



English 475

The Language of Homophobia: Word Choice in Anti-Gay Propaganda

Britney Carey

I. Introduction

Blumenfeld (1992) defines heterosexism as “both the belief that heterosexuality is or should be the only acceptable sexual orientation and the fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex” (p. 15). As a consequence of heterosexism and the manner by which it is spread (through fear and hatred), prejudice and discrimination against the LGBT (lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender) community have become a modern phenomenon (Blumenfeld, 1992, p.15). Heterosexism is perhaps most apparent in the propaganda of anti-gay organizations. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, or SPLC (2010), conservative Christian groups have been among the most critical opponents of equal rights for gays and lesbians for the past thirty years (para. 1). The leaders of such groups claim that the gay rights movement is a threat to American society and culture; some have even gone so far as to declare this struggle against gay rights a “second civil war” (SPLC, 2010, para. 2). Of the various strategies the Christian Right has in its arsenal, perhaps the most questionable has been the defamation of the LGBT community (SPLC, 2010, para. 3). As the SPLC (2010) notes, these individuals have been described as “‘perverts’ with ‘filthy habits’ who seek to snatch the children of straight parents and ‘convert’ them to [homosexuality]” (para. 3).

There is no question that language can

be a powerful tool of persuasion. It appears that many anti-gay organizations are turning more and more to rhetoric and specifically-worded propaganda as a means of gathering supporters. This paper will examine the language used in publications and websites supported and/or distributed by several anti-gay organizations in an effort to show how specific and calculated language is utilized as a means of persuasion by these groups.

II. Data/Analysis

II.i. Data Set 1: Focus on the Family “Answers”

The Christian ministry Focus on the Family (FOTF), an organization dedicated to the promotion and continuance of the nuclear family, maintains a website (focusonthefamily.com) which includes an “answers” page where website visitors may post questions concerning any aspect of family or Christian life (FOTFa, 2010, para. 1). The first sets of data (see Appendix A for the full texts of each question/answer set) examined in this paper come from this area of the website.

In the first question/answer set, the author replies to a question concerning special rights for homosexuals (FOTF, 2010b). In response the author writes, “What if a pedophile (child abuser) could claim that he inherited his lust for kids?” (FOTF, 2010b, para. 3). The use of the term “pedophile” suggests a sinister connotation which evokes images of unspeakable actions. Thus, when pedophilia is coupled with the idea of homosexuality, even in a seemingly detached manner as in this case, the author is equating pedophilia with homosexuality. Such a sentence, when broken down for its codification, carries with it an even deeper assumption which insists, essentially, that homosexuals are pedophiles and vice versa.

The rest of the passage is sprinkled with word like “lust,” “offensive,” “Scripture,” and “God,” (FOTF, 2010b, para. 3). It may

be argued that these words, especially in the Christian faith, all have some element of fear attached to them, and that the author has chosen these words for the specific purpose of instilling fear to elicit obedience.

The author also uses “perversion,” “immoral,” “reprehensible,” and “flawed” which suggest to the reader that homosexuality is something devoid of morality; it is a state which is utterly appalling and should be avoided on all accounts. Perhaps with the exclusion of “flawed,” these words also carry with them an element of fear, specifically a fear of punishment.

The second question/answer set from FOTF is similar to the first. In response to a question about whether or not homosexuality is an inherited trait, the author writes,

It is more likely to be related to one or more of the following: (1) confusion of role models seen in parents... not limited to, a dominant mother and a weak or absent father...; (2) serious family dysfunction that wounds and damages the child...; (4) the influence of an older homosexual during a critical period of adolescence; (5) conscious choice and cultivation; and/or (6) homosexual experimentation... Scripture refers to epidemics of homosexuality and lesbianism that occurred in specific cultures... Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion...I don't believe [God] would speak of homosexuality in the Scriptures as an abominable sin and list it among the most despicable of human behaviors if men and women bore no responsibility for engaging in it (FOTF, 2010c, para. 3)

The use of the terms “confusion” and “influence” implies the idea that homosexuality is something that only happens to weak-minded people. The author uses the

phrases “dominant mother” and “weak or absent father” as a reinforcement of the family structure and values which the organization supports. “Dysfunction,” “wounds,” “damages,” and even “experimentation” again paint homosexuality as an unnatural and risky behavior which may lead to negative impacts on the health of the individual and those around them. The use of the loaded word, “epidemics” seems to go as far as to equate homosexuality with a disease.

