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Article

Distinctive and Distinguished Gay-Friendliness in Park Slope, New York City

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that a new norm has emerged in former gay and now gentrified neighborhoods. Straight upper-middle-class residents claim to be gay-friendly—an attitude that has not erased hierarchies, but has both displaced and instituted boundaries. Based on fieldwork in Park Slope, a neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York City, this article highlights that gay-friendly markers signal acceptance as much as they work to establish heterosexuals' moral authority and social privileges. Sociability between neighbors and friends is characterized by exchanges and interactions that have an impact on heterosexuals, yet remain primarily checked and filtered by them. In the domestic sphere, which is still structured by heterosexual (and gender) norms, significant restrictions on homosexuality persist. By analyzing progressiveness in relation to class and race, this study brings to light persistent power relations. It thus aims to contribute to the discussion about the extent, limits, and lingering ambivalences of a growing acceptance of homosexuality, which constitutes a significant dimension of so-called inclusive cities.

Keywords

gay neighborhoods; gay-friendliness; gentrification; heterosexuality; homosexuality; tolerance

Issue

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1. Introduction

“It would be uncool to be un-gay-friendly”: Liz, a 40-year-old academic, who owns a brownstone in Park Slope (New York City), came up with this catchphrase to express how self-evident it is for her and her circle of white upper-middle-class residents to express their acceptance of homosexuality. “Gay-friendliness” has become a positive attitude that seems to announce a new and promising era regarding homosexuality in contemporary societies (Loftus, 2001; Seidman, 2002). But while intentionally irrevocable, Liz’s statement also plunges us into the ambivalence and limits of the acceptance of homosexuality (Dean, 2014). In specific areas, homosexuality, as part of a “diverse” environment and “cool” sociability, seems attractive. However, it requires attention and even surveillance (of oneself and others). The word “uncool” indicates the mandatory dimension

of “gay-friendly” attitudes, which are part and parcel of a “good neighbor” ethos. Social distinction, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s vocabulary, i. e., the process through which cultural tastes are displayed against other groups’ tastes to uphold one’s status, definitely plays out here (Bourdieu, 2010).

My hypothesis about the link between power and progressiveness in attitudes toward homosexuality draws on a rich literature that showed that the latter has been used to uphold the power of dominant groups and institutions. The discussion opened by the notion of “homonormativity” (Browne, 2009; Duggan, 2002) has been instrumental in questioning the outcome of the fight for same-sex marriage and the growing acknowledgment of gay families. By creating a respectable figure of homosexuality (Warner, 2000), integration is said to primarily benefit upper-middle-class white gay men seeking to marry and committed to monogamy,

thus delegitimizing a more subversive culture (Halperin, 2012). When promoted by dominant groups and institutions, including cities, as a way to attract wealthy newcomers, sexual progressiveness tends to draw boundaries that exclude poor people and racial minorities, deemed less tolerant.

I use the frame of social distinction to study how the rhetoric of sexual progressiveness works to reinforce the social and spatial influence of upper-middle-class heterosexuals. I argue that the issue of sexuality, and more specifically the acceptance of homosexuality, is a significant element of class culture, or habitus (Bourdieu, 2010), hence the strong ambivalence that characterizes it. Building upon the queer of color critique that emphasized the intersection of race and sexuality in building liberal modernity (Ferguson, 2004), I pay specific attention to how progressiveness regarding sexual norms consolidates whiteness as well as class. To do so, I investigate a specific form of acceptance of homosexuality based on a strong refusal of violence and discrimination, but which, like tolerance, as it is defined by Brown (2008), implies conditions about what and whom one accepts, and, as a consequence, presents itself as a combination of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, I aim to contribute to a discussion about social inclusion as both a value and a process. Because social inclusion is an increasingly accepted value, we need to take a close look at how it is appropriated and at the kind of transformations it generates. As a process, I do not define it as a shift from exclusion to acceptance, but rather as the mapping out of new boundaries.

In order to explain the mechanisms through which power and sexual progressiveness are intertwined, I drew on a fieldwork study on a gay-friendly neighborhood, seeking to bring an original contribution to the research on formerly gay neighborhoods which have experienced a massive arrival of straight residents due to gentrification (Ghaziani, 2014). The concept of “gay-friendly neighborhoods” reflects urban and socio-demographic transformations. It also emerged from discussions about the “enclave epistemology” (Ghaziani, 2019) generated by early works on the residential and commercial concentration of gay men (Castells, 1983) and later the specific appropriation of space by lesbians (Adler & Brenner, 1992; Brown-Saracino, 2019; Podmore, 2006). In the last 15 years, scholars have been increasingly vocal about the need to question the reduction of “queer space” to “gay space” and, as a consequence, more attention has been paid to bisexuals, trans and transsexuals as well as sexual minorities of color. But even though queer theories urge to “take heterosexuality seriously” (Browne et al., 2007, p. 11), heterosexuals living in those neighborhoods and how they concretely change traditional gay places have rarely been studied. Drawing on debates about fluid and complex relationships between space and sexuality, I chose to study a gay-friendly neighborhood by focusing not on minorities and their declining appropriation of spaces, but rather on a group of upper-middle-class heterosexuals, intend-

