

Op-Ed: What we really mean when we talk about acceptance of gay people

By AMIN GHAZIANI
JUNE 10, 2018

Every year the polling organization Gallup takes America's pulse on gay rights. A random sample of more than 1,000 Americans adults is asked whether "gay or lesbian relations" between consenting adults are "morally acceptable or morally wrong." Over the 17 years Gallup has looked at this issue, the trend has been steeply positive, a shift that has influenced public policy, political candidates, civil rights claims and Supreme Court cases. The 2018 survey found that 67% of the population embraces moral acceptability.

But when we talk about *acceptance* related to sexual diversity, as many of us are right now during LGBTQ Pride Month, what is really being offered? If you're gay, exactly how far does being found "morally acceptable" by two-thirds of your fellow Americans get you? Maybe not as far as you think, even among your most progressive neighbors.

Research by sociologists shows that heterosexuals are willing to extend "formal rights" to same-sex couples — policies such as family leave, hospital visitation, inheritance rights and insurance benefits. Yet they are unwilling to grant them "informal privileges" such as the freedom to express affection in public places by holding hands or sharing a kiss — or whether they can get a custom wedding cake.

As a professor, I have spent nearly a decade trying to learn about this contradiction — particularly among those who say they are liberal-minded. My research has brought me face-to-face with the heterosexual residents of urban gay districts, or "gayborhoods," of big American cities.

I've learned how fine the line is between progress and prejudice, and how broad statistics about public opinion conceal the subtle forms of discrimination that now routinely surface between gay and straight neighbors. The majority of the straight people that I've spoken with during my research said that they supported gay civil rights, felt a common humanity with gay people ("we're all just people") and had positive views about the integration of gay spaces in the city (gayborhoods are

“welcoming,” “inclusive,” and “open” environments where we can all “thrive together,” I was told). But these liberal stances were often unsupported by concrete actions, or even coexisted with other anti-gay biases. This is what I call “performative progressiveness”: It’s easier to talk a good talk than to walk it.

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Many of my interviewees who described themselves as “liberal” and “accepting” of homosexuality remained apathetic about the causes and consequences of social inequality. They freely reported that they do not donate money to LGBTQ nonprofit organizations, do not march in protests for LGBTQ rights, and do not write to their congressperson expressing their support for favorable pieces of legislation. Instead, they felt that having an address in a gayborhood was enough to give them progressive street cred. (Some also claimed to live among a “diverse” population, even though their local gayborhood lacked racial or ethnic diversity.)

Some straight people saw themselves as “gay-blind,” much like a white person might say that she is “colorblind” toward race and racial discrimination. But to say that being gay is a “nonfactor” is strategic for straights; it allows them to exempt themselves from political engagement and material support. Straight residents also cited “reverse discrimination.” Specifically they felt excluded from LGBTQ spaces or businesses, such as when a gay-owned bakery in Chicago instituted a no-child policy. Others accused LGBTQ activists who championed their own spaces as “segregationist,” “separatist” or “heterophobic.”

Across America, larger numbers of straight people have moved into gayborhoods. When I asked about this trend, a straight man told me that gays and lesbians should “be happy” about it, rather than focusing so much on prejudice, discrimination and inequality. He waved his index finger in my face and said in an elevated voice, “You wanted equality! You wanted your rights! You wanted to get married! This is it!” Equality somehow became my fault. When I pressed straight residents to talk about ways anti-gay discrimination persists — things like hate crimes or housing discrimination — I was told to “get over it.”

Researchers and activists often talk about “oppression fatigue,” a side-effect of confronting discrimination and inequity without really being able to do anything about it. What I encountered struck me as “privilege fatigue,” a frustration resulting from

the cognitive dissonance between progressive attitudes and conservative-to-apathetic behavior.

I interviewed 53 straight people who lived in two Chicago gayborhoods. Their sentiments reflected a much larger pattern that has also been captured by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. In its 2018 Accelerating Acceptance Report GLAAD found Americans' comfort level with LGBTQ people backslid in recent years: The survey of more than 2,000 adults, done by the Harris Poll, found 4 percentage points fewer heterosexual "allies" and a corresponding jump in "detached supporters." In a 2015 study that went more in-depth on same-sex marriage, GLAAD also found:

- 34% of heterosexual Americans are uncomfortable attending a same-sex wedding;
- 43% are uncomfortable bringing a child to a same-sex wedding;
- 36% percent are uncomfortable seeing same-sex couples hold hands.

Just because straight people find gays "morally acceptable" and even move into their neighborhoods does not mean that their prejudice is gone; it just takes subtler forms. Progressive straights say they support "diversity" and "equality" — but they use those terms to mean an improvement in gay-straight relations, not actual improvement in the lives of LGBTQ people.

We are mistaken if we interpret — or celebrate — straight people moving into gay neighborhoods as evidence that we have made significant strides toward equality. True progress would be things like employment and housing non-discrimination laws, closing the sexual orientation wage gap, addressing anti-gay and anti-trans hate crimes, and other pressing social problems. Unless progressive straights are helping on those fronts, they may be gays' neighbors, but they aren't their allies.

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