does not have an equal impact on homophobia for males and females. In short, as acceptance of family structure nonconformity increases, males’ levels of homophobia increases, while, simultaneously, their black female counterpart’s decreases. Further, we found that the impact of women’s work engagement is a function of education: the counterintuitive result is that the level of homophobia decreases to a greater extent for those with lower levels of education (see Model III on Table 2). Finally, our environmental symbol measure—perceived homophobia—had a positive impact on homophobia. More specifically, the more likely one is to perceive the black community to be homophobic, the more likely that person is to be homophobic her- or himself. It is also useful to notice that, when this variable is considered, the influence of the moral liberalism measures decrease (see Model IV on Table 2).

Table 2. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for Index of Homophobic Attitudes (Beta in parentheses)

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
Individual Variables				
Male Centered	.100 (.057)	.015 (.009)	.001 (.001)	.027 (.015)
Age of Respondent in Years Centered	.015** (.240)	.009* (.136)	.008* (.130)	.007 (.104)
Level of School Completed Centered	-.055 (-.087)	-.018 (-.029)	-.037 (-.058)	-.053 (-.083)
Household Income Centered	-.035 (-.101)	-.037 (-.108)	-.035 (-.101)	-.028 (-.082)
Sexual Behavior since Age of 18-Years	-.359* (-.144)	-.296 (-.119)	-.255 (-.102)	-.202 (-.081)
Structural Variables				
Political View Centered	---	.136** (.192)	.138** (.194)	.143*** (.202)
Family Structure Nonconformity Centered	---	-.377*** (-.303)	-.398*** (-.320)	-.327*** (-.262)
Women Work Engagement Centered	---	-.325* (-.145)	-.364* (-.162)	-.318* (-.141)
Male Centered * Family Structure Nonconformity Centered	---	---	.365* (.201)	.314* (.126)
Level of School Completed Centered * Women Work Engagement Centered	---	---	-.315** (-.200)	-.279** (-.176)
Environmental Variable				
Perceived Homophobia in Community Centered	---	---	---	.285*** (.308)
Constant	1.33***	1.31***	1.33***	1.32***
Adjusted R2	.096	.258	.313	.402
F-Statistic Change	5.17***	15.02***	8.50***	28.80***

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

In sum, the present study supports the idea that, in addition to the demographic variables, social-moral bonds, moral liberalism, and environmental symbols are important elements in predicting levels of homophobia among Black Americans. Yet, what we consider to be even more important is that our results unravel the dynamics existing among the different layers constituting morality that, from a more theoretical perspective, undermines the idea of a monolithic system of moral reasoning equally valid (and applicable) in every sphere of life; and, on the other hand, it gives room for practical action to

counteract homophobia within the black community. We expand on this perspective in the next section.

Discussion

By simultaneously considering individual, structural, and environmental characteristics, we have a more dynamic understanding of the recursive and reciprocal set of relationships in which homophobic attitudes articulate in the black community. At the individual level (Model I), the expectations advanced in the theoretical section were further confirmed. We found a positive relationship between age and homophobia (Seltzer 1992; Kite and Whitley 1996). The idea of the inverse relationship between educational attainment and homophobia was not fully corroborated by a statistically significant estimate, although we found that above an associate's degree, the level of homophobia decreases (Kite and Whitley 1996). Arguably, educational attainment, rather than having a linear pattern of influence in decreasing the antihomosexual attitude, exerts a conjoint effect with structural variables.

In order to understand such dynamics better, we deepened the analysis of the moral sphere, paying particular attention to the interaction between the levels involved. To achieve this goal, we used measures representing the concept of moral liberalism for the relationship it has with the "individual autonomy," which, in turn, offers a clear link between the individual (micro) and the structure (macro). In fact, as shown on Table 2, when social-moral bonds are considered, the individual characteristics present a different and more contextualized arrangement. More specifically, sexual behavior becomes statistically nonsignificant in Model II, while, instead in the consecutive model—strikingly—the influence of women's work engagement in decreasing the levels of homophobia is greater for those with lower levels of education. On the other hand, the acceptance of less traditional family structures (family structure nonconformity) highlights a gender-role attitude such that its influence produces increases in level of homophobia for men but not for women (Boykin 1996). Finally, we found that environmental symbols increase negative attitudes toward homosexuals (Model IV) and simultaneously decrease the influence of moral liberalism.

