



Gay men's experiences of holding hands in public: Psychosocial dilemmas and the discourse of homophobia

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Abstract For many members of the LGBTQ community, holding hands with their partners in public, and other public displays of affection (PDAs) is seldom a carefree and spontaneous act. Survey studies have previously indicated that a majority of LGBTQ individuals report that they never hold hands with their partner in public, out of a fear of possible negative or abusive reactions from others. To contribute to qualitative research in this area, in this article we develop an account of the role of homophobia and internalised homophobia in gay men's experience of navigating the act of holding hands with their partners across different landscapes. We take a detailed look at interview material from three study participants to consider the psychic struggles involved when negotiating internal and external barriers to holding hands. The data was generated through photovoice interviews and include verbal as well as visual material. Writing as two psychoanalytic practitioners, we deploy a clinically informed listening stance in our engagement with the study material and offer a distinctly psychosocial theorisation of homophobia.

Keywords homophobia · internalised homophobia · LGBTQ · sexuality · psychosocial · psychoanalysis

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Introduction

On any typical day or night walking in urban, suburban or rural environments, it is not uncommon to see what seems, from appearances, to be a heterosexual or straight-passing couple holding hands as they walk, or engaging in similar gestures that portray themselves to be in a loving and intimate relationship. Typically, such public displays of affection appear carefree and spontaneous. The picture is different however for members of the LGBTQ community. According to the 2017 UK National LGBT Survey (Government Equalities Office, 2018), more than two thirds of respondents reported that they never hold hands with their partner in public out of a fear of possible negative or abusive reactions from others. We have contributed elsewhere to furthering qualitative research on this topic (Rohleder et al., 2023). Extending this work, the current article develops an account of the role of homophobia and internalised homophobia in gay men's experience of navigating the act of holding hands with their partners across different landscapes. We take a detailed look at interview material from three study participants to consider the psychic struggles involved when negotiating internal and external barriers to holding hands. Writing as two psychoanalytic practitioners, we deploy a clinically informed listening stance in our engagement with the study material and offer a distinctly psychosocial theorisation of homophobia.¹

Before contextualising the study and turning to our participants' interview material, we begin by offering some reflections on the conceptual frameworks that have informed our thinking on this topic, especially with respect to psychoanalytic and psychosocial debates. We also spend time addressing matters of language use. Our aim is to consider how the contested nature of our topic's terminologies, most obviously the term 'homophobia', is intimately linked to the concerns and questions that arise in the minds (and therefore interviews) of our participants.

Homophobia and the Case of Psychoanalysis

Same-sex relationships have been documented throughout history and have been understood in shifting ways through different historical periods as acceptable, as conditionally acceptable, as immoral and illegal, as dangerous, as perversion, and as a normal expression of human sexual diversity (Halperin, 1990). In psychoanalysis, formulations of homosexuality and 'the homosexual' have shifted from Freud's formulation of 'inversion', to the diagnosing of homosexuality as a perversion and pathology and, in contemporary psychoanalysis, to understanding same-sex desire as a normal component of human sexuality (see Hertzmann & Newbiggin, 2023). This is not to indicate that there is only a linear or progressive narrative to tell about psychoanalysis's contribution to the discursive construction and subsequent treatment of 'the homosexual', but rather to underscore how, as a disciplinary

¹ We would like to acknowledge the contribution of our colleague, Róisín Ryan-Flood. It was agreed we would write and publish this paper without her, as we are writing this as psychoanalytic practitioners with a view to engaging readers from our profession, and we have used data from interviews where we were one of the interviewers.



practice, psychoanalysis is deeply implicated in the modern construction of homosexuality (Weeks, 2010). There is now broad recognition of psychoanalysis's varied but frequently injurious history with respect to marginalised and minority subjects at the level of theory and the clinical encounter, as well as through its institutional logics (see, for example, Giffney & Watson, 2017; Hertzmann & Newbiggin, 2020). Given its foundational engagement with questions of human sexuality and human desire, the potential for psychoanalysis to stage and/or surface dynamics of stigmatisation, shame, othering and violence on intersubjective and intrapsychic levels when operating within a broader heteronormative cultural context is not to be underestimated. And yet, always at the same time, psychoanalysis has developed rich analytic and clinical resources to give language and understanding to these dynamics. An important area where we can see this tension to have been operative concerns the homogenising impulse of theoretical models that trade in accounts of masculinity and femininity. As psychoanalysis has shifted its thinking on homosexuality, so shifting attention has been given to the psychosocial mechanisms of homophobia.

Many psychoanalytic and psychosocial writers have suggested how homophobic attitudes, particularly for men, may be a form of 'gender policing', motivated by male sexual anxieties about passivity and masculinity and the repudiation of masculinity (for example, Butler, 1997; Corbett, 2001; Moss, 2002). In her topology of prejudice, Young-Bruehl (1998) regards such forms of homophobia as a type of 'narcissistic prejudice', which involves attempts to establish firm gendered boundaries so as to assert intactness and integrity, in this case around notions of masculinity and femininity. Gay men and lesbian women are seen as subverting and disrupting what is regarded as a 'natural' gender binary, with gay men perceived as behaving 'like women' and lesbian women behaving 'like men'. Additionally, gay men may be regularly perceived, at least unconsciously, by the homophobe as castrated men.