ing to better understand their claim of progressiveness. What are heterosexuals’ relationships toward an environment that has been formerly appropriated by a visible gay population? As explained by Gorman-Murray and Waitt (2009), in queer-friendly neighborhoods, progressive gentrifiers have not imposed a hegemonic straight culture and invisibilized queer groups. They promote social cohesion and diversity and thus welcome the visibility of their queer neighbors. Yet, Brodyn and Ghaziani’s (2018) concept of “performative progressiveness” reveals that heterosexuals living in those neighborhoods manage to combine “progressive attitudes” and “homonegative actions.” Because I argue that the enigmatic mix of inclusion and exclusion that lies behind the myth of social inclusion has yet to be examined, I chose to consider multiple times and spaces, thus showing that progressive attitudes toward homosexuality are not uniform. They do not convey the same degree of openness across all places and occasions. First, “gay-friendly markers” in the neighborhood signal acceptance as much as suspicion and vigilance toward gay visibility, and delineate the contours of authorized visibility. Second, sociability between neighbors and friends in a mixed context has a socializing impact on heterosexuals, yet remains primarily checked and filtered by them. Thirdly, in the private sphere, which is still structured by heterosexual (and gender) norms, significant restrictions on homosexuality persist.

2. Methodology

Once considered to be the lesbian neighborhood of New York, Park Slope is a portion of the city with a high concentration of same-sex couples, especially in the northern part of the neighborhood and in South Slope (Gates & Ost, 2004). Because lesbians have fewer resources, commercial spaces marked as homosexual have not flourished as they have in areas where gay men have historically congregated, as Rothenberg (1995) documented in her study of Park Slope. Moreover, the accelerated process of gentrification fueled an influx of wealthy straight families while many lesbians were priced out because of the rising rental prices in the 2000s. Along with the “lesbian baby boom,” it led to a dramatic increase in households with children after 2000. Among the factors that significantly changed the atmosphere of this Brooklyn district, Gieseking (2020) also stresses the rise in queer activism and trans-activism and the declining association of lesbian identities with cisgender women, thus questioning the traditional lesbian-queer markers or symbols.

Park Slope appears to be a relevant place to examine the ambivalence of contemporary acceptance of homosexuality by privileged residents. First, in addition to remaining a neighborhood with a high concentration of lesbians, Park Slope is characterized by the queer-lesbian community’s strong identification with it, even in the more fragmented and unstable way brought to

light by Gieseck (2020). Park Slope is also an adequate site of investigation to substantiate the claim that race and class shape gay-friendly attitudes. Formerly home to an Irish population and then to African-Americans and Puerto Ricans, Park Slope is still made up of racial minorities: This neighborhood of 67,649 residents has 67.3% of white residents, 6.4% Black/African Americans, 6.0% Asians, and 28.6% Hispanics, according to 2010 US census data and its delimitation, which includes the Gowanus area. But a comparison with the demographic percentages for the city as a whole (33.3%, 22.8%, 12.6%, and 28.6%) points to the process of gentrification in the area. Like several neighborhoods of Brooklyn with easy access to Manhattan, Park Slope has witnessed a “back to the city” movement that contrasts with the “white flight” to the suburbs after World War II (Osman, 2011). Although it has been unevenly gentrified, Park Slope stands as one of the most upscale and desirable areas of Brooklyn, and even of New York City, with a median household income of \$101,784 (compared with \$53,889 nationally).

I interviewed 37 self-identified straight residents between 2011 and 2016. I asked general questions about socioeconomic and matrimonial status and detailed questions about their relationships to the neighborhood and their residential trajectories. The interview guide focused on their image of homosexuality, a strong indicator of acceptance. But to avoid bias introduced by the desire to provide “good” and therefore “liberal” answers, I systematically asked them to evoke the various “contacts” they’d had with gay men and lesbians across their lives. As I listened to descriptions of gay friends, tenants, neighbors, and parents at school, I was able to gather moral judgments that are more revealing than they would have been in answers to abstract questions. I also interviewed 18 self-identified gays and lesbians, and one self-identified bisexual woman. A huge majority of my interviewees have similar characteristics that reflect the gentrification of Park Slope. All of them (but one, who is Hispanic) are white and belong to the upper-middle class, which means that they are well-paid professionals and managers with advanced educational degrees, who enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their work (Gilbert, 2003). In terms of occupation, I interviewed lawyers, judges, bankers, engineers, academics, filmmakers, journalists, and businessmen, among others.