Although a superficial interpretation of these outcomes may lead one to conclude that, with an increase of a conservative mentality, an increase in homophobic attitude follows (and the contrary holds), we think that this is not the whole story. We believe that the reading of such results must be placed within the larger context of transformations that the black community has

gone through in the past decades, specifically in urban areas. These transformations include the worsening conditions of the labor market, which has affected, in particular, males in low-skilled jobs and the changing attitudes toward sex and marriage. The “interaction between material and cultural constraints” (Testa 1991, 16) has had a profound impact on the family structure and the roles in it. Higher levels of male unemployment, in conjunction with weaker norms against premarital sex, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and nonmarital parenthood, have had two (sometimes conflicting) impacts. On the one hand, they have weakened the image of the male breadwinner role, leading to a cultural change that places “less value on marriage and rejects the dominance of men as a standard for a successful husband-wife family” (Wilson 1996, 105), while on the other hand, they have facilitated the proliferation of single-mother families (Wilson 1996).

In such a context, it seems that our results go in the same direction. For example, for people with lower levels of education, who are also likely to have lower incomes, the acceptance of higher workload for a woman after marriage correlates with greater decreases in homophobia. As a result, this may be an indication of a more liberal morality deriving from material conditions of existence. This does not imply that these changes are the results of rational decisions and, above all, the total abandonment of mainstream values. It could be the outcome of an accidental cultural transmission where the frequent exposure to life situations allows the shaping of new cultural perspectives and habits. This is what some have called cultural adaptivity or resiliency models.

In short, although the majority of people endorse societal values, individuals may find (some of) them in contradiction with their own living conditions. We consider this “contradiction” a useful space for the implementation of practical action aiming to fight homophobia. According to the “Survey of Chicago African-Americans” (1997), 66.2 percent of respondents favored nondiscrimination in the workplace supporting “gay job discrimination laws,” yet 66.5 percent opposed “homosexuals and lesbians being allowed to adopt children.” Equally complexing, 52.8 percent of people disagreed in varying degrees to the statement “homosexuality is disgusting.”¹² The General Social Survey (2002), a national dataset, found that 82.1 percent of blacks considered, to varying degrees, that “homosexual sex relations” were wrong.¹³ Taking into consideration the methodological differences of those surveys and our research (for example, indicators used, the way concepts were operationalized, methodologies employed, etc.), we conclude that, in some geographic areas, although the environment continues to be a source

of pressure and stress, there is a higher acceptance of different sexual identities than the average U.S. area. Since LGBT identity coexists with many other kinds of identity, it becomes important to substantiate these preliminary outcomes.

Future research needs to examine more fully why in some cases/areas this coexistence is functionally adaptive while, in others, it is conflictive; how the identification with other social groups happens and along which lines it influences the behavior; and how self-esteem is derived from this process and how it contributes to identity development. In terms of our approach, it becomes a matter of analyzing the process of social comparison (among groups of belonging) for understanding the process of self-categorization *within* a context of political and social arrangements exerting their cultural-educative functions.

Our findings are tempered by some limitations of the study. First, due to data limitations, we used household income rather than personal wage or salary. Further, we did not include any measures of religiosity or religious participation. As a result, our understanding of moral indoctrination disapproving homosexuality is limited to only the political dimension (conservatism). Second, our sample included 198 people. Some would argue that such a small sample might not be able to pick up variance within the sample and, thus, that we may not have the ideal statistical power. Moreover, because this was a convenience sample of New York City residents, one should use caution when generalizing our results to the larger Black American population. However, to address this last point, we conducted further analyses that showed that distribution of the variables used in our study are not so distant from a normal distribution (see our methods section); further, we ran the multivariate analysis with bootstrap option (10,000 repetitions) and obtained the same results in terms of direction and level of magnitude of the parameter estimates and improved levels of statistical significance for those same coefficients. More important, our findings are consistent with those found in national datasets like the General Social Survey (GSS).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present research supports the need to consider an ecological approach in studying homophobia in conjunction with the use of a national dataset. More specifically, an ecological approach utilizes multiple levels of analyses, such as the historical and the familial, and employs different methods and statistical techniques. Further, for theory development, the advantage of this approach allows researchers the opportunity to use theories that, because of their macro- or microdimensions, on their surface, seem incompatible. Consider, for example, when

social researchers inform the action of political thinkers in terms of where the emphasis should be placed in defining frameworks and priorities for LGBT people in order to promote social change. At a given historical moment, how can the *status quo* between dominant and dominated group(s) be altered? When is it appropriate to change the basis of social comparison, in particular at the cognitive level? Should the emphasis be the same for different issues—for example, same-sex marriage and nonheterosexual-couple adoption—or should they be modulated? Should those issues be promoted in terms of civil-political rights or should they need to be rethought in terms of human rights? An ecology model, in a research context, would offer some insight and instruction into these quests.

