

'One can hardly call them homophobic': Denials of antigay prejudice within the same-sex marriage debate

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‘One can hardly call them homophobic’: Denials of antigay prejudice within the same-sex marriage debate

Abstract

The UK’s Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act (2013) was framed by the Government as an equality measure and, as such, those who opposed the legislation were likely to be sensitive to possible accusations of prejudice. This paper examines opposition to marriage equality within the British press and explores how denials of homophobia were made. Opponents to same-sex marriage attended to common sense notions of ‘homophobes’, either by aligning their views with categories of persons not typically considered homophobic or by distancing their views from a homophobic other. Opponents also offered a counter accusation that it was liberal supporters of same-sex marriage who were intolerant. Parallels are drawn with discursive literature on racist discourse and it appears that despite social scientists’ attempts to expand the concept of antigay prejudice, homophobia is commonly referred to in terms of irrational bigoted individuals.

Keywords: *Homophobia; heterosexism; same-sex marriage; discourse; rhetoric*

Introduction

The term ‘homophobia’ is generally credited to the psychologist George Weinbergⁱ and was popularized through the publication of his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (Weinberg, 1972). In the book Weinberg offered an alternative to the then-prevailing view, by suggesting that it was those who were prejudiced against homosexuals that had the psychological problem rather than homosexuals themselves. Weinberg aligned homophobia with Allport’s (1954) definition of prejudice as an ‘avertive or hostile attitude toward a

person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group' (p, 7). He also suggested several factors that led to homophobia including: a religious taboo against homosexuality; a secret fear of being homosexual; repressed envy of homosexuals' perceived ease in life; and a threat to societal and family values. Since then homophobia has become the most widely used term to describe antigay prejudice. However, despite its ubiquitous usage, many social scientists have criticized the concept for suggesting that antigay prejudice is a trait of individuals and for ignoring broader social and ideological concerns (e.g. Kitzinger, 1996). As Speer and Potter (2000) note, one response to these critiques has been to develop alternative concepts such as 'heterosexism' that shifts the focus onto a cultural bias towards heterosexuals (Kitzinger, 1996). Others have proposed that what is typically subsumed under the category of 'homophobia' be broken down and re-conceptualised. For example, Herek (2004) suggests three distinct concepts: sexual stigma (the shared knowledge of society's negative regard for non-heterosexuality); heterosexism (the cultural ideology that privileges heterosexuality); and sexual prejudice (individuals' negative attitudes based on sexual orientation).

Yet, despite social scientists' reappraisal of homophobia as a concept, homophobia as a term continues to be widely used both within and outside of academia. Homophobia is not just a psychological concept, it has become an everyday concept, used in ordinary discourse. As an article in *The New York Times Magazine* recently noted:

“Weinberg had intuited that culture wars are waged not just in hearts and minds, but also in conversation...As homophobia became less and less accepted in American culture, “homophobic” was etched into the English language as the standard descriptor for the intolerant. No challenger proposed before or since — not “homonegativity,” “heterosexism,” “sexual prejudice” or “heteronormativity” — has stood a chance of supplanting it.” (Hess, 2016)

Not only has the term penetrated American culture and the English language more generally, but as the above extract suggests, it has become socially unacceptable to be (seen to be) homophobic. As such, people are likely to be sensitive to the possibility of being labelled as homophobic when expressing opposition to policies that advance lesbian and gay equality, such as policies to legalize same-sex marriage.