Related to the notion of the separateness and boundaries of gender, are ideas of who one 'ought' to desire. So Young-Bruehl offers us a second type of homophobia. Taking Freud's (1905/1953; 1923/1961) notion of innate bisexuality into account and the proposal of a 'complete' Oedipus complex (Heenan-Wolff, 2011), heterosexuality will involve some repression of homosexual desire, and so for some homophobic men, homosexuality may be a persecutory reminder of forbidden and repressed homoerotic desires. Young-Bruehl (1998) refers to such homophobia as a form of 'hysterical prejudice', where a group of people, in this case homosexuals, are perceived as representing disavowed and repressed sexual desires.

Young-Bruehl adds a further form of homophobia that is expressed via what she refers to as 'obsessional homophobia' (obsessional prejudice), where homosexuality, and its perceived disruption to gender and male sexuality, is regarded as a more global threat and pollutant to the very safety of society and family, with claims of a 'gay agenda' infiltrating and corrupting social institutions; an agenda that needs to be actively oppressed. We can see some of this expressed in the current increasing anti-LGBTQ discourse in the USA (and UK).

Across Young-Bruehl's schema, which is instructive for its analysis of the operations of different modes of homophobia, the point is made that unlike adjacent



sites of prejudice (sexism, racism, antisemitism, for example), ‘what is directed at homosexuals is not a standard, stereotyping adjective but the charge “he / she is a homosexual”’. The category itself – and whatever it means to the individual using it – is the main accusation’ (1998, p. 143).

Further, she demonstrates how the deceptive singularity of this ‘category accusation’, gives false coherence (or a fantasied unity) to ‘the homosexual’.² In other words, homophobia and homophobic practices, including the worst of past psychoanalytic writings, situate ‘the homosexual’ as both individual and a group in categorical terms. ‘Homosexuals’ are not a group, yet they have been constructed as a group through the distorted assumptions and projections of the majority and treated, or othered, as such. As Young-Bruehl puts it, ‘the homophobes have invented the homosexuals’ (1998, p. 142). We can take a step back now and ask of the invention of the term ‘homophobia’ itself.

Revisiting the Debates: The Shifting Landscapes of ‘Homophobia’

On introducing the term to his field as well as to broader public consciousness, American psychologist George Weinberg (1972) is widely recognised to have challenged the prevailing order of the normal-pathological by figuring the homophobe and homophobic society (rather than the homosexual and the practice of homosexuality) as that which was in need of cure. Weinberg is explicit in conceptualising homophobia as a disease, a psychopathology which manifests attitudinally as an ‘irrational fear’ or ‘dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals, and in the case of homosexuals themselves, [as] self-loathing’ (1972).

Within the psy disciplines, Weinberg’s work was highly impactful in developing an understanding that the ‘problem’ of homosexuality lay in social prejudice rather than the character of ‘the homosexual’. However, though it makes sense to locate the development of the construct ‘homophobia’ as integral to the refashioning of professional discourse – for example, it influenced the removal of ‘homosexuality’ as a mental disorder from the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders*) in 1973 – we should note that in affirming the causal weight of the social, the term retains a psychological (or even characterological) orientation. Constructed around ‘dread’, ‘fear’, ‘revulsion’ and ‘loathing’, homophobia is located in the figure of the homophobe, and their homophobic feeling states. Indeed, we can see something of the legacy of this approach still in Young-Bruehl’s schema of different homophobic prejudices outlined above, which emphasises the internal psychic processes of the homophobic individual.

Of course, we can acknowledge that this inflection by Weinberg is not surprising given that he was a psychologist (his express intention is to expose the psychological motivations behind discriminatory practices), but it is also indicative of the ascendancy of a psychological world view, commensurate with emergent

² Given the problems of language use that we are pointing to here, we should state that we are using the term ‘homosexual’ as it is regularly used in psychoanalytic writing, but want to acknowledge that this may not always be a preferred, or indeed welcomed term.



neoliberal logics, which emphasise the interiority of the individual as the privileged site through which change can be secured and new freedoms realised (Kitzinger, 1987; Rose, 1996; Wickberg, 2000). As we hope to demonstrate throughout, this psychological or 'internal' point of emphasis continues to pose conceptual difficulties for understanding the various operations of homophobia in contemporary narratives – especially its sometimes confusing location inside and outside the subject. These difficulties are further complicated by the proximate but still separate category of 'internalised homophobia' (see below).

Since its inception 'homophobia' as a descriptive and analytic term has been both celebrated and critiqued in scientific and cultural discourse (see Herek & McLemore, 2013). Along the critical axis can be positioned a set of concerns relating to the 'homo' component of the term, for example that it expresses a problematic male bias, marginalising lesbian experience and obfuscating the ways in which persistent gender norms maintain heteropatriarchal power relations (the emergence of 'lesbophobia' and 'femme-phobia' can be seen as attempts to address the importance of gendered differences). The 'phobia' component of the term has been equally problematised from different directions, for example through the assertion that it erroneously names the prejudice and negative feelings that homophobia expresses, which, in terms of observable responses, are often those of hatred, anger and disgust, rather than fear or dread; or through the suggestion that the *irrationality* of the fear, which is central to Weinberg's definition of homophobia as disease (as well as being a strict diagnostic criterion for phobia), would be refuted by those who consider themselves to have rational justifications for their views (Herek, 2004). The primary objection to the term however, mobilised variously, has been sociopolitical, namely that 'homophobia' misattributes the ideological and structural force of anti-LGBTQ discrimination and hostility to personal psychology (for example, Kitzinger, 1987; Plummer, 1981). Thus, the point is made that homophobia shines its spotlight on the individual – whether the homophobe or the recipient of homophobic abuse – as the operative site of discrimination and its effects.

