



Deconstructing Tolerance: When Benevolence Stalls Progress for Gay Equality

A Review of

The Tolerance Trap: How God, Genes, and Good Intentions Are Sabotaging Gay Equality

by Suzanna Danuta Walters

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Reviewed by

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Polls show rising support for gay rights, gay marriage bans are being overturned, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” has been repealed, and gay characters are presented more positively in media than ever before. Finally, the battle for equality is being won, right?

Not so fast, cautions sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters in *The Tolerance Trap: How God, Genes, and Good Intentions are Sabotaging Gay Equality*. Tolerance may be the new norm; but are there hidden costs? Walters aims to raise awareness of covert power plays hidden in the “tolerance” narrative. She reminds us that “tolerance” is a word we use to label our responses to that we find aversive—pain, frustration, cold weather. When applied to people, tolerance is bestowed by the powerful (the heterosexual majority) to those lower in the power structure, contingent upon them colluding with the dominant narrative that heterosexuality is optimal, and complying with traditional institutions (e.g., marriage and religion). Tolerance pacifies Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning (LGBTQ) people and allies and neutralizes resistance to patriarchal and heterosexual hegemony.

The book, which consists of 11 chapters divided into three parts, should appeal to a wide audience, from undergraduates to academicians, thanks to Walters’ engaging writing, frame-shifting critiques, and plentiful popular culture references. Walters examines changing constructions and deconstructions of sexual orientation and gender over the decades. She contrasts perspectives from postmodernists, feminists, scientists, artists, celebrities, politicians, and journalists. She makes the basics of postmodern theory accessible even to novices by providing the context of familiar TV and movie plotlines, news stories, and entertainment gossip. She references *Family Guy*, Ricky Martin, *Harry Potter*, *Glee*, *The Jersey Shore*, Lady Gaga, *Sex & the City*, *American Idol*, *Desperate Housewives*, and much more.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?

Concerned that Ritch Savin-Williams's (2006) optimism about a new "post-gay" age is premature, Walters analyzes public discourses on sexual orientation, such as coverage of the 2008 murder of a gender-nonconforming high school student. In a *Newsweek* article, a journalist writes that the victim "flaunted his sexuality and wielded it like a weapon," and that the murder illustrates "the difficulty of defining the limits of tolerance." So "tolerance" is framed as a burden for heterosexuals, who decide who is worthy of it, and when to withdraw it. The murdered teen is blamed for testing the limits of the benevolence from "tolerant" (heterosexual) society.

Even in matters less malevolent, "tolerance" often constrains by perpetuating heterosexual and patriarchal hegemony. Walters is heartened by declining homophobia, increased visibility, and gains in marital equality, but warns that each falls short of full integration and inclusion of everyone comprising the LGBTQ spectrum. A "place at the table" is offered selectively to those who assimilate into heterosexual institutions, stray not too far from traditional gender norms, and refrain from "flaunting" homosexuality. "Tolerance" is a reward to those who squeeze into the hegemonic mold—"virtually normal" white, wealthy males who are incidentally gay. Less welcome are people elsewhere on the continuum. And while GL people are increasingly visible and normalized by media, BTQ people are largely missing, and the trauma of homophobic violence is denied or minimized.

Walters also critiques the muddled debates over marriage equality and the right to serve in the military. She argues that the legal and economic protections conferred by both fall short of resolving social injustice, and that the wedding industry diverts money and focus from expanding programs for LGBTQ youth, ending job discrimination, providing HIV services, etc. Society's positioning of marriage as the optimal and most legitimate configuration for relationships and families is a tolerance trap that perpetuates hegemony and devalues other family arrangements.

Positioning Social Constructivism as Superior to Empiricism

Walters confronts simplistic dichotomies about sexual orientation and gender, yet she doles them out in her polarized appraisal of social constructivism vs. evolutionary theory. The search for biological correlates of homosexuality is "Bad Science, Bad Reporting, Bad News," according to a subtitle in the book. Tellingly, no section is devoted to uncovering "bad postmodernism." Walters' views are mired in the zeitgeist of Foucauldian deconstruction of sexual orientation and gender. She decries Simon LeVay's sample sizes as unacceptably small, but evidently finds postmodern philosophers and historians beyond reproach, despite their sample sizes of zero.

Walters spends 60 some pages "debunking" evolutionary psychology and behavioral genetics. Some of her complaints are fair—caveats regarding dichotomization of nature vs. nurture, circular reasoning, reductionism, small samples, operational definition inconsistencies, and implicit assumptions of "gender inversion." The chapter suffers, though, from dismissive jokes and hyperbole. Throughout she ridicules empirical research. Enthusiastic news coverage is pathologized as "Gay science mania," 2D:4D finger length

correlates of sexual orientation (Lippa, 2003) are mocked as research on “deformed fingers,” and so on. This approach to the material is ironic for a book making a case that language, respect, and celebration of diversity matter.

Preaching to the choir of today’s postmodern academe, Walters’ unwavering faith in the gospel of social constructivism positions it as THE supreme authority. She privileges postmodernism but can’t muster even “tolerance” for the empiricists. The list of those Walters declares misguided is long: evolutionary psychologists, geneticists, welcoming pastors, Melissa Etheridge, Simon LeVay, the Human Rights Campaign, Truth Wins Out, Eric Marcus, to name a few. Walters deems George W. Bush and homophobic pastors to be on the “correct” side on matters of choice/determinism, essentialism/socialization, and immutability of sexual orientation.

The book would be richer had Walters been open to diverse epistemologies. Largely neglected are the many quantitative studies suggesting that attitudes toward homosexuality vary as a function of beliefs about essentialism and immutability of sexual orientation (e.g., Haslam & Levy, 2006). Further, Walters never mentions the highly pertinent work on “benevolent” prejudice (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1997) or System Justification Theory (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Each is supported by more than a decade of empirical research and offers broad contexts relevant to Walters’ thesis that paternalistic benevolence maintains the status quo of structural and institutionalized power differentials.

In spite of Walters’ disdain for evolutionary psychology, and her neglect of key psychological research and theory, *The Tolerance Trap* has potential to spark empirical research. Walters’ critiques provide much material for generating hypotheses suitable for correlational and experimental research. Do messages of tolerance increase paternalism toward LGBTQ people or even increase self-policing? How do beliefs about essentialism and immutability relate to tolerance and to support that is deeper?

Walters concludes the book with a final plea to stay the course for something deeper and more transformative than mere tolerance. She hopes for integration and full inclusion of people at all points along the continua of sexual orientations and gender identities. Her vision is for a changed culture for all, moving beyond the frame of benevolent but paternalistic tolerance, and to instead celebrate all sexual and gender identities.

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