Most research on same-sex marriage has been conducted in North America where the issue has long been viewed as a key debate within a ‘culture war’ between right-wing conservative traditionalists and liberal progressives (Fingerhut, Riggle and Rostosky, 2011; Smith and Windes, 2000). Social psychologists have particularly been interested in examining attitudes towards same-sex marriage. Herek (2011) summarizes that heterosexuals’ attitudes towards same-sex marriage are predicted by many of the same demographic, psychological and social variables that predict their attitude towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people more generally. Based on opinion poll data, those who oppose same-sex marriage in the US are more likely to subscribe to conservative political values (Jones, 2009) and are less likely to have a gay or lesbian friend, relative or co-worker (Morales, 2009). Research also suggests that opposition to same-sex marriage is closely associated with sexual prejudice against lesbians and gay men (Herek, 2009). Critics might argue that this last point is an example of social psychologists simply confirming common sense; one might reasonably expect those who hold prejudiced attitudes towards lesbians and gay men to oppose same-sex marriage and vice versa. If this association is ‘common sense’, then we might expect opponents of same-sex marriage to be particularly sensitive to the possibility of their opposition being attributed to prejudice, and to attend to this possibility within their arguments. This article examines how opponents of the UK’s Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act (2013), writing in the British press, attended to (potential or actual) accusations of homophobia during a public consultation.

Discursive/rhetorical psychology and denials of prejudice

Discursive psychologists have sought to move away from viewing prejudice as the underlying attitudes of individuals to examining what such evaluations do in everyday discourse. Billig (1987) suggested that rather than internal phenomena, attitudes can be seen as stances taken within matters of controversy. When people offer an opinion, they are positioning themselves on some issue of debate. As such, evaluations are typically rhetorically designed to counter opposing positions or to forestall counter arguments.

The denial of prejudice has been studied extensively in discourse studies, although often in relation to racial prejudice (e.g. Billig, 1988; Condor, 2000, 2006; Condor et al., 2006; Durrheim et al., 2005; Goodman and Johnson, 2013; Van Dijk, 1992; also see a special issue of this journal edited by Augoustinos and Every, 2010). Social scientists have identified that denials of prejudice are often formulated as disclaimers ('I'm not prejudiced but...') (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) as an advanced deflection of a potential accusation of prejudice. Billig (1988) argues that this use of prolepsis suggests that there is a cultural norm against prejudice. For example, in his analysis of fascist literature, Billig argues that this norm is so widely accepted that even far right political parties are at pains to deny they are prejudiced. More recently, in their analysis of media interviews with the leader of the British National Party (BNP), Goodman and Johnson (2013) observed that while racial prejudice was strongly denied, prejudice towards homosexuality appeared to be treated as less problematic. They note that when challenged, the BNP leader Nick Griffin did less to distance himself from a homophobic remark maintaining that he found the sight of two men kissing 'really creepy'. He did however still present himself as a moderating influence, claiming to have brought his party from one which advocated re-criminalization to a position of tolerating homosexuality, provided it remain within the private sphere.

There is a growing body of discursive research examining ‘heterosexism’ (e.g. Peel, 2001; Gough, 2002; Kitzinger and Peel, 2005; Speer and Potter, 2000) and how people who oppose lesbian and gay equality measures construct their arguments (e.g. Clarke, 2001; Ellis and Kitzinger, 2002; Summers, 2007). There is also rhetorical research that examines same-sex marriage debates. For instance, Smith and Windes (2000) take the US Congressional debate over the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) (1996), which effectively barred same-sex marriage, as a case study of the ‘antagonistic enjoyment’ of pro and antigay rhetoric (p.156). Like Billig (1987), Smith and Windes note how the rhetorical appeals of either side of a debate are mutually shaped by the arguments of their adversaries. For instance, advocates for DOMA appealed to a traditional Christian understanding of both homosexuality and marriage, while anti-DOMA legislators framed marriage as a civil rather than a religious institution, and access to it as a civil right. There were also instances where both sides of the debate appealed to the same common value. For example, both pro and anti-DOMA legislators appealed to the idea that government’s power should be limited; opponents claimed that DOMA invaded states’ rights to individually legislate on the matter, meanwhile its supporters argued that DOMA prevented state legislators from overstepping their authority in the form of redefining marriage.