Only two decades after Weinberg's introduction of the term, some commentators were already remarking on the redundancy or demise of the term homophobia. The writer Harriet Gilbert, for example, pronounces that whilst "“homophobia” was once much used to describe the aversion to lesbians and gays – indeed to the very idea of homosexuality – exhibited by a number of heterosexual people, ... it has now by and large been replaced by “heterosexism”" (1993, p. 118). Suffice it to say that this replacement was not set to last, especially within the realm of public discourse.³ We suggest that among the various factors that might account for the endurance of the term 'homophobia' is a loosening of the psychological focus that we have seen to be a cause for critique and rejection. From the vantage point of contemporary language usage, homophobia is now widely accepted to include the institutional and structural, alongside the individual and psychological, (just as it has

³ Data from our holding hands study affirms this observation: across the 27 interviews conducted, the term 'homophobia' was significant in its prevalence (52 per cent of our participants used the term at least once in their interview); whereas other terms including 'stigma', 'prejudice', 'heterosexism' and 'heteronormative/heteronormativity' were notably underused.



become common to recognise the institutional operations of other modes of oppression and discrimination such as racism, sexism and Islamophobia). As is now acknowledged, a broadening of the scope of homophobia means that it makes sense to conceive of ‘homophobia without homophobes’ along the lines of Bonilla-Silva’s 2014 theorisation of racism without racists (see Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016). However, we contend that there may be value in being recalled to the earlier line of critique, in order to explore how homophobia is experienced by LGBTQ individuals in everyday life today. We do so not simply to rehearse or revive a set of established critical perspectives, but rather to listen out for how they resonate within the contemporary narratives of our research participants, sometimes as audible critique, sometimes as cause for confusion. In our analysis of the interviews, we will name this dynamic ‘the psychosocial dilemma’ to convey the subject’s sense that the experiences they describe regarding their public displays of affection are sometimes accompanied by a complex interplay of psychological and social dimensions that does not resolve easily. Prior to turning to the interview material however, there is one further aspect of homophobia to consider, namely the mechanism of internalisation.

Internalised Homophobia

Weinberg referred to the self-loathing experienced by many homosexuals as ‘internalised homophobia’. It remains a point of debate whether, for the purposes of describing a psychical operation, the terminological differentiation of *internalised* homophobia is strictly necessary given that, as Wickberg (2000) surmises ‘many writers suggest that all homophobia is an externalisation of the person’s hatred and fear of his or her own homosexual feelings’ (p. 56). In other words, it is proposed that the fear or dread inaugurates from the internal landscape of the subject and is then projected onto the target of the homosexual (following this logic, the homophobia that the homosexual person might feel would be an externalisation that rebounds internally, within the subject’s psyche). However, the negative feelings that exist ‘inside’ the subject are of course already formed through processes of *taking in* the experiences and attitudes against same-sex desire present in the external world. Thus, as has been argued by Russell and Bohan, for example, the internal aspect of internalised homophobia must be understood as an experience that involves the ‘intersection between interiority and social and political contexts’ (2006, p. 346). This commitment to a *psychosocial* understanding of internalised homophobia (and homophobia more broadly) is necessary if the complexity of homophobic attitudes, and the unconscious fantasies in which they may be anchored, is to be acknowledged.

In one of the early psychoanalytic accounts of internalised homophobia, Malyon (1982) suggests that homophobic content is internalised to become an aspect of the ego, which influences the individual’s sense of self and identity development, with conscious and unconscious dimensions (p. 60). The ‘proto-gay’ boy and girl may have the early experience of having their same-sex desire responded to with fear and rejection, instilling a sense of shame regarding who they are, and the feeling that



something about their sexuality, and themselves, is 'wrong' (for example, Isay, 2010; Elise, 2002; Rohleder, 2020). It has been stressed that rejections of same-sex desire and the internalisation of homophobic attitudes can be a feature of the Oedipal period, but can also be shaped by homophobic experiences of later childhood (Friedman & Downey, 1999) as well as throughout adolescence and adult life. An important articulation of the different ways homophobia and internalised homophobia play out is given a psychoanalytic framing by Moss (2002), who argues that homophobia targets the sexual drive's object, whereas internalised homophobia targets the aim and source of the sexual drive. Thus, gay men and lesbian women who struggle with internalised homophobia may experience intimacy problems, as 'one hates oneself for wanting what one wants, and therefore for being what one is' (Moss, 2002, p. 30). This resonates with research suggesting that internalised homophobia and shame may have interpersonal consequences for same-sex couples (Hertzmann, 2011; Rose, 2007), where the partner that is desired may also be the reminder of the shame of same-sex desire. The feeling that 'something is wrong with me' can get turned into 'there is something wrong with us'.

To explore these issues further, and given that research suggests generally greater expression of homophobia towards gay men (Herek, 2004; Herek & McLemore, 2013), we report next on the experiences of three gay men, as they speak about and attempt to understand the impact of homophobia and internalised homophobia on their feelings about holding hands with their partners in public.