Ethnographic work was instrumental in collecting evidence of complex attitudes toward homosexuality and, eventually, of an acceptance that combines openness and exclusion. As I observed individuals in the context of their community and leisure activities and various settings, I witnessed subtle, and more rarely open, forms of rejection. I attended events and visited places where, even as the interviewees expressed “gay-friendly” stances, the dominant presence of straight people could be observed, thus revealing situations of co-presence with enduring hierarchies. During my several visits to New York City (11 months in total between 2011 and

2016), I lived in Park Slope or nearby, joined the Food Coop, became involved with a variety of activities in the neighborhood (church services in the Park Slope United Methodist Church, yoga classes, tai chi classes, bookstore events, often taking my work for long sessions in cafés, etc.), and befriended a number of local residents. As part of the ethnographic perspective, I conducted additional interviews with a librarian, two teachers, and several lesbian mothers of the renowned Park Slope public school PS 321. I also met two members of the Park Slope Civic Council, a rabbi, a journalist for the local newspaper, a bartender, a sexologist, and two shop vendors. The combination of interviews and ethnographic immersion in the neighborhood allowed me to get a large range of indicators of acceptance. I was able to measure the degree of visibility of gays and lesbians, and how it varies according to place and time. I looked at indicators related to accepting spaces, extending my inquiry beyond affirming religious institutions (Brown-Saracino, 2018) to include accepting institutions in general. I was able to study acceptance as an attitude that entails concrete practices and sociability, in the sense that it is not limited to progressive stances but is equally defined by open condemnations of homophobia, interactions with queer people, and choice of certain schools. When it came to the domestic sphere, observations proved less easy, and even impossible because the duration of my stays in New York City prevented me from developing more personal and lasting interactions. The questions I asked straight men about their sexuality and sexual orientation sometimes raised resistance and embarrassment that would likely have been less strong with a male researcher. I rapidly inferred that studying heterosexuals who rarely define themselves as such (though they categorize gay men and lesbians by their sexual orientation) was a stimulating but possibly sensitive project. Yet, as a white tenured professor, I was able to develop relationships of trust, thanks to similar (although not equivalent in terms of income) socioeconomic characteristics, a display of class-based manners, and a shared rejection of homophobia. The racial affinity, in addition to my being a foreigner to whom one may feel freer to talk about one’s country, might also explain the relatively open comments on the links between race and homophobia. I chose not to mention my own sexual orientation, if not asked specifically.

3. Gay-Friendly Markers

While doing fieldwork in Park Slope, I regularly noticed women (and sometimes men) holding hands while walking on the streets, pushing strollers, lining up in the Food Coop with openly affectionate gestures, or sitting and even kissing at Tea Lounge, the famous café on Union Street opposite the Food Coop, where one can sit casually on large cushions. Still, more than the presence of a gay population, it is the authorized visibility of that population that forms a distinctive feature of

this neighborhood. What interviews with heterosexuals and investigation in local institutions show is a generally accepting atmosphere predicated on a limited influence or a selected presence of gays and lesbians.

A significant number of interviewees feel ill at ease with gay visibility in public space, or rather a certain visibility. I heard repeated comments about lesbians' supposedly excessive visibility, often through the derogative phrase "in your face," on the part of people who explicitly stressed their commitment to LGBT rights and support for same-sex marriage. More than presence in public space, these remarks point to its sexual connotation. The fact that gays and lesbians live in the neighborhood is not considered a problem; a visible non-heterosexual identity linked to sexuality is. Lesbians, more than gay men (who are also visible in the neighborhood), are the objects of these comments. Anthony, a white retired lawyer, expressed a specific concern with women:

Maybe with the girls, what you call butch....They are a little more hostile.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

They want to flout. They want to show in public, exhibit, challenge. And gay women are more...some of them want to assert it, and they want to confront it. That's my personal opinion. But that's a segment....They feel comfortable walking 7th Avenue and kissing, and hugging.

Interviewer: Is there a lot of public display of affection?

Yes, I think there is. But much more among women. Oh, yeah. Hugging, kissing. Maybe it's some female culture. I see it much more among the girls, the women.

When asked about public displays of affection, Kathie, a social worker who is also retired, said:

I'm not good about it. Whether it's men and women, I prefer not to see overt stuff on the street. And two women walking along holding hands [sighs], some of them I look at and it makes me feel vaguely uncomfortable. And I'm not sure....See...my experience sometimes with homosexuals is some of their over-behavior is coming from some neurotic part of themselves, of drawing attention to themselves.

