The Consequences of Coming Out: The Societal Implications of Being Gay

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ABSTRACT (139 Words)

According to LaSala (2000), disclosing one’s sexual identity to parents is considered to be the most stressful experience a gay individual is confronted with. In addition to the conflicts which arise in familial life, gay men and women are also faced with issues in society which contribute to misinformation, prejudice, and unacceptance. Although we may be progressing as a society, gay men and women are still discriminated against and do not receive the equal rights they deserve. Twenty men and women were interviewed for this research project, and the three common themes which arose from the interviews include hetero-normative culture, religious conflict, and inaccurate gay stereotypes. To conclude, it was found that gay men and women are confronted with many hegemonic ideals in society which serve to ostracize, persecute, and inaccurately represent the lives of gay men and women.

KEY WORDS
Coming out ■ Gay ■ Conflict ■ Hegemonic
Introduction

On April 29, 2014 Darren Crotty committed suicide days after he came out to his family (Chronicle 2014). Although the exact reasons concerning