Holding Hands: Study Context and Methodology

In 2020–21, together with our colleague Róisín Ryan-Flood, we conducted a qualitative study, funded by the British Academy, to explore the experiences of LGBTQ individuals holding hands with their partners in public. Our research was informed by a psychosocial theoretical framework, which appreciated the social dynamics as well as the psychic experiences at play in shaping the participants' experiences. In this way our study design adhered to the basic ambition of a psychosocial approach, namely to accommodate the interwoven nature of the 'personal' and the 'social' (Frosh et al., 2023). A total of 27 individuals were interviewed, representing a range of sexual and gender identities.⁴ All but one participant was currently living in the UK. The one who was not, had recently lived in the UK. A thematic analysis of the overall data identified several themes: vigilance for potential homophobic abuse; daily forms of inhibitions involving hiding or not demonstrating any forms of affection in public; differences between each partner regarding the wish to hold hands or the level of comfort about holding hands and how this was negotiated; participants' negotiations of internal and external boundaries to holding hands; and, dilemmas involving intersecting community identities, for example religion or ethnicity (see Rohleder et al., 2023).

⁴ Because of the Covid pandemic, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. All participants gave signed consent for their photographs and narratives to be used in dissemination of findings, and many of the photographs and some of the quotations reproduced here already appear on the project website: www.lgbtq-holdinghands.com. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities.



The interviews utilised photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997), a creative, participatory qualitative research method in which participants are invited to produce images (typically photographs or drawings) that represent or symbolise an aspect of the topic being explored. Participants were invited to bring a selection of these images (three or four) to an interview, where they were discussed with a view to exploring participants' experiences of holding hands with their partner(s) in public. Thus, the interviews were not conducted with a predetermined set of questions, but rather were led by the agenda and narrative of the interview participant. Following the free association narrative interview approach by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), this method was chosen because a less structured interview design allows for the exploration of affect and possible unconscious material. Further, we suggest that photovoice methodology, and image-oriented encounters more broadly, are especially facilitative of psychoanalytic and psychosocial enquiries that engage with sensitive topics, such as prejudice, sexuality and disability (see Rohleder et al., 2019). This is because the use of images in psychosocial research can be treated as affective material for reflection (Manley, 2009), and can function as a vital and potentially shame-alleviating 'third' that can mediate the intensity of the dyadic encounter (Walsh, 2014).

In the extracts from three interviews, we show how participants were invited to take part in a process of affective reflection, looking 'inside' for subjective experience and looking 'outside' for meaningful symbols of that experience. As per the thematic analysis, we are interested in our participants' self-understanding of the impact of homophobia, including its internal and external barriers. There are moments in the different interviews where the prominence and complexity of this theme is especially alive in our participants' reflections. In our analysis we name such moments as 'psychosocial dilemmas' to convey the unstable demarcation between the psychological and the social, and the felt need to question the balance of forces that impact the subject's experience.

Our participants engaged in lengthy dialogues with us, often sharing material that was challenging to talk about. As psychosocial researchers who are also psychoanalytic clinicians, we were aware that the interviews might raise difficult material for the participants, and we framed the encounter accordingly. Many of our participants were motivated to take part in this study for the opportunity to think deeply and further process their experiences; further, as is reflected in some of the excerpts below, many of our participants were motivated to take part to 'normalise' and make visible that which they felt was missing from their own experience. To honour and accurately capture the reflections that were generated through the process of participating in this study, we have chosen to include relatively long quotations from our participants, allowing their language to speak to the particular resonance of the psychosocial dilemma that we are exploring. We would like to acknowledge the generosity of this sharing and express our thanks to all our participants for taking part in the study.



José: 'To me it's like a prison or something like that'

At the time of the interview, José was 45 years old, identified as a gay male and had been with his partner, a gay man, for 23 years. They were married.

José started the interview prompted by his first photograph which depicted a wall which he described as looking like 'a prison' (Fig. 1). He said how this symbolised for him his own experience of his 'passions' and emotions, describing how:

It's like all my emotions and all the needs I had to express in public, I mean I didn't have the chance to do it. I mean, it was not forbidden, but I didn't feel, I don't know, like strong or forward enough to do it in public. It's like the real world is at this side of the picture and my world is on the other side of the picture.



Fig. 1: José – 'prison'

The struggles with the boundary between self and the world, the inside and the outside, is powerfully depicted here and points to José's psychosocial dilemma of where prohibition lies, which unfolds during the course of the interview.

José seemed to 'locate' the prohibitions he experienced as the internalisations of an explicitly homophobic past. He mentioned how he grew up in a country where homosexuality was not accepted or permitted. He describes how this past determines the difficulty he feels he has in the present with expressions of affection, like holding hands with his partner in public, adding that he has little hope that this will change significantly for him in the future. For José, this seemed to be described as more of an internalised prohibition. As he commented, 'it is not forbidden', but for him it is unimaginable, despite the times having changed and gay rights being recognised in his country. He commented on the 'jealousy' he feels when seeing a younger gay couple holding hands or kissing in public. He says:

I would have liked to do that, [but] it's like I haven't had the chance to do it, it's like I am not able to do it, it's like I cannot do it, it's too dangerous to do it, and when I do it, it's not natural.

We see here José's internal conflict between longing to be able to freely express himself with his partner, yet at the same time labelling the act as 'not natural' for him. The overlapping prohibitions José narrates that have prevented him from doing what he would 'have liked to do' (that is, publicly displaying affection) include opportunity ('haven't had the chance'), ability or capacity, and risk.

In his second photograph (Fig. 2), José presents his longing for what he referred to as a 'normal' experience. He describes this as representing his 'dream'. He states, 'This is what I would like to see, not in a shadow, but in real flesh, in real life', but immediately added 'but to be honest, it's not something I am comfortable with. This is what I would like to see in my future, although I am not optimistic about it.'