A few heterosexuals still consider homosexuality through a pathological lens, especially those who are aged 70 and older and moved to the neighborhood before the 1990s. There is a generational factor linked to the fact that these residents grew up after World War II, in an era of fierce repression and forced invisibility. But present reaction to homosexuality, especially in public space, is

also shaped by residential trajectories. Anthony moved to Park Slope in 1960; Kathie in 1975. Asked about the reputation of the neighborhood when they moved in, both play down the presence of lesbians and gays. But even if they don't comment on it, they moved to Park Slope at a time when the lesbian population was visible through alternative looks as well as through activism, thus questioning straight privilege and patriarchy.

Both homeowners, Anthony and Kathie are active in various local groups, including the Food Coop. Both express liberal values and do not mention any endeavor to concretely constrain gay visibility—whether they have learned to be gay-friendly and not to express attitudes that might be considered reactionary, or limit their reservations to private thoughts. In any case, their view sheds light on the conditions that come with their touted general acceptance of homosexuality. Contrary to the pride demanded by the gay and lesbian movement, a degree of discretion in public space is required. It is especially the case for lesbians, who attract more suspicion about their sexual conduct than men, as the interview with Anthony showed.

While overt negative attitudes toward gay visibility are limited to older interviewees, the majority share a reluctance to see the neighborhood defined by the presence of gay people. Acceptance is mixed with anxiety to control. I asked my interviewees how they described their neighborhood and whether they considered it a "gay neighborhood." All of them denied this label. Some did because they were aware of the declining visibility of lesbians; others were ill at ease with a label that depreciated their environment and questioned their right and ability to imprint their own norms. Instead, they strongly emphasized the "diverse" character of the neighborhood, considered as a mix of different populations, including a gay population.

The interviewees' recurrent use of the adjective "diverse" in conversations about the acceptance of homosexuality reveals what the desired presence of gays and lesbians in their neighborhood is. Homosexuality is less an explicit sexual orientation than an element of diversity among others. This is consistent with gentrifiers' preference for a diverse environment that does not challenge power relations and even strengthens their moral authority, thus requiring surveillance to uphold (Tissot, 2015). The gay-friendly commitment to diversity thus obscures the fact that gays and lesbians might still experience domination in a mixed locality and be in need of their own space. For instance, Daniel, a white 40-year-old lawyer, did not seem to understand when I mentioned that some gay men and lesbians lamented the transformations of Park Slope along with its gentrification. "I'm not sympathetic to the ghetto choice," he exclaimed. While assuming that the arrival of straight families brought a positive element in the lesbians' life, he also expressed barely veiled class- and race-based prejudices toward people living in "ghettos." In his libertarian view, which reflects his privileged status, this experience is not only

negative, it is also the consequence of a “choice.” In sum, he strongly opposes the view of Park Slope as a place where gay people would get together to find refuge and create their own culture.

Authorized visibility of homosexuality in Park Slope comes from persisting ambivalences on the part of heterosexuals, but also from the fact that gay symbols no longer work only to express the demand for pride and overt expression of homosexuality (Gorman-Murray & Waitt, 2009). Rainbow flags hang on the storefronts of shops that cater to straight customers, revealing an expansive acceptance but also the dissociation of rainbows from the queer world. These former gay markers have become gay-friendly markers, i.e., signals of acceptance, which encourage gay men and lesbians to be out and visible while emphasizing the heterosexual’s progressiveness. I noticed one striking gay-friendly marker on the day of my first visit to Park Slope in April 2011 when I stopped in front of the Park Slope United Methodist Church and I saw a prominently displayed sign: “Hand in hand, we the people of Park Slope United Methodist Church—black and white, straight and gay, old and young, rich and poor—unite as a loving community in covenant with God and the Creation.” As I would find out later, Park Slope United Methodist Church belongs to the Reconciling Congregation Program (Dean, 2014, pp. 157–158; Moon, 2004) created in 1984, which condemns homophobia, promotes acceptance of gay people and gay ministers, and supports same-sex marriage. Synagogues of Park Slope (two of which have lesbian rabbis) as well as associations and many local businesses cultivate a similar accepting attitude.

Private and public schools also display an accepting attitude and a strong commitment to diversity, which, however, come with stricter control of homosexuality. Acceptance of homosexuality is part of class-based strategies, as experiencing diversity is an educational norm and might be a useful skill for well-paid professionals. But the endorsement of diversity goes hand in hand with a meticulous selection of gays and lesbians who may embody diversity. A married, wealthy gay couple in their late 30s (one is a banker and the other one a therapist, with a combined income of \$500,000) confirmed this point. They adopted a daughter and explained how she was accepted into preschool:

That’s when we tried to use the fact that she has same-sex parents. It’s a small preschool that is highly sought-after and many parents apply and don’t get in. There was a questionnaire, an application. “What is the thing that concerns you about your child?” And I said: As two fathers, a papa and a daddy, I’m worried whether she’s going to relate to kids with daddy and mummy. And of course, it was complete bullshit because 30% of the people there have two daddies or two mummies.