Other studies have primarily examined opposition arguments against same-sex marriage. For example, Matthews and Augoustinos (2012) examined political speeches and parliamentary debates on same-sex marriage in Australia. They identified how politicians legitimated their opposition as non-discriminatory by claiming the exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage was in the best interests of children. They concluded that “discourse opposing non-heterosexual marriage in Australia operates under a rhetoric of denial whereby any negative sentiments towards non-heterosexual individuals is vehemently denied” (p. 139). Meanwhile in the UK, Jowett (2014) examined arguments used to oppose same-sex

marriage in the British press. He found that opponents of same-sex marriage framed their opposition around a number of commonplace values such as upholding tradition, democracy, the best interest of children and the need to prioritize parliamentary time (see also Hull, 2001; Summers, 2007). Unlike Smith and Windes' (2000), Jowett found that even opposition arguments expressed by religious leaders were not typically framed in relation to their disapproval of homosexuality *per se*. Opponents often argued that they were in favor of lesbian and gay equality, but that 'equality' had already been achieved in the form of civil partnerships for same-sex couples.

Much of this work has claimed to reveal how heterosexism is legitimated through discourse. However, Speer and Potter (2000) have advocated examining what speakers themselves deem to be prejudiced by exploring whether speakers treat their own talk or that of others as potentially heterosexist. By examining talk in interactional settings where sexuality was made relevant, they concluded that the internal rhetorical design of people's utterances, as well as their response to explicit challenges, display that speakers are sensitive to the possibility of being heard as homophobic. Yet there is little literature on how people discuss or 'orient' to homophobia itself when making arguments that risk being attributed to antigay prejudice. Billig (1988) claimed that social psychologists often investigate prejudice by narrowly examining people's views and representations of minority (out)groups rather than people's understanding of 'prejudice' itself. The current study then will examine how opponents of same-sex marriage attended to potential or actual accusations of homophobia in the British press and asks what this can tell us about common sense understandings of antigay prejudice.

The context of current study

In 2011, the UK Government announced that it was to have a public consultation on the introduction of same-sex civil marriage in England and Wales (Government Equalities Office, 2012)ⁱⁱ with the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act subsequently granted royal assent in July 2013. Same-sex couples had been able to gain legal recognition in the UK since 2005 in the form of ‘civil partnerships’, which was euphemistically referred to as ‘gay marriage’ within the media (Jowett and Peel, 2010) and as ‘marriage’ by many same-sex couples themselves (Heaphy, Smart and Einarsdottir, 2013). For some however, this fell short of ‘real’ or ‘full’ marriage (Jowett and Peel, 2010) and represented a rebranding of marriage, designed to exclude same-sex couples from the privileged status of marriage (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 2004; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006). The introduction of same-sex marriage was thus the response to a perceived inequality in the law. The framing of same-sex marriage as an ‘equality’ issue was clear by the way the Government referred to it as ‘equal civil marriage’ within the consultation document (Government Equalities Office, 2012). As egalitarianism is a cultural truism (Billig et al., 1988), framing same-sex marriage in this way rhetorically placed those who wished to oppose it in an awkward position and made denials of prejudice a more salient concern. The following analysis examines how opponents writing in the British press attended to and deflected potential accusations of homophobia and the image of homophobia such denials implicitly reveal.

Method

The data corpus consisted of British national newspaper coverage of same-sex marriage collected over a nine-month period (October 2011 – June 2012), from the UK Government’s announcement of a public consultation to the end of the consultation period. The Nexis UK database was used to identify press coverage of same-sex marriage in UK national newspapers (including newspapers’ online content) using “marriage” as a search term in

combination with “gay” or “same-sex”. This initial search retrieved over 3,000 results. From this, results that clearly communicated an opinion on same-sex marriage were then identified including editorial and comment pieces (n=105) and published letters to editors (n=103). For the current article any material that attended to homophobia/antigay prejudice was selected for analysis. The data was analyzed using discourse analysis informed by rhetorical and discursive psychology, following stages outlined by Billig (1997). A rhetorical approach is part of a wider family of discursive psychological approaches (Potter, 2007; Billig, 2009) that focuses on the argumentative aspects of discourse. Billig (1987; 1991) proposed that expressing opinions on matters of controversy involves an argumentative dialectic of justifying one’s own stance and criticizing counter-positions. This analysis will draw particularly on Billig’s (1988) seminal work on the rhetorical aspects of (racial) prejudice as well as work by Smith and Windes (2000) on progay/antigay rhetoric. For the analysis that follows, extracts were chosen that most clearly illustrate the analytic claims.