The narrative and rhythm of José's interview had a sense of oscillation, between shame, anger and pessimism, and a fragile hope and optimism. He seemed to move between the hold that the past seemed to have on him, and the shame he felt about his sexuality, also making tentative moves towards hoping for the possibility of something freer. His narrative in the interview also moved between temporalities – a description of the present, attempts to imagine future possibilities, and then strong recollections of his past, reflecting how captured he still feels by the past experiences.

In the interview he grapples with feelings of anger towards society, and also his family, for not giving him 'the opportunity to behave like the others'. He described feeling like he has been robbed of an experience that others have had – 'I think someone stole a part of my life because it could not happen; we could not enjoy what we had and feel a different way'. He wondered whether he would be more at ease with affection if his past experience was any different: 'I am sure that I would be a different person If I had the social permission to do this.'

José reported that he and his partner have not experienced any overtly homophobic abuse. But then it must be remembered that they do not hold hands in public. He went on to reflect on his own internal struggle and how he is imprisoning himself:



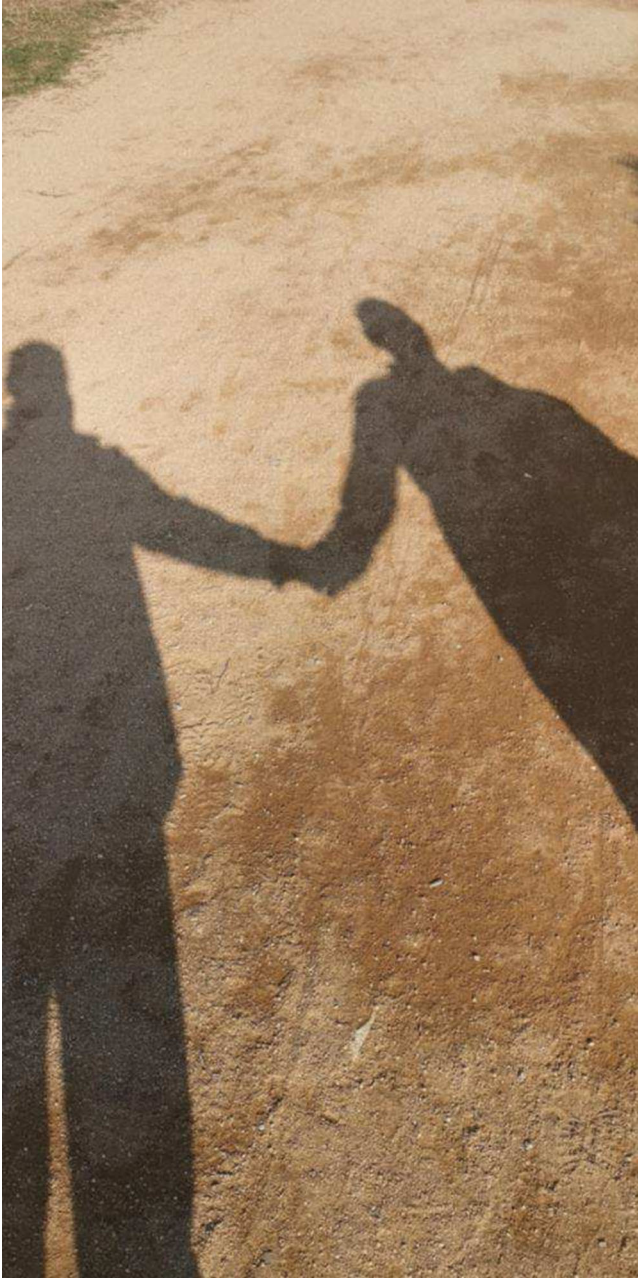


Fig. 2: José – ‘dream’

I am the one. It's like I have the power. In the end it's, like, it's up to me. I mean, I don't know how to say it, it's like I am the one who is building all these rules, because nobody has said anything to me before. Nobody has forbidden me publicly 'don't do that'. It's like I have the power to change my behaviour, but I'm not able to do it.

What he imagines then is the possibility of public humiliation of abuse: 'I would feel like, like pointed at, or like people would be gossiping "look at those two guys they are kissing each other" or things like that. It's like I could feel like they are staring at me, and they are judging me.'

At this point, José reflects back angrily on the past and growing up under such oppression. It was interesting that at the start of his interview he commented on how same-sex affection was 'not forbidden', but at this stage in the interview he made clear how in his childhood it certainly was. He recalled how, when aged six or seven, he heard his oldest brother say 'all gay men should be hung up in a tree in the city hall square'. Although he now describes good relationships with his brothers and parents, their reaction to him coming out was negative, and he described how this past has left a 'watermark for him'.

José's recognition that he is marked by the context in which he grew up, and the punitive early environment in which he came to know his own sexuality, does not offer sufficient relief from the idea that he has the 'power' to feel and act differently ('in the end it's, like, up to me'). Across the interview his self-understanding moves between locating the forceful barriers to public displays of affection inside himself, and identifying the external oppressions that have instilled them. This is an area of tension, and potential confusion in his narrative ('I don't know how to say it, it's like I am the one who is building all these rules'), indicative of the type of psychosocial dilemma that navigating homophobic landscapes as a gay man can engender.

Tom: 'The world you walk through is one that looks at being a man in a different way to the way you do'

At the time of the interview, Tom was 42 years old, and identified as a gay man. He had been with his partner, a gay man, for 15 years.

