Homophobia in “Mean Girls”

A veritable gold-mine of social psychological processes, Paramount Pictures’ “Mean Girls”, demonstrates the destructive effects of stereotyping in the form of homophobia. A discourse on this depiction framed by two social psychological concepts, along with an analysis of three germane studies will demonstrate how, in the classic, satirical film, a major, if not fundamental, driving point of the plot is the homophobia exhibited by the principal antagonist, Regina George. When she was younger, Regina was best friends with a girl named Janis, but once Regina began to propagate a rumor demarcating Janis as a lesbian, their friendship crumbled and the traumatic experience fueled Janis’ motivation for revenge. Janis’ plot for revenge ultimately came to fruition with the aid of Cady, the protagonist of the movie. In other words, had Regina’s homophobia not driven her to ostracize her best friend, the plot of the movie would have never occurred! To illustrate Regina’s blatant homophobia, the following selected lines from the movie are taken; Regina: “I was like, ‘Janis I can’t invite you because they think you’re a lesbian.’ I couldn’t have a lesbian at my party! There are going to be girls there in their bathing suits. I mean, right? She was a lesbian!”

Regina’s aforementioned behavior is, one could argue, quite indicative of her attitudes toward homosexuals, particularly lesbians. An excellent social psychological concept from which to view her attitude towards homosexuals is through the ABCs of attitudes toward others. The concept is made up of three components, affective information, behavioral information, and cognitive information. In Regina’s case, the affective information which influences her attitude towards lesbians is her prejudice against lesbians. Her prejudice informs her behavior and gives us the behavioral information used to further assess her attitude. The behavior unfortunately displayed is discrimination; Regina refuses to invite Janis to her party, because she perceives Janis as being a
lesbian. Lastly, Regina provides a glimpse of her schema of lesbians by insinuating that Janis will stare at, perhaps be unable to control herself around other girls in bathing suits. This preconceived notion that lesbians are not able to handle themselves around girls in bathing suits illustrates Regina’s stereotypes of lesbians and the cognitive information associated with her attitude. Overall, Regina’s conscious attitude towards others, in this case lesbians, can be ascertained through her affective information, her prejudice, her behavior, shown by her discrimination against Janis, and her cognition of lesbians, the stereotype she has.

Another social psychological concept illustrated through Regina’s behavior is the out-group homogeneity effect, which exacerbates her stereotypes of lesbians. Regina, through her treatment of Janis, demonstrates that she believes lesbians are pariahs around heterosexual women and will make situations with heterosexual women uncomfortable and socially undesirable. The out-group homogeneity effect is the tendency to see “out-groups”, in this case lesbians, as more homogenous and significantly less diverse than “in-groups”, in this case heterosexual females. That being said, Regina’s tendency to see all lesbians as being the same contributes to her negative stereotypes of lesbians which she uses to tease Janis.

Given Janis’ later goal to get revenge on Regina, it would not be a stretch to argue Regina’s negative treatment of Janis resulted in adverse consequences. A study by Lewis and Derlega examined the inter-related, potentially adverse effects of stigma consciousness compared to social constraints, intrusive thoughts, stress, negative mood, internalized homophobia, and even physical symptoms. (Lewis, Derlega, Clarke, & Kuang, 2006). One hundred and five predominantly open lesbians from the Southeastern Virginia area filled out questionnaires regarding each of the above-mentioned metrics. This study was not structured as an experimental design but rather as a correlational study to determine the relationship, if any, between the measures, particularly stigma consciousness and social constraints, mentioned earlier. Based on the results of the various surveys
and questionnaires, the researchers saw that stigma consciousness, expectations of discrimination and prejudice against oneself, was positively associated with social constraints, lesbian-related stress, physical symptoms, intrusive thoughts, yet not with internalized homophobia. The researchers argued however, that they have previously seen a positive correlation between stigma consciousness and internalized homophobia, so that the results of this particular study may be due to some sampling error. Furthermore, researchers also saw that when social constraint was low, and stigma consciousness was high, the other metrics were also comparatively lower to when constraints and stigma consciousness was high. Essentially, the implications of this research are that low social constraints, especially in regards to talking about lesbianism, can reduce the adverse effects of stigma consciousness. While this particular study is not explicitly linked to “Mean Girls”, it is not completely unrelated. If Janis was in fact a lesbian, her evaluation of the social constraints placed on her lesbianism would have played a significant role in reducing the negative effects of the stigma consciousness catalyzed by Regina’s homophobia.