Analysis

The denial of homophobia was an important feature of articles expressing opposition to same-sex marriage, both in their self justifications and criticisms of others. The analysis will examine two rhetorical features that were present within the data: i) attending to the notion of the stereotypical homophobe and ii) constructing supporters of same-sex marriage as intolerant.

Attending to the notion of the stereotypical homophobe

One striking feature of the data were the ways in which opponents of same-sex marriage rhetorically invoked categories of person to claim either that opposition to same-sex marriage

itself was not homophobic or to dissociate their individual opposition from a homophobic other. One way this manifested itself was to claim that opposition to same-sex marriage was not restricted to a particular type of person but included categories of person not typically considered to be 'homophobic'.

For example, take the following extract from an article by the former Member of Parliament (MP), Ann Widdecombe published in *The Express*. The article was in response to comments by the then Equalities Minister Lynne Featherstone who stated that the Church did not own marriage. Widdicome argued that such comments implied that opposition to same-sex marriage was purely religious:

1. I have no doubt that as gay marriage is debated we shall see bishops deployed
2. against gay activists but it is simply not true that only the Church is opposed to
3. redefining marriage. An opinion poll, independently carried out for the Coalition
4. for Marriage, suggests 86 per cent of the population believes it perfectly possible
5. to promote gay rights without redefining marriage. So if, as Ms Featherstone
6. claims, marriage is owned by the people maybe she should start listening to the
7. people's voice. I know gays who oppose this measure – as does Christopher
8. Biggins – and one can hardly call them homophobic. People who never go inside
9. a church from one year to the next oppose it. Some of those who spoke in favour
10. of civil partnerships oppose it. Writers on the Left-wing newspapers oppose it. So
11. as this is the most fundamental change to society in centuries, let David Cameron
12. ask people what they want. If he insists on pushing ahead then I challenge him to
13. hold a referendum. The redefinition of marriage is too big an issue for the state to
14. foist on an unwilling population.

(Widdecombe, 2012)

Several points can be noted. In refuting the notion that only the Church opposes same-sex marriage Widdecombe cites an opinion poll. Interestingly, the statistic does not relate to the public's views on same-sex marriage nor is it about the association between religion and opposition to marriage equality. Rather, a majority are cited as agreeing that it is 'possible to promote gay rights without redefining marriage'. The implication is not that those who oppose same-sex marriage are not necessarily religious but rather that they are not necessarily homophobic.

Widdecombe then offers a list of types of people who oppose same-sex marriage. The relevance of these categories of person is spelled out towards the beginning of the list in lines 7 – 8 when she states that she knows 'gays' who oppose same-sex marriage (including a gay celebrityⁱⁱⁱ) and that 'one can hardly call them homophobic'. Thus, the list functions to imply that opponents include people that common sense would suggest are not homophobic. Others mentioned in the list include those who are not religious (lines 8-9), those who supported civil partnerships (lines 9-10) and writers for left-wing newspapers (line 10). This works by invoking shared cultural knowledge about the types of people who are typically not considered to be homophobic. These categories are also implicitly in contrast to those who are religious, those who consistently oppose lesbian and gay equality and right-wing commentators, all of which could be used to describe Widdecombe herself and are commonly associated with homophobia in the social science literature (Herek, 2011). Although the extract begins with an explicit claim that it is not only the Church that is opposed to same-sex marriage, there is a broader implicit claim that the same-sex marriage opponent is not a particular type of person and includes those that one would not accuse of homophobia.