Tom's interview started with reflecting on notions of masculinity and his sense of himself as a gay man living in a heteronormative society. He spoke of growing up in what he described as 'quite a masculine community', involving sport and drinking. In preparing for his interview, he reflected on this and his experience as a boy who would later come out as gay. His first photograph (Fig. 3) depicted a field where he would go and do morning exercise. For him this captured something of the environment that he grew up in, and what his experience is 'always like'. He explained:

The posts and that picture, I suppose, represent a kind of ... I want to say surveillance, but it's not surveillance, but it's being watched, it's being noticed, it's being seen. About having to be very careful about what is seen, I





Fig. 3: Tom – ‘sports field’

suppose, which you know in my adulthood kind of is, is still there. It’s not something I’ve been able to shake off.

He went on to refer to the sports field and imagined himself walking across the field and a football rolling his way:

And in the instance of a ball rolling your way, there’s a moment in time where you’ve got to go, ‘oh, this is the test here right now’ ... this is the reminder that actually the world you walk through is one that looks at kind of, you know, being a man, in a different way to the way you do.

Although referring back to the past of his childhood, Tom also refers to the experiencing of a perceived masculine, homophobic environment in the sports field of the present. The ball rolling to his feet is not just a reminder of the past, but the test as to his masculinity is alive and raw in the present moment.

When thinking about holding hands with his partner in public, a familiar feeling of anxiety and fear of being exposed and shamed rises in him, taking him back to his childhood experience of feeling different to all the other boys, and fearing exposure. This fear of being exposed is captured in the comparisons between the first and second photograph he took (Fig. 4). The first is of an open field, with no place to hide; the second is of a path sheltered by trees, offering some protection from exposure. Even here, Tom described an ever-present background discomfort:

So, there are times when we can go out into ... what I think of a semi-public space; so places which are maybe quieter, a little bit more remote where you suddenly feel away from the *gaze* – the G A Z E. So that you can ... you can feel a bit more comfortable. But you know one of the things that I'm always aware of then is always kind of being on alert; hyper vigilant around 'what if somebody comes around the corner?' Or 'what if somebody comes up behind us and I don't see them' ... and we're holding hands? So that ... becomes the line, the kind of barrier to being able to enjoy this romantic intimate moment because, actually, when will it be disturbed?



Fig. 4: Tom – ‘wooded path’



While he refers above to an external disturbance of the moment of intimacy, he acknowledges a much more powerful internal 'disturbance' of his sense of ease about holding hands. He adds:

Of course, you know, the logical part of my brain says that 99.9 per cent of the time if somebody was to come around the corner, they're not gonna ... even if they do think something, they're not going to say anything. But that extent of logic is not enough to change the kind of psychological response.

Reflectively in the interview space, Tom articulates a version of the psychosocial dilemma, suggesting that the psychological response to the threat of holding hands in public cannot be assuaged by 'logic'. He went on to describe how he would be holding hands with his partner, and as soon as he spots someone else coming their way, he would 'withdraw' his hand. He reflects on how this is 'more my stuff than it is my partner's stuff'. This phrase, which expresses a common question about what belongs where (or to whom), brings another layer of difficulty to the challenge of accounting for why public displays of affection remain highly scrutinised by Tom.

Tom let the interviewer know that in the past few months, he had been more mindful of trying to be more affectionate with his partner in public, without having discussed it with his partner. He said:

I do now kind of make more effort to initiate kind of physical contact when we're out and about. But, almost by degrees. So, I'll do things like maybe kind of put my arm around his shoulder or something like that, and that feels safe ... it's interesting that stuff feels safer to me than actually grabbing his hand. You know what? I know why that is, because potentially kind of touching in different ways doesn't need to be necessarily interpreted about 'oh here's two gay men coming'.

Although he does not state so, there is perhaps a reference back to the sports field, and the sort of masculine affection between male friends, rather than 'gay' affection.

Tom spoke in the latter half of the interview about having become more confident in himself and less ashamed about his sexuality. He reflected on the gradual acceptance from his parents after coming out, and their acceptance of his partner and their life together. But he expressed some anger at the 'socialisation' that he experienced and what he was aware of having 'internalised'. In thinking about the topic of the research and his own experiences of holdings hands with his partner in public, he said:

One of the things that I know in my mind that changes this scenario is me being more comfortable with it and me being more expressive. But you know what? It really pisses me off. No. It annoys me that I have to be the one who leads that through, you know. And the narratives around, if we can kind of be proud and show and that kind of thing. And I think, 'well, yeah, I think that. I get that'. I completely get it, and I wish I could be better at it. But at the same time, I think, you know, why should it be me putting myself out there? Why is it not society changing around me, rather than me having to change society?



We might consider Tom's question here to be a further articulation of the psychosocial dilemma, not, this time, regarding the most accurate location of the source of prejudice, but rather where to place one's expectations for change. He went on to add: 'Because if I walk out and hold hands, I'll change that; I'll change the world. Yeah, I might do, but I might also get my head kicked in along the way.'

Robert: 'It felt complicated when I feel like it should have been simple'

At the time of the interview, Robert was 32 years old, identified as a gay man and had been with his partner, a gay man, for six years.