The empirical and heuristic value of knowing the interactive context in which homophobia emerges could clarify the influence exerted by the stigma attached to homosexuality (perceived homophobia) such that LGBT people, feeling discomfort to disclose their sexual orientation, end up having the undesirable outcome of lower self-esteem. Similarly, it could hamper the political right's ability to divide conveniently and conquer the black community around issues of little political import to the black community (like gay marriage) and, thus, highlight discussions of resolution of more important ones (for example, racial discrimination, the prison-industrial complex, lack of quality public health care, urban unemployment, urban poverty, etc.; Lewis 2003). Clearly, more studies need to be done that utilize the proposed approach of contemplating several levels of analyses combined in a single model, thus providing a framework for individual-level empowerment and community-level political action.

Endnotes

1. For example, The Family Protection Act voted in 1981 (“No federal funds may be made available . . . to any public or private individual . . . for the purpose of advocating, promoting, or suggesting homosexuality, male or female, as a lifestyle” cit. in Clarke 1999, 31) or the so-called Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) that in 1996 turned homosexuality into law (Fone 2000).

2. Although traditionally “human ecology” has been considered as having a greater affinity with structural functionalism for the emphasis given to the concepts of adaptation and equilibrium, later contributions within social sciences have proposed “ecology” as a framework that interconnects different levels of analysis. Bronfenbrenner 1979, for example, by emphasizing the size and function of those levels, distinguishes among micro-system, individual experience; mesosystem, social relationships among microsystems; exosystem, social settings exerting power over individuals; and macrosystem, institutions and systems of ideology. Other authors instead classify the levels as (1) historical,

(2) environmental-structural, (3) cultural, (4) familial, and (5) individual (Germain 1991; Appleby and Anastas 1998).

3. "Medical and scientific elites have also contributed greatly to homophobia and heterosexism. Until 1973 the American Psychological Association (APA) considered homosexuality to be a form of mental illness. Counseling and psychiatric services were offered to LGBT people to overcome these disorders. Far too many people continue to hold this belief. Some medical practitioners and clinicians offer treatments intended to cure lesbians and gays of their 'affliction'" (Stein 2004, 34).

4. Again, to emphasize the parallel existence between institutional and psychological dimension, consider how the birth of a child, beyond reestablishing the sexual orientation of the parents, is also acknowledged at the institutional level in forms of tax deductions, religious rituals, gifts, and so forth.

5. For example, exhibiting a picture of one's own (heterosexual) spouse is not perceived as an intrusion in the private sphere because the public identity as husband or wife is the socially acceptable and without controversy. However, for same-sex couples, such a display immediately stirs considerations about the gender of the partner as well as the sexual components of the relationship.

6. In this paper, the difference between homosexual behavior (men who have sex with men, MSM) and homosexual identity (LGBT) has been operationalized in two different variables. This distinction is employed in particular for those studies that concentrate on the relation between homophobia and AIDS—where it is the behavior, rather than the identity, that matters.

7. In this specific regard, the intention is not to label some intellectuals as anti-LGBTs, but rather to highlight how certain forms of theorizing by disregarding the complexity of identity—which includes being of African descendents and gay—lend themselves to the political division within the black community and the perpetuation of machismo and patriarchal domination.

8. In its original formulation, social distance was conceptualized as "the degrees and grades of understanding and feeling that persons experience regarding each other. It explains the nature of a great deal of their interaction. It charts the character of social relations. The measurement of social distances is to be viewed simply as a means for securing adequate interpretations of the varying degrees and grades of understanding and feeling that exist in social situations" (Bogardus 1925, 299).

9. Category 6 ("I have not had any sexual partners") was not considered in this computation, resulting in a loss of five cases.

10. Multicollinearity inflates the standard error of the unstandardized coefficients (Bs) above their true value with the consequence of making these coefficients appear to be statistically nonsignificant.

11. The most conservative approach we found about the VIF refers to logistic regression and comes from Paul Allison (1999), who sustains that there should be a concern for multicollinearity when VIF is above 2.5.

12. Source: <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+Chicago>. Our analysis items were "hm1a," "hm2a," and "hm3a." Accessed November 20, 2011.

13. Source: <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10>. Our analysis items were "racecen1" and "homosex." Accessed November 20, 2011.

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