Interviewer: What was the reaction of the school?

They want diversity. This kind of progressive....I used the two daddies thing as a trump card: “She’s going to contribute to the diverse environment of your students.”

During our conversation, they explained that, as second-generation Russians, they also brought an element of ethno-racial diversity. The visible presence of such gay couples is not only acceptable but desirable for wealthy heterosexuals living in Park Slope. Their respectable homosexuality and their harmless non-white identity constitute a “diversity” that increases the value of the school, of the neighborhood, and ultimately of the real estate property. One sees here the ambiguities of the interest in gay presence, as the multiple resources of this couple reveal the strong pressure and concrete difficulties for all gays and lesbians to conform to the rules of local integration that this privileged couple benefits from. The presence of gays and lesbians is welcome, as expressed by gay-friendly markers, but it is conditioned and controlled: These are the defining characteristics of what I called authorized visibility.

4. Categorizing Neighbors, Friends, and Acquaintances

In a neighborhood like Park Slope, there are numerous opportunities for straight people to meet gay men and lesbians, who can be out in a majority of spaces. The context of gentrification generates and shapes rich but controlled interactions between heterosexuals and homosexuals. First, gentrifiers often seek interpersonal relations in their residential environment. Similar to Jane Jacobs’ model, they define “diversity” not only as the presence of various groups, but as a place with strong social ties, small local businesses, and pedestrians on the street. Dog parks provide opportunities for gay and straight residents of similar socioeconomic status to meet regularly. As I was dog-sitting one summer in Park Slope in order to be able to live in the neighborhood, I witnessed the spectacle of several dozens of residents meeting early in the morning in Prospect Park when the animals can be off-leash (before 9 AM). As I had already noticed in a previous study in Boston, dog ownership, or rather ownership of certain dogs, is a class-based practice. Since it allows a subtle appropriation of public space by wealthy residents, it has become a vehicle for gentrification (Tissot, 2011). In Prospect Park, neighbors also interact informally, sometimes befriending and even flirting with each other, while their chic animals play and run. Friendships between heterosexuals and homosexuals thrive in a place that is racially homogeneous but mixed in terms of sexual orientation. The demand for “ambient communities” (Brown-Saracino, 2011) from lesbians who seek informal connections and a sense of belonging and of security more than a “lesbian enclave” reinforces this sociability.

In Park Slope, local institutions also generate personal and potentially friendly relationships between

straight and gay people. In the Food Coop known for its liberal values, members of all sexual orientations meet to do their “shift” every four weeks. This provides opportunities to chat, and it is a well-known place for newcomers to socialize. In the orientation session I attended in October 2012, I listened to a presentation that underscored the commitment to diversity several times: “Anyone who has a problem with diversity has no place here.” The session is both a warning against people who are prone to expressing homophobia publicly and a message for gays and lesbians that they have “their place here.” This kind of moment is also part of a broader process of socializing heterosexuals to acceptance.

The day after my first visit to the neighborhood, I returned to the Park Slope United Methodist Church to attend the service. I met a (lesbian) parishioner who later helped me circulate an email explaining my project about the acceptance of homosexuality. Ten parishioners enthusiastically replied to my request for interviews, half of them were straight. In the interviews, they expressed pride in the church and its accepting atmosphere. One of them, white, heterosexual, age 51, now a lactation consultant, had grown up in a conservative family. I asked her how and when she heard about homosexuality for the first time in her life. After mentioning a lesbian student in college, whom she “sort of accepted,” she explained:

I think when I first started to go to the church, to the PSUM [Park Slope United Methodist Church]. That was really the first time I was sharing events with people who were gay. It was also the first time I was aware of how antigay most churches are....That’s why we march with our church at the Manhattan parade every year.

The theological perspective developed by the Reconciling program has played a crucial role in providing arguments to reject homophobia and accept gay people. In this view, homosexuals, like heterosexuals, are made in the image of God. They are thus respectable and have rights, such as access to marriage, seen as a factor of stability. Not only did this resident of Park Slope actually meet gay people in the Methodist church, but she also found a moral and political atmosphere, as well as a theological frame, that allowed her to make sense of homosexuality. During the interview, she expressed a strong enthusiasm for the defense of gay rights that was nevertheless tinged with pity—an attitude that reveals, as Moon (2004) suggests, that the frame of equality does not yet prevail. This member of the Methodist church defined herself as an ally and supported her gay friend when he came out, yet did so with a claim she knew his sexual orientation when he himself did not: “I threw my arms around him and I said: ‘Thank god, you finally realized!’” she remembered. “Gay pain” remains central to the rhetoric of acceptance developed by numerous Christian heterosexuals, some of whom still con-

sider themselves more “normal” while lending help to the people who are considered inherently “unhappy” (Ahmed, 2010).