Robert brought a drawing he had made from when he had met his partner (Fig. 5 below). It was a drawing depicting two hands side-by-side with little fingers interlinked. At the time he had also attached some lyrics from a song by Perfume Genius, the stage name of a gay male American singer and songwriter. The lyrics talk about the wish to hold a partner's hand in a crowded street 'with no hesitating'. Robert recalls the time of making the drawing and these lyrics:

It captured this emotion or the sensation where, because I was in this new relationship, the first kind of what I considered to be on the path to a real relationship with a same-sex partner, it just captured the attention of wanting, kind of, and expecting, casual displays of affection, especially hand holding. But that there was also a strong sense of hesitation. And for me that was both internal, that, you know, I didn't feel comfortable necessarily holding his hand

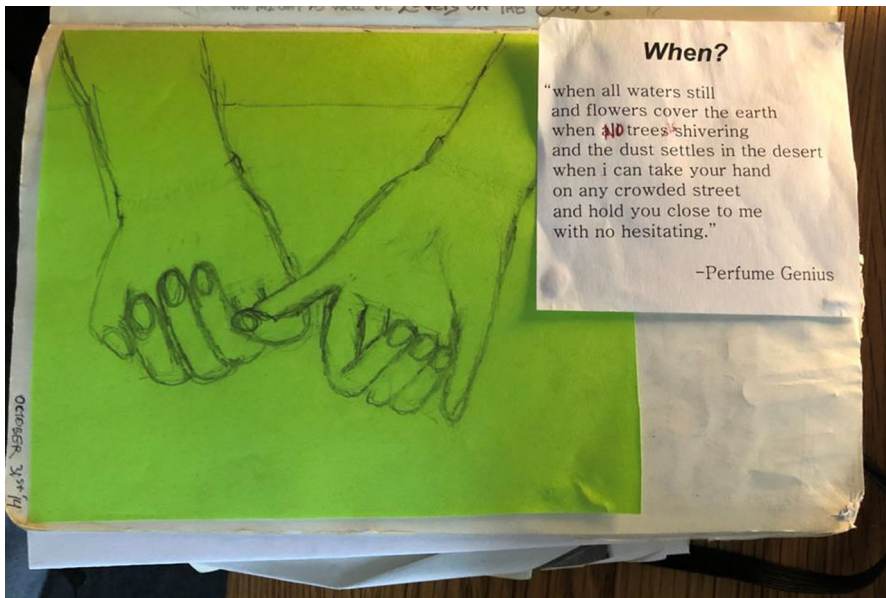


Fig. 5: Robert – 'hesitating holding hands'



or couldn't do it without kind of thinking I shouldn't, or feeling confused about it, and then also worrying about what other people would think when they saw it or if they saw it.

He went on to say that before meeting his current partner, he had been in a heterosexual relationship and had held hands with his female partner many times. He said how he 'didn't think about it; it was just kind of a given that you would do this and there wasn't any real sense of self-consciousness around it'. But at the start of his relationship with a man, he had the same excited urge to hold his new partner's hand, but this time, could not do it:

I couldn't do it without feeling self-conscious and then it almost lost its – it didn't feel as good as kind of I guess I thought it might if I didn't have all these other things on top of it. So, it felt complicated when I feel like it should have been simple in the way it used to be.

Reflecting in the interview setting, Robert wondered whether part of his self-consciousness about holding his male partner's hand was about his not yet having fully accepted his sexuality: 'I still hadn't fully accepted it myself, and so how much of the hesitation is myself holding me back versus the worries that might sit external to me about what would people do or how will society react.' Here he speaks of trying to navigate what is his internal struggle and what is external oppression. Is he being stopped, or is he stopping himself? Such questions are indicative of what we are calling a psychosocial assessment of the situation which does not resolve easily. Robert's self-understanding shifts over time, accommodating changes of perspective, and speculating as to the balance of factors that influence his self-consciousness about holding his male partner's hand (that is, how much was it me, how much is it society?). Nevertheless, this added layer of conflict made holding hands not as 'simple in the way it used to be'.

In that first year of meeting his male partner, and first coming out to his siblings and then some months later to his parents, he described a growing sense of ease, and he recalled the special moment of going to Gay Pride for the first time. He went on to reflect how long it has taken him to navigate through a sense of shame to some sense of pride:

I remember talking about this with a friend recently, just that all the things we taught ourselves to get by before we came to terms with our own sexuality to ourselves. Those are habits that, you know, we sometimes spent years forming, around not even letting yourself think certain things, and trying to shut down these trains of thought. Those habits leave a mark, and I think it can take a long time, or at least in my experience, it's taken a long time to shake all of those habits and some of them maybe not, not quite.

Robert's second photograph (Fig. 6) was of the escalators in a London Underground station. Although he does not explicitly mention the symbolic meaning of the image, it is echoed in his narrative when he talks about a movement towards being more visible in his expression of affection, a movement from a hidden (underground) space up to something more open and visible:





Fig. 6: Robert – ‘escalators’

It’s on the Underground that I most clearly remember, and actively engaging in hand holding. I think at first, tentatively, and I remember it started off with, you would be on the train together and we’d both be holding onto the rail ahead of above our heads and I’d put just one finger on his hand holding the rail. This is such a small thing and I think in large part because it’s so inconspicuous it’s not necessarily noticed by anyone except for me and for him, but it’s kind of full of meaning.