The reference to gay people who oppose same-sex marriage is perhaps worthy of particular note, as citing gay 'friends' who oppose same-sex marriage was a recurring feature. For example:

My homosexual friends tell me that many of them are opposed to the planned law change, for much the same reasons as I am. One told me he thought they were “silly”, “patronising” and “just designed to make a political point”. (Heffer, 2012)

Phrases like this arguably inoculate the author against possible accusations of prejudice. Such formulations have more commonly been identified in studies of racism whereby fascists refer to having black friends or cite people from ethnic minority backgrounds who oppose immigration too (e.g. Billig et al., 1988; Goodman and Johnson, 2013). Ventriloquizing the opposition views of gay ‘friends’ rhetorically wards off potential accusations of homophobia because common sense might lead one to assume that those with feelings of antipathy towards homosexuality would not have such friends. Invoking the opinions of gay friends thus invites an inference that the authors’ own opposition to same-sex marriage is not indicative of an underlying prejudiced disposition. As with the previous extract by Widdecombe, there is perhaps also a taken for granted assumption here that gay people themselves cannot be considered homophobic^{iv}. Thus if the author of the above extract opposes same-sex marriage for ‘the same reasons’ as their gay friends, then these reasons are not to be taken to be homophobic reasons.

So opponents of same-sex marriage were keen to align their position with the views of others who ‘one can hardly call homophobic’. The next extract displays similar discursive features in some respects but also represents a deviant case. It comes from an article written by an Anglican priest (and journalist) shortly after the Church of England’s response to the Government consultation was made public. While the author shares the Church’s official position against same-sex marriage, he is also keen to dissociate his own (op)position from the notion of religious homophobia:

1. As a classic Anglican liberal, I'm slightly rattled at finding myself siding with the
2. traditionalists over gay marriage. I'm uneasy about my position because I suspect that
3. much of the Church's opposition to same-sex marriage is rooted in homophobia. And
4. that's queer, in the traditional sense of that word, because the Church itself has a
5. disproportionate number of clergy who are gay. But, despite my unease at standing in
6. the ranks that undoubtedly contain some discriminatory gay homophobes (go figure),
7. I'm supportive nevertheless of the Church of England's opposition to gay marriage,
8. published in its government consultative paper today. That's because I'm committed
9. to equality, not uniformity.

(Pitcher, 2012).

By categorizing himself as a 'liberal' (line 1) in contrast with those in the Church he describes as 'traditionalists' (line 2), the author positions himself as someone belonging to a category (liberals) and as someone with a value system (liberalism) not typically associated with prejudice and in contrast with those who are (the 'traditionalists'). Indeed, the first sentence bears some resemblance to a disclaimer, acting as a prolepsis that wards off an interpretation that the writer's forthcoming objection to same-sex marriage is attributable to prejudice. The author then explicitly associates 'traditionalists' with homophobia by asserting that he suspects 'much of the Church's opposition to same-sex marriage' is 'rooted in homophobia' (line 3). Smith and Windes (2000), who themselves refer to the antigay lobby as 'traditionalists', note that religious opponents of lesbian and gay equality typically resist being categorized as homophobic by instead positioning themselves as 'people of good faith'. Yet here this author does not attempt to distance his religion from homophobia. Rather, the author distinguishes between the opposition of 'traditionalist' homophobes within the Church and his own opposition as a 'liberal'. He thus locates homophobic prejudice as existing within the Church, in accordance with shared common sense knowledge, but outside of

himself. This extract also differs from the earlier extract by Ann Widdecombe in another key respect. In contrast to the suggestion that gay people cannot be homophobic, this author claims that the Church ‘undoubtedly contain[s] some discriminatory gay homophobes (go figure)’ (line 6). The parenthesized ‘go figure’ here constructing homophobia as quintessentially irrational.

The final line of the extract is also worthy of note. By stating a commitment to ‘equality, [but] not uniformity’ the writer further establishes his liberal credentials, presenting the self as unprejudiced and egalitarian. By distinguishing between equality and uniformity he also draws on an apparent contradiction of liberalism: the egalitarian proscription against discrimination on the basis of personal characteristics (such as a person’s sexual identity) and the notion that a liberal society should acknowledge diversity and difference (Billig et al, 1988).