The characteristics of the neighborhood in terms of socio-demographics, planning, and architecture also facilitate the ambivalent process through which heterosexuals can modify their perspective and soften their attitudes. Susan, a retired straight teacher, bought a brownstone in the late 1970s. A very politicized woman, she explained that she found out about (and started supporting) the gay movement when gay tenants moved in the upper floors of her home in the 1990s. While she learned politically about the issue of gay rights, she also got accustomed to seeing gay people as familiar figures who shared her close environment. Spatial proximity can contribute to creating social familiarity, as is also the case with this couple now in their early 40s, who acquired a brownstone in Park Slope in 2001, and have since rented one of the apartments to a gay couple with a kid—a family which “live on the fourth floor and share the same entrance, they’re sort of part of our house.”

Here we see how the spatial characteristics of the neighborhood fuel a sociability that, in return, translates into mixed spaces (stoops and sidewalks, parks, local organizations, etc.). Yet, the outcome of contacts generated by co-presence is not automatic nor inevitable. A similar commitment to family life as well as class-based educational norms seems necessary to alleviate the suspicions that straight households may have toward gay families. A lesbian mother with two kids describes the families of the house where she and her wife lived:

Very nice people. Very nice. With the same educational values. People in the house think it is important that their children are polite. Not yelling, quiet children, and interested in other things than just video games. These people want to offer something to their children that enrich their lives. More than things easily accessible. People who are ready to invest in their children’s education.

Her strong commitment to education is expressed in opposition to behaviors that, as Lareau (2000) showed, are implicitly associated with working-class people, prone to advocate “natural growth” for their children rather than intensive parenting. Thus, we see how the decline of the boundary between heterosexuality as a desirable norm and homosexuality as a moral pitfall is predicated on consolidated class affinity. Class interests help straight people get over possible prejudices. Even more importantly, drawing boundaries through attitudes toward homosexuality can be used to establish cultural superiority, moral authority as well as racial privileges.

In fact, many straight residents of Park Slope made positive statements about homosexuality to express their rejection of poor, non-educated people and racial minorities, deemed ignorant and prone to a natural hostility toward homosexuality. Several interviewees

mentioned the “Hispanic community,” “Irish neighborhoods,” or “Italian neighborhoods.” A white straight 65-year-old lawyer, a member of the Methodist church, strongly expressed accepting values concerning gay-friendliness, for instance toward her lesbian daughter, and to trans issues that she has recently become more aware of. During the same interview, she also explained that homophobia was an “ethnic issue.” Other interviewees used the issue of education and good manners to express the idea that sexual progressiveness is intrinsically linked to class. In many interviewees’ opinion, homophobia is absurd, irrational, or even worse, a social *faux pas*, as this 63-year-old white engineer living in a brownstone one block from Prospect Park explained: “I find homophobia unpleasant the same way I find racial bigotry and any other racial discrimination unpleasant. And inappropriate.”

Local sociability is a sphere in which a particular progressiveness is shaped and performed. Exclusion and inclusion, moral openness, and strict surveillance go hand in hand, as descriptions of friendships also reveal. I interviewed a straight resident of Park Slope, a 30-year-old software interaction designer, introduced to me by two married women I met in a café on 5th Avenue in Park Slope. He and his wife live in a one-bedroom apartment that they have rented for the last seven months and dream of buying their own place. He began by emphasizing how homosexuality had become a “normal” phenomenon to him. “It just doesn’t bother me. It just seems normal, I guess. I don’t really think about [it]. Yes, I have a wife. I know a woman who has a wife....It’s normal.” Marriage is key to the sense of normalcy felt by this heterosexual.

Rapidly, however, he exposed the limits of what came to look like tolerance rather than full acceptance as he drew a distinction between what he accepted and what he didn’t accept. “I’m not extremely pro-gay. I’m not very involved with it. It doesn’t bother me, it’s just I don’t see how it affects me, really.” Beyond the political avoidance he expressed (Eliasoph, 1998), the term “pro-gay” sets up a distinction between an attitude of acceptance (his) and something more committed and implicitly excessive. He then described his lesbian friends as being “not super, I guess, enthusiastic about gay rights. They are gay and just want to be left alone, not talk about it.”