Through the use of “conscious choice” and “cultivation,” it is implied that homosexuality is something that requires maintenance; it is not the normal sexual orientation for a human being so it must be developed and encouraged. The use of such terms seem to suggest that because homosexuality is a personal choice, not one that is inborn and unchangeable, LGBT individuals are not entitled to the same civil rights as those afforded to citizens on the basis of inborn characteristics such as race and sex. This belief is also promoted by another Christian organization, the Family Research Council (FRC; Sprigg, 2007, p. 3-4).

As seen with the first set, the terms “God” and “Scriptures” aid in the persuasion of the reader through fear, as do “abominable sin” and “penalty.” The author’s mention of the fact that homosexuality is listed in the Bible as “among the most despicable of human behaviors” is another effective tool of scaremongering.

II.ii. Data Set II: Excerpts from Coming Out of Homosexuality

The second sets of data examined in this paper are from *Coming Out of Homosexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women*, a book by Bob Davies and Lisa Rentzel, in which the authors attempt to show homosexuality is not set in stone; that one may be, effectively, cured of it. For instance, Davies and Rentzel (1993) write, “For the man or woman struggling with homosexuality, there is hope for healing and new freedom in Christ!” (p. 14) The terms “struggling” and

“freedom” enhance the overall meaning of the sentence by implying that homosexuality is a burden and an affliction to be overcome.

The authors’ stance on the idea of love in homosexual relationships is obvious in the line, “Then Mike ‘fell in love’ with another man and they began a long-term relationship” (Davies & Rentzel, 1993, p. 9). The fact that the phrase “fell in love” is in quotation marks conveys the message that true and genuine love between two people of the same sex is not possible.

Davies and Rentzel (1993) go on to claim that “For people getting out of drugs, alcohol, or even prostitution, Christian counseling and support were plentiful. For the man or woman trying to break out of homosexuality such counseling was almost nonexistent (p. 14-15).” This sentence essentially equates prostitution and addiction with homosexuality, in effect deeming it a social taboo or even a disease.

II. iii. Family Research Council’s Stance on Homosexuality

On its website (frc.org), under the headline “Issues,” one may find the FRC’s position on homosexuality (see Appendix B for the full text). The statement reads, “Family Research Council believes that homosexual conduct is harmful to the persons who engage in it and to society at large, and can never be affirmed. It is by definition unnatural, and as such is associated with negative physical and psychological health effects” (FRC, 2010, para. 8). The terms “harmful” and “unnatural,” along with the phrase “negative physical and psychological health effects,” constructs for the reader a specific picture of homosexuality: that it is a behavior which puts the health of homosexual individuals and those around them at unnecessary risk.

The FRC (2010) goes on to say that “attempts to join two men or two women in ‘marriage’ constitute a radical redefinition and falsification of the institution” (para. 8). The fact that “marriage” is enclosed by quotation marks suggests that the FRC believes (and

wants its readers to believe) that same-sex “marriage” is not equivalent to heterosexual marriage. In effect, the use of quotation marks mocks the gay rights movement’s campaign for same-sex marriage; as far as the FRC is concerned, even if same-sex couples were allowed to wed, it would still not constitute marriage.

Finally, the FRC (2010) insists that “sympathy must be extended to those who struggle with unwanted same-sex attractions, and every effort should be made to assist such persons to overcome those attractions, as many already have” (para. 8). The use of “sympathy,” “unwanted,” and “overcome” suggests to readers that all LGBT individuals are in need of support and help. In this way, the FRC reaffirms its own belief that homosexuality is not a natural state of being; the only reason one would feel sympathy for, or give assistance to an individual is if that individual is experiencing something undesirable and unfortunate.

II.iv. Family Research Institute, excerpt from Public Policy Article “Can Anything Be Done to Stop Gay-Rights?”

The Family Research Institute (FRI) was founded by Paul Cameron, a psychologist, in 1987 (Schlatter, 2010, para. 55). The SPLC has labeled FRI as a “hate group” in response to its anti-gay propaganda (Schlatter, 2010, para. 55-59). The FRI has posted several articles on its website which explain the organization’s position on different issues (FRI, 2009a). In one such article, “Can Anything Be Done to Stop Gay-Rights?”, the FRI (2009b) writes,

Gay rights is also a cause of civilization’s decline. Homosexuality is a unique manifestation of hedonism. Instead of producing children, it preys on them. Instead of keeping to itself, it proselytizes. Instead of promoting health and stability (as does marriage), it thrives on aggression, spreads disease, and destroys its

practitioners, emotionally and physically. (para. 2)

This passage is perhaps the most aggressive and antagonistic of those presented thus far. Instead of alluding to or shrouding their intentions in rhetoric, the FRI's message here is straightforward. For example, "a unique manifestation of hedonism" informs the reader directly that homosexuality is something to be condemned by man, and even by God.