Constructing supporters of same-sex marriage as intolerant

In addition to warding off accusations of prejudice, opponents also responded by accusing same-sex marriage supporters of intolerance. For example, the Equalities Minister, Featherstone, was criticized by a number of columnists for raising the issue of homophobia. This occurred shortly after the leader of the Catholic Church of Scotland had written an article in *The Daily Telegraph* (O’Brien, 2012) in which he described the case for same-sex marriage as ‘a grotesque subversion of a universally accepted human right’. Featherstone was reported to have criticized the Cardinal’s use of language, stating: ‘On these issues, we have a responsibility in leadership positions to make sure we don’t fan the flames of homophobia’ (Grice, 2012). In turn, Featherstone was then herself criticized for referring to ‘homophobia’ in the context of the Church leader’s opposition. For example, the following extract comes from a comment piece from *The Mail Online*:

1. anyone wishing to make the case against same-sex marriage must do so rationally.
2. Calling its advocates rude names, or deriding their arguments, would simply
3. weaken the case [...] This view is plainly not shared by Lynne Featherstone, the
4. Lib Dem MP who is Equalities Minister. She said the opposition expressed by
5. prominent Christians to same-sex marriage was “homophobic” [...] Such
6. blinkered intransigence, indeed, I would go so far as to call it bigotry, does not
7. bode well for the free, pluralistic society that liberals claim to believe in. And it
8. makes a mockery of their much-vaunted virtue of “tolerance”. [...] The slur
9. “homophobic” is designed, like “racist”, to shut down any argument in other
10. words, to censor debate. When a liberal such as Miss Featherstone calls someone
11. “homophobic”, the implication is that person is prejudiced and holds views that
12. are beyond the pale. [...] Their weapons are abuse, vilification, unreason and
13. moral blackmail as they attempt to silence, or at least cow, the opposition. This is
14. a shocking attack on freedom of speech. Just because somebody, priest or
15. otherwise, finds same-sex marriage irreconcilable either with his conscience or his
16. sense of reason, does not make him a homophobe. Nor does it make him
17. medieval. The tone taken by supporters of same-sex marriage, and not just by
18. Miss Featherstone, against those who disagree with them has been deliberately
19. intimidating.

(Heffer, 2012)

There are a number of points worthy of note here. First of all, the journalist begins by invoking the necessity of making one’s case ‘rationally’ as opposed to resorting to name-calling (line 2). Note that this is applied first to opponents of same-sex marriage (line 1), presenting these rules of engagement as applying equally to both sides of the debate. But it is supporters of same-sex marriage who are accused of transgressing this principle. More

specifically, invoking homophobia within public discussion is constructed as name-calling and an illegitimate rhetorical tactic (characterized as vilification, moral blackmail and intimidation). Supporters of same-sex marriage, characterized here as ‘liberals’, are constructed as hypocrites by transgressing their ‘much-vaunted virtue’ of tolerance. The author also draws a parallel between accusations of homophobia with accusations of racism, claiming both are ‘slurs’ designed to ‘cancel debate’. Indeed, discursive scholars examining racial discourse have noted that denials of racism often include counter-accusations of intolerant liberals and claims that anti-racists seek to suppress freedom of expression (e.g. Condor, 2006; Van Dijk, 1992).

This comment piece could be seen as an example of a genre of polemic against liberalism commonly found within the right-wing British press. A very similar article published more recently by the same newspaper but by a different columnist, carried the headline ‘The real gay marriage bigots are its intolerant supporters’ (Platell, 2014). This article claimed that ‘[i]n modern Britain, the chattering-class thought-police have decreed their liberal value system is morally superior to the traditional beliefs of millions of ordinary Britons’. In addition to accusing same-sex marriage supporters of being ‘intolerant’ ‘liberals’ who cancel debate, they are also referred to here as the ‘chattering class’, discursively positioning them as part of an elite that is out of touch with with ‘ordinary Britons’. Again this is a commonly identified feature of racial discourse whereby refugee sympathizers are referred to as ‘white liberals’ and part of a political elite that are out of touch with the concerns of ordinary citizens (e.g. Lynn and Lea, 2003; Verkuyten, 1998)

Smith and Windes (2000) observe that both progay and antigay advocates often present themselves as battling against a repressive establishment, with opponents of gay equality typically accusing a ‘metropolitan elite’ of suppressing the views of an ordinary majority of people (Jowett, 2014). Yet the notion of ‘tolerance’ itself is not questioned here

but rather is re-affirmed by accusing same-sex marriage advocates of intolerance. There is thus an irony within this genre of anti-liberal polemic. As Billig (1991) has previously observed in literature by the far-right, attacks on liberalism nevertheless employ the values of liberalism within their attack.