Thus, his “indifference,” which echoes “color-blindness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), is far from neutral and works to brush off the issue of rights. Being political versus keeping it private intensifies other oppositions: discretion versus open behaviors (an element we have seen earlier), invisibility versus cultural particularities: “I have many friends who are gay, but I don’t see them as gay. I see them as friends, I guess. If they were doing gay things, I don’t think I would feel comfortable.” His demand for discretion specifically targets gay men and those he described as “effeminate”: “When it’s a caricature, it’s annoying. An effeminate man, a gay person....I have the same feeling towards them as a girl who

wears a short skirt and tries to show off.” We see how the disqualification of dissension combines with strict and misogynist gender norms, thus reinforcing singular heteronormative norms. According to those, homosexuality itself is no longer a problem, or at least it is never considered or designated as such: a certain homosexuality or certain homosexuals (as well as certain heterosexuals) are. Here again, visibilizing and praising upper-middle-class white heterosexuals’ openness while controlling the conduct of gays and lesbians who are part of their inner circles characterize gay-friendliness.

5. Enduring Heterosexual Norms in the Intimate Sphere

Gay men and lesbians are often aware of the existence of negative feelings toward them, even though social stigma means they will never be communicated explicitly. One lesbian mother whose son goes to PS 321 explained:

You never really know how people are reacting or why they are [reacting]. When your kid doesn’t get invited to a birthday party: Is it you, is it the kid? This is a neighborhood....Nobody would ever say something to us.

The existence of private (and hidden) reservations does not mean that homosexuality is ignored and forbidden in the private life of Park Slope straight residents. In this sphere too, gay-friendliness entails a presence of homosexuality, first of all during the ritual that is fundamental to heterosexuality (Ingraham, 1999): weddings. Asked about the ceremonies they organized, several married women talked about their bridal showers. While it traditionally brings together female friends and women of the family, gay men, often the “gay best friend,” sometimes participate. A resident of Park Slope, a 46-year-old engineer, recalled his wife’s bachelor party: “Her best friend is a gay man. So, he went to the bachelor party. And the bridal shower too!” While gay men can be present on the bride’s side, this is not the case for the men I interviewed. Another resident, 47 years old and a successful businessman, describes his bachelor party: “With 10 guys, we went camping and play paintball in the wood.” But the “dear friend” he had mentioned earlier in the interview, a gay man who was his roommate, was not present.

In addition to this, as we have noted earlier, gay-friendliness is part and parcel of the educational norms of the American progressive upper-middle class. In Park Slope schools, children from straight families are expected to learn the positive aspects of a diversity that includes children from same-sex parents. Like the parents described by Martin (2009, p. 202) who “prepare for the possibility of homosexuality” but nonetheless form a minority of her sample, many mothers of Park Slope buy children’s books with gay characters. This is the case of Elsa, a 40-year-old filmmaker. Her son also experiences “diversity” through another element of their family life: the visits of her brother and his partner,

known to the son as “uncle Charlie and uncle Jason.” Represented by gay members of families who are fully accepted (she vocally supported his brother when he came out to their parents), homosexuality is present behind the doors of houses and apartments. But limits can emerge when it comes to the possible homosexuality of children themselves. While some parents were cautious and hesitant, several interviewees expressed total acceptance when they were asked about the possibility. A journalist, mother of a five-year-old child, living in Park Slope, who donated to the gay rights organization Human Rights Campaign said:

For me the most important thing is that my child is healthy and happy. Gay, straight....It doesn't matter to me. I want him to be accepted in society. That's one more reason that we should fight for any different form of equality.

However, even for the most accepting heterosexuals, the possible homosexuality of one's own kids appears to be an issue, not so much to be feared and prevented, but discussed and scrutinized. The same 47-year-old businessman explains: “Sometimes, July [his wife] and I talk about our kids' sexuality and whether we think they are straight or gay.” This “will to know” indicates that heterosexuals still investigate homosexuality as a phenomenon that remains an “object of knowledge” (Foucault, 1988).

The departure from the Victorian era and the acknowledgment of “sex as an autonomous domain of pleasure” as well as a “sphere of love and romantic bonding” (Seidman, 1991) after World War II brought forth new attitudes toward sexuality and homosexuality. Nevertheless, while questioning the former “antinomy” between eroticism and love as Seidman explains, it also created a forceful social norm. This new norm associates the two, thus excluding a conception of “sex” that was, during the gay liberation era, “no longer merely something you did in bed, [but] served to define a mode of living, both private and public, that encompassed a wide range of activities and relationships” (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012, p. 223). Although I interviewed a polyamorous couple (who questioned this strict association of conjugality and sexuality), heterosexuality still largely rests on a definition of sex and love that casts suspicion on “promiscuous sex” and on gay men, supposedly prone to it. A straight resident of Park Slope, a 30-year-old man and manager in the music industry, confided to me his strong dislike of the social networking application Grindr:

We were having this conversation the other day about promiscuity, the high level of promiscuity in that community [gay community], especially this app, you're familiar with Grindr? It's crazy!