The third and fourth sentences of the paragraph, which make begin with the phrase "instead of," suggest to the reader that rather than encouraging what is socially acceptable (procreation, modesty, and wholesomeness), homosexuality will, essentially, be the downfall of modern society. The repeated use of this sentence form is a very effective means of persuasion; the author uses this repetition to drive the message of the sentence home.

The word choice employed in this passage is also an effective means of persuasion. The use of "prey," "proselytizes," and "aggression" depicts homosexuality as a rampant monster bent on the conversion of all mankind. The author could have used "recruits" instead of "proselytizes," but the former does not carry with it the same religious connotations. Again we see the term "disease," and "destroys," both of which imply that homosexuality is something to be avoided.

II.v. NARTH's Journal of Homosexuality

The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), claims to be a "professional, scientific organization that offers hope to those who struggle with unwanted homosexuality" (NARTH, 2008, para. 1). The organization produces a journal consisting of articles which address issues of sexuality, especially that of homosexuality (NARTH, 2009). In a summary of one article, it is claimed that,

Treatment success for clients seeking to change unwanted homosexuality and develop their heterosexual potential has been documented in the

professional and research literature since the late 19th century. What Research Shows reviews 125 years of clinical and scientific reports which document that professionally-assisted and other attempts at volitional change from homosexuality toward heterosexuality has been successful for many and that such change continues to be possible for those who are motivated to try. Clinicians and researchers have reported positive outcomes after using or investigating a variety of reorientation approaches (NARTH, 2009, para. 3).

Although NARTH claims to be an objective and academic organization based in science, there are obvious similarities between its published materials and those of more religiously motivated groups. The word choice employed in this passage, for example, is reminiscent of many of the texts already presented in this paper. The term "treatment," for example, is rarely used without relation to some kind of disease, ailment, or condition. This tactic (equating homosexuality with disease) is, as we have seen, repeatedly utilized in all of the texts presented thus far. "Unwanted" is another term repeatedly used in these texts.

NARTH, however, does supply three new terms: "potential," "motivated," and "reorientation." While these words are less emotionally charged, and (seemingly) more scientific than those previously discussed, the motives behind their usage are just as questionable. "Potential," at first glance, seems like a positive word. Taken in context, however, we see that it is, in fact, dripping with persuasive rhetoric. The idea that clients may "develop their heterosexual potential" tells the reader that homosexuality is a less-desired, perhaps even inferior, sexual orientation than heterosexuality.

"Motivated," like "potential" is a term rarely attached to anything negative. In this context, however, it may be taken to imply

that LGBT individuals who do not seek “treatment” are somehow apathetic about their lives. The idea that “change continues to be possible for those who are motivated to try” does not fairly address the issue: not all LGBT individuals wish to change their orientations; this sentence does not allow for this possibility.

The use of the final term, “reorientation,” asks the reader to assume several things. First, it implies that there was a point at which an LGBT individual was a heterosexual. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the prefix “re-,” means “again” or “back” (p. 696). To “reorient” something, then, would mean to place it back where it once was. This term also implies that because heterosexuality is the state to which LGBT individuals must “reorient” themselves to. In this sense, NARTH is implying that heterosexuality is the natural sexual orientation for all human beings, and homosexuality, therefore, is unnatural.

Although the language used in NARTH’s publications is somewhat more neutral than those of the other organizations presented in this paper, the rhetoric employed serves the same purpose: to persuade readers that a homosexual orientation is unnatural and can, and, even should, be changed.

III. Conclusion

As Pennycook (2001) suggests, there is a definite connection between language and power (p. 73). Conservative Christian groups and other anti-gay organizations are aware of this relationship, and are using it to their advantage. As has been shown, the language used in texts published by several of these organizations, as well as that of publications listed as resources by these organizations, contain elements of persuasiveness made effective mostly through the fearful reactions which they elicit. Through the use of specific words and phrases, these texts paint an extremely biased picture of homosexuality that is obviously designed to satisfy a specific agenda.

It is hard to know whether this linguistic manipulation is subconscious or deliberate, but there is no question that rhetoric is often misleading, and, at times, entirely incorrect. The fact that so many people accept these statements as the truth is a testament to the power of language.