He went on to describe the continuing journey:

I think then over the course of months, and ultimately years, the escalators, and I don’t know, maybe it’s just me, but it’s one of those things that when you get on the escalator and everyone is coming down the escalator, you’re always looking across at who’s coming down, and then I just remember thinking or seeing, you know, straight couples, or people presenting as straight couples, how just casual affection between them was on [display] in a public place ... It stood out to me. And I remember even when I was alone, I would look at that and there was definitely an element of jealousy. I imagined that they didn’t even think before they did something like that ... I think then for me holding hands on an escalator in public became not just about wanting to do that, and kind of getting to a place where I felt comfortable within myself, but it also became a way of saying ‘well this is a small thing that I’m doing that is visible’, and that visibility is what I maybe missed growing up and didn’t see. And so, as a small thing that I can do for myself and for others; it’s just normalising or just trying to, you know, make it not stand out. But there’s



still the worry that it will stand out, or there's that sense of will it at the time. It starts to feel like it's not a casual act, because it actually becomes very deliberate in a different way. So, it's got this weird mix of 'actually, I just want to hold your hand', but also now there's another component that's not just between us, that's between me and everyone coming down that escalator".

Robert's articulation of how many ways there are for him to perceive of the act of holding hands in the public and transitional space of the escalator speaks again to the presence of the gaze. His final photograph was one of him and his partner holding hands at home, their hands in a full contact with each other, which Robert considered to be representative of the psychological journey from early 'testing out' of hand holding, to more confident public displays of affection.

Conclusions

While many rights for LGBT individuals have been realised in the UK, homophobia remains a prevalent issue. In the UK, reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation remain high, and have increased over recent years (Home Office, 2021). Epidemiological research has shown that LGBT people have higher rates of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and suicidality when compared to the heterosexual population and this has in large part been attributed to homophobia and internalised homophobia (Semlyen & Rohleder, 2023). In this article we have tried to lend texture and voice to this social reality by exploring interview extracts from three gay male participants from our holding hands study. We have focused on our interviewees' self-understanding of how homophobia operates and impacts their experience of holding hands with their partners in public. We have shown that exploring this self-understanding simultaneously opens up an exploration of masculinities and invites complex reflections from our participants regarding how they are seen, and how they see themselves. While all the participants referred to a homophobic past, and a psychosocial dilemma around holding hands with their partners in public that reflected in part an internalised homophobia, it was also clear that homophobia did not just exist in the past, nor was it only internalised in the mind of the participant. It was a problem of the present too. Across the study, the material that our participants shared with us, which reflected the struggles they experienced regarding holding hands with their partners in public, often took the form of an internal monologue (for example, the 'what if...' expressions of Tom's more 'hypervigilant' states of mind). Externalising these difficulties, via speech and action, was central to a shared concern with making more visible the types of public displays of affection that heterosexual or straight-passing partners might take for granted. This was both self-oriented (for example, José's frustration that he could have had a different self-experience had he had received greater 'social permission'), and community-oriented (for example, Robert's thought that holding hands on the escalator is 'a small thing that I'm doing that is visible'). Importantly the spaces where the internal and external barriers to holding hands could be negotiated



and tested included safe community spaces (such as Gay Pride); spaces of transition that were moved through physically (walking through the park, travelling on the escalator); and to a certain extent the reflective space of the interview encounter in which participants chose to voice and make visible the complexities of their psychosocial dilemmas.

We have been attentive to the socially and discursively constructed reality of different sexualities, recognising psychoanalysis's sometimes problematic history with respect to its treatment of homosexuality. Nonetheless we have suggested that psychoanalytic ideas remain vital in *psycho*-socialising standard socialisation theories, especially with respect to addressing dynamic processes of internalisation. We paid particular attention to the shifting use of the term homophobia in modern discourse, showing how, since its coinage in the late 1960s, it has been involved in discursive disputes that span multiple disciplinary contexts (psychology, gender and sexuality studies, feminism, social activism) as well as five decades of cultural and political change with respect to LGBTQ rights. Whilst a central dimension of the early debates concerned the implications of the term's roots in psychology (see Kitzinger 1987), this has since given way to a more structural understanding of how homophobia operates as a social prejudice. Our suggestion has been that although a relatively settled definition of homophobia may now exist, its history of debate remains audible through expressions of what we have termed the 'psychosocial dilemma'. We use this phrase to convey the subject's sense that the experiences they describe regarding their public displays of affection are sometimes accompanied by a complex interplay of psychological and social dimensions that does not resolve easily. Across the different interview narratives, we sought to highlight moments where our participants are actively engaged in reckoning with such dilemmas by reflecting on the balance (or imbalance) between the psychosocial components of their experience. We heard a tendency to take psychological responsibility for feelings of fear or inhibition about being publicly affectionate with a partner (for example, 'I have the power to change my behaviour but I'm not able to do so' [José]); we also heard an active questioning of how to apportion the different factors that inhibit a public display of affection (for example, 'how much of the hesitation is myself holding me back versus the worries that might sit external to me about what would people do or how will society react?' [Robert]). Further, our interviewees were all aware of how they had been 'marked' by homophobic attitudes and contexts, mostly in a more homophobic past, but also in the present. This language conjures the operations of stigma and shame which mark out minority sexualities and demonstrate how homophobia impacts internal states of mind alongside peoples' interactions in the world. For example, for José this was expressed with reference to the 'watermark' left from childhood experience and an oppressive regime; for Robert it was more about how habits formed in a heteronormative context leave their mark – including habits of 'not even letting yourself think certain things'.

One thing seems certain – at least for these three participants, which research suggests reflects the experiences of many others – holding hands with a partner in



public can represent a significant psychosocial dilemma, rather than a carefree and spontaneous act.

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Data availability Selected interview material is available on the project website: www://lgbtq-holdinghands.com

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