Interviewer: What do you think about it?

I think it's very dangerous, very risky, in terms of you just randomly meet people, so there is a higher risk of....You meet people and you're just having sex and, to my knowledge, it's less about meeting someone for a relationship, just sexual. I mean, it's not very different from prostitution in a way, except that there isn't any money. So there is just this random person you know nothing about whom you're meeting and have some sex, and you have all the risk that come with that.

Once again heteronormative norms are expressed without targeting “homosexuality” or “homosexuals” and earlier in the conversation, he expressed his support for same-sex marriage and told me how making gay friends in college changed his perspective. He also seemed to have the same opinion about heterosexual dating applications. However, he explicitly linked a behavior he condemned, and that even shocked him, to “the gay community.” The reason why he condemned it reveals the norms and the characteristics of the “relations” he values. First, he considered the application as dangerous. Second, he compared the interactions between people meeting through Grindr to sex work. He thus contrasted what he saw as typical gay behaviors with romantic relationships supposedly free from any financial or safety issues. Pointing out a certain practice (recreational sex through the internet), he thus expressed a judgment that opposes an “amoral” homosexuality and a “healthy” sexuality that is probably not reserved to straight people in his mind, but that, as a straight man with a fiancée, he claims to embody.

Finally, a persistent rejection of homosexuality or what is associated with that sexuality, like anal penetration, exists in what is unanimously considered the most intimate sphere—sexuality. One sexologist working in Park Slope told me: “Straight men tend to carry around a lot of tension in their butts.” This does not mean that sexual intercourse with individuals of the same sex does not exist. As Ward (2015) argues, “sex between white men” might well define, although in a specific (and heteronormative) mode, male heterosexuality. As a woman, and given the type of empirical study I conducted, I was in no position to investigate this phenomenon. Still, my data confirm Ward's argument about the invisibility of these practices. Although cultivating sexual liberalism, very few interviewees admitted to homosexual contact. One interviewee recalled a certain “confusion” that, however, dissipated as they went to college and entered their adult life. In all cases, it appeared to be a thing of the past. Thus, homosexuality can be present in the domestic sphere of straight people, but as distinct and distant from any sexual reality.

6. Conclusion

Strong although euphemized power relations persist in a neighborhood like Park Slope that combines a visible

queer presence and a distinctive heterosexual culture. Social inclusion is a value claimed by the majority of the residents, but not yet a reality if we consider that it requires the end of suspicion and an equal right to visibility. This gay-friendly or queer-friendly neighborhood provides an atmosphere of acceptance and even promotes norms that openly stigmatize homophobia. Yet, heteronormativity still plays out by way of appropriating spaces formerly occupied (if not totally controlled) by the gay population and, even more importantly, by deciding the terms and conditions of their visibility. Focusing on heterosexuals helps us outline the distinct characteristics of a social inclusion that is often unanimously claimed but is still accompanied by discrete forms of exclusion. In environments such as Park Slope, a significant number of heterosexuals take strong action to defend full acceptance of gay men and lesbians in their community. At the same time, gay-friendly markers institutionalize an acceptance that heterosexuals benefit from. The sphere of friendship in a gentrified environment is the site of a novel blend, but also of logics of distinction that create exclusionary boundaries, against heterosexuals who are considered “homophobic,” and against gays and lesbians who do not comply with respectable norms. Heterosexuals have opened the doors of their homes to homosexuality: gay members of the family are accepted and the possibility of homosexuality for one’s children can be openly discussed and eventually supported. But this reorganizing of the intimate sphere rests on a persisting binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality. How can we account for straight people who desperately seek close-by homosexuality to establish their moral authority, and are at the same time deeply anxious to control it? How can we grasp the willingness to accept homosexuality and even promote its acceptance while maintaining heterosexual privileges? My answer is that this particular attitude is made possible by the socioeconomic status of the heterosexuals I studied, which allows them to face, digest, and eventually promote changes. The array of resources—economic, cultural, and social—belonging to the dominant groups allow them to manage anxiety and tensions and, via a *tour de force*, to master and transform them into moral profit.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Sylvie Tissot is a professor of political science at the University of Paris 8. Her research focuses on the intersection of class analysis and urban studies. *Good Neighbors. Gentrifying Diversity in Boston's South End* (Verso, 2015) reveals the ambivalent way in which upper-middle-class newcomers have positioned themselves as champions of diversity. She has conducted another field-based research project on so-called “gay-friendly” heterosexuals in France and the United States (*Gayfriendly. Acceptance and Control of Homosexuality in New York and Paris*, Polity, 2023).