Works Cited

- Blumenfeld, W.J. (1992). *Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Family Research Institute. (2009a). Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://www.familyresearchinst.org/category/public-policy/>.
- Family Research Institute. (2009b). Can Anything Be Done to Stop Gay Rights? Retrieved from <http://www.familyresearchinst.org/2008/12/can-anything-be-done-to-stop-gay-rights/>.
- Focus on the Family. (2010a). About Focus on the Family: Helping Families Thrive. Retrieved from http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx"http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx.
- Focus on the Family. (2010b). Do you think homosexuals should be granted special rights? Retrieved from http://family.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/1216.
- Focus on the Family. (2010c). Do you believe homosexuality is inherited? Retrieved from http://family.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/1217/related/1.
- National Association for the Research and Therapy of Homosexuality. (2008). NARTH Mission Statement. Retrieved from <http://www.narth.com/menus/mission.html>
- National Association for the Research and Therapy of Homosexuality. (2009.) What Research Shows: NARTH's Response to the APA Claims on Homosexuality. (Summary) Retrieved from <http://www.narth.com/docs/journalsummary.html>.
- Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: a critical introduction*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Re-. (2001). In J.P. Pickett (Ed.) *The American Heritage Dictionary* (p. 696, 4th ed.). New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Schlatter, E. (2010). 18 Anti-Gay Groups and Their Propaganda. *Intelligence Report*, 140(Winter). Retrieved from <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/winter/the-hard-liners>.
- Southern Poverty Law Center. (2010). *Anti-Gay*. Retrieved from <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/anti-gay>.

APPENDIX A:
Question/Answer Sets from
Focus on the Family Answers Page

1. Question/Answer Set 1:

Question: "Homosexual activists claim their lifestyle, which in some cases includes thousands of sexual partners, should be sanctioned, protected, and granted special rights by society. Their rationale is that since their sexual nature is inherited, it is involuntary and therefore should be considered morally neutral. Would you critique this stance?" (FOTF, 2010b, para. 1).

Answer: What if a pedophile (child abuser) could claim that he inherited his lust for kids? He could make a good case for it. Certainly his sexual apparatus and the testosterone that drives it are creations of genetics. Even if his perversion resulted from early experiences, he could accurately claim not to have chosen to be what he is. But so what? Does that make his abuse of children any less offensive? Should society accept, protect, and grant special civil rights to pedophiles?... No! The source of their sexual preference is irrelevant to the behavior itself, which is deemed to be immoral and reprehensible by society. Being genetically inclined to do immoral things does not make immoral behavior right. There are many influences at work within us, but they are irrelevant. I know of no instance in Scripture where God winked at evildoers because of their flawed inheritance or early experiences (FOTF, 2010b, para. 3).

2. Question/Answer Set 2:

Question: "Would you indicate whether or not you believe it [homosexuality] is inherited? I have reviewed studies conducted in recent years that seemingly indicate it is in the genes and is therefore involuntary. Do you agree?" (FOTF, 2010c, para. 1)

Answer: It is more likely to be related to one or more of the following: (1) confusion of role models seen in parents, including, but not limited to, a dominant mother and a weak or absent father; (2) serious family dysfunction that wounds and damages the child; (3) early sexual abuse; (4) the influence of an older homosexual during a critical period of adolescence; (5) conscious

choice and cultivation; and/or (6) homosexual experimentation...How do these and other forces interplay in individual circumstances? I don't know. I don't think anyone knows... Scripture refers to epidemics of homosexuality and lesbianism that occurred in specific cultures... Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. (That final sentence sounds like the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, doesn't it?)... God is infinitely just. I don't believe He would speak of homosexuality in the Scriptures as an abominable sin and list it among the most despicable of human behaviors if men and women bore no responsibility for engaging in it (FOTF, 2010c, para. 3, 4).

APPENDIX B:

1. The following is the Family Research Council's position on homosexuality:

Family Research Council believes that homosexual conduct is harmful to the persons who engage in it and to society at large, and can never be affirmed. It is by definition unnatural, and as such is associated with negative physical and psychological health effects. While the origins of same-sex attractions may be complex, there is no convincing evidence that a homosexual identity is ever something genetic or inborn. We oppose the vigorous efforts of homosexual activists to demand that homosexuality be accepted as equivalent to heterosexuality in law, in the media, and in schools. Attempts to join two men or two women in "marriage" constitute a radical redefinition and falsification of the institution, and FRC supports state and federal constitutional amendments to prevent such redefinition by courts or legislatures. Sympathy must be extended to those who struggle with unwanted same-sex attractions, and every effort should be made to assist such persons to overcome those attractions, as many already have. (FRC, 2010, para. 8)