Yet these discursive features are not restricted to columnists writing for right-wing audiences. Another example can be examined, this time in the form of a published letter to the editor of *The Times* in response to a comment piece by columnist Hugo Rifkind, titled “‘Eeeuw’ is no argument against gay marriage; Neither is saying 'God doesn't like it’” (Rifkind, 2012). In the article Rifkind concluded that there was no logical case against same-sex marriage and that while opponents may not admit it, ‘literally all’ opposition was based on religious objection or disgust at the thought of homosexuality. He did not use the term ‘homophobia’ but described opposition as the result of ‘unthinking, inherited prejudice’. He claimed that disgust is rarely expressed overtly in opposition to gay rights but offered the example of a parliamentary debate on the equal age of sexual consent in 1994 during which an MP shouted down a speech with a graphic description of anal sex. In response to Rifkind’s article, a letter to the editor written by MP David Burrowes and published in *The Times* read as follows:

1. Sir, Hugo Rifkind (Opinion, Mar 9) is uncharacteristically intolerant in his dismissal
2. of those, such as me, who wish to retain the present definition of marriage. He puts up
3. the smokescreen of a prejudiced 1994 Commons debate about homosexuality. I hope
4. when the current debate comes to the floor of the Commons there will be respect both
5. for homosexual rights which mirror married rights in civil partnerships and for the
6. importance of the institution of marriage. Mr Rifkind unfortunately gives succour to
7. those who seek to vilify supporters of "traditional" marriage as homophobic and
8. ignores the hostile attacks on freedom of expression.

There is much that could be said about this extract but for the present purposes I will focus on those discursive features identified in the previous extracts that reoccur here. Again, it is the proponent of same-sex marriage that is presented as ‘intolerant’ (line 1), rather than those who stand accused of being motivated by prejudice. In lines 4-8 the author calls for ‘respect’ (line 6) on both sides when the issue is debated within Parliament, projecting an ethic of civility, which implicitly constructs accusations of prejudice as uncivil and contrasts himself with the image of the uncivilized hate-filled bigot (Smith and Windes, 2000). Calling for respect for ‘homosexual rights’ in particular, also functions to establish the writer’s non-homophobic credentials.

A final point of note from this extract is that again accusations of prejudice are juxtaposed with the value of freedom of expression. While the counter-accusation of Rifkind as intolerant is hedged within a compliment/criticism type formulation (by describing him as ‘uncharacteristically intolerant’, line 1), he is accused of lending support to ‘those who seek to vilify supporters of “traditional” marriage as homophobic’ and for ignoring ‘the hostile attacks on freedom of expression’ (lines 6-8). As in the previous example, same-sex marriage opponents are positioned as the victims of intolerance while supporters are positioned as violating freedom of expression. The theme of victimhood has been noted as a pervasive theme of antigay discourse within literature by the Religious Right, echoing claims of oppression by the gay community (Smith and Windes, 2000). Using the language of liberalism (e.g. ‘tolerance’ and ‘freedom of expression’) allows opponents to project an image of moderation, and to claim to be upholding commonly held values.

Discussion

In this paper I have explored how opponents of same-sex marriage writing in the British press responded to accusations of homophobia. I identified firstly how they attended to common sense notions of ‘homophobes’, either by aligning themselves with non-homophobic others (e.g. gay people, left-wing writers) or by claiming certain category memberships (e.g. as a liberal) and distancing their views from a homophobic other (‘traditionalists’). Secondly, I identified how opponents of same-sex marriage claimed that it was same-sex marriage supporters that were intolerant. The analysis demonstrates that the norm against prejudice extends to antigay prejudice and that opponents of lesbian and gay equality legislation are sensitive to the possibility of being labelled homophobic.