Another pertinent study to discuss is Moradi’s study of threat and guilt in internalized antilesbian and gay prejudice (Moradi, van den berg, & Epting, 2009). Operating within the frame of Personal Construct Theory, Moradi and colleagues examined the disparity between gay and lesbian’s constructs of their preferred versus their actual selves. Furthermore, the researchers looked to test their hypothesis to see if there was a correlation between the disparities of the actual self against the preferred self, threat, and global internalized antilesbian and gay prejudice. Also, the study looked at the differences between interpersonal (privacy, acceptance, and discomfort with disclosure) and intrapersonal (identity confusion) stressors on gay and lesbian individuals. The research was conducted with a sample size of one hundred and two participants (63% men, 35% women, and 2% not responding) using a survey method. The results of the study indicated that threat and guilt both play distinct roles when it comes to global internalized prejudices. It seems as if guilt seems to be a
more stable force when it comes to the development of global internalized prejudices. The implications of this study are primarily focused on providing a useful model for helping determine individual internalized prejudices when it comes to their sexuality by using reports of guilt and threat, measured through the disparity between the actual self and preferred self. Again, this study is not explicitly linked to Janis and Regina, but does provide insight into potential issues that arise when lesbian and gay individuals experience feelings of guilt or threats about or to their sexuality and identity. Had Janis actually been lesbian, there is a strong chance that she would have feelings of guilt, probably both interpersonal and intrapersonal, over her sexuality, quite potentially developed because of Regina’s treatment of her.

Lastly, a study conducted by Rivers examined the long-term implications of homophobic bullying (Rivers, 2004). Rivers’ main focus was to garner a better understanding of the long-term consequences of homophobic bullying by having 92 gay and bisexual men and 27 lesbian and bisexual women fill out extensive questionnaires based off the DSM-V’s criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder. Also, Rivers assessed participants on an internalized homophobia acceptance scale. Interestingly enough, results showed that those who reported more symptoms of posttraumatic stress also scored lower on the internalized homophobia self-acceptance scale. In other words, those with posttraumatic stress symptoms (flashbacks, intrusive memories, psychological distress in situations reminding them of their victimization) were more accepting of their homosexuality. Furthermore, a general analysis of the reported symptoms reported by the participants indicates that many of them continued to be troubled by their bullying experiences. The implications of this study are quite clear to see, victims of homophobic bullying suffer from many long-term impacts, and, in some cases, suffer from symptoms characteristic of posttraumatic stress. The link between this study and the homophobia in “Mean Girls” is quite clear and direct. Janis, despite not actually being lesbian, suffered homophobic bullying at the hands of Regina George. The long-term impacts of her actions
could potentially have devastatingly adverse consequences for Janis’ psychological well-being in the future.

Overall, given the factors discussed in Lewis’ study (the adverse effects of stigma consciousness facilitated by demanding social constraints), Moradi’s study (the effects of threat and guilt on inter and intrapersonal self-attitudes of internalized antilesbian and gay prejudice), and Rivers’ study (the adverse, posttraumatic stress symptoms of homophobic bullying), it is clear to see that, even though “Mean Girls” was satirizing the bigotry of homophobes, the risk of homophobic bullying is very real and can result not only in immediate internalization of negative self-construals, but also lead to adverse, long-term posttraumatic stress symptoms.
References