Several parallels were drawn between discursive features identified here and those identified by scholars examining racial discourse, demonstrating that denials of prejudice are done in much the same way across different contexts. One feature that is perhaps more specific to denials of antigay prejudice relates to the association between religion and homophobia (Weinberg, 1972). Such an association is often affirmed not only in the form of accusations but also implicitly through the way denials are formulated (e.g. by claiming that non-religious people oppose same-sex marriage too or by claiming to be a ‘liberal’ Christian). It is interesting to note that an association between religion and prejudice played an important role in the historical development of prejudice as a concept. As Billig (1988) notes, this association arose during the Enlightenment as philosophers adapted what was a legal term in their dispute with unreasoning faith (see also Gadamer, 1979). The rationalist thinkers claimed that in relying on religious authority, rather than reason, one’s judgment was prejudiced; in other words, prejudice was considered to arise when one’s judgment was insufficiently rational. Billig et al., (1988) note that while an association with irrationality continues in common sense understandings of prejudice, its connection with religion has been all but forgotten. Prejudice is now more commonly associated with antipathy towards

minority groups. However, with orthodox teaching in many religions continuing to condemn homosexuality, the association between religion and homophobic prejudice is strong.

Accordingly, not only are those who are religious and oppose same-sex marriage particularly sensitive to accusations of prejudice, they also typically frame their opposition using non-religious arguments (Jowett, 2014).

Denials of homophobia might suggest that in contemporary Britain people do not readily express views that explicitly present sexual minorities unfavorably, or at least that editors of major newspapers are unwilling to publish such views. Indeed, criticisms of the current study may be that these textual data are not off-the-cuff remarks but the ‘finished products’ of editorial processes, and that denials of prejudice in the form of single authored texts may elide how such denials are a collaborative accomplishment (Condor, 2006). No claims are made here that these articles reflect the way that such opposition and denials of homophobia get done in face-to-face interaction, however examining discourse published in the press is still useful as it provides an indication of how they are performed within mainstream public discourse. In addition, although newspaper data may on the face of it appear monological, views expressed within the press are often offered as part of a dialogical network (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2004) consisting not only of the author’s views but also the views of those they are criticizing.

Given that making homophobia relevant within a public debate can lead to counter accusations of intolerance, one might conclude that it is difficult to openly challenge prejudice (Augoustinos and Every, 2007). To do so risks being accused of impinging on people’s freedom of expression. One answer to this might be to broaden the public’s understanding of prejudice beyond the individualized notion of the ‘homophobe’. On the other hand, accusations (real or potential) would likely still loom large within the debate; accusations of being a homophobe would simply be replaced by accusations of being

complicit with heterosexism. Rebuttals and counter accusations would then be offered. For example, opponents of equality laws could still argue that liberals are trying to impose their value system on those with 'traditional' beliefs. While the coining of the word 'homophobia' by psychologists may have informed everyday usage, more nuanced definitions of prejudice by social scientists are unlikely to silence the arguments, accusations and denials.

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ⁱ As Herek (2004) notes the first published use of 'homophobia' in the English language predated the publication of *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (Weinberg, 1972) by several years. Both Weinberg and his associates had used the term in several magazine articles.

ⁱⁱ Same-sex marriage law, unlike the Civil Partnership Act, was devolved meaning that the legislation did not extend to Scotland or Northern Ireland. The Scottish Government subsequently established its own Marriage and Civil Partnership Act (2014) leaving Northern Ireland as the only part of the UK yet to legalise same-sex marriage.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher Biggins is a British celebrity who is publicly known to be gay and is in a civil partnership. When asked about his views during a television appearance on *Loose Women* Biggins commented that he was religious and that marriage 'is for heterosexual couples', a clip of which was uploaded to YouTube by the Coalition for Marriage (2012).

^{iv} This assumption is not one made by Weinberg (1972). He suggested that homophobia was not only an attitude held by heterosexuals but also 'by the majority of homosexuals in countries where there is discrimination against homosexuals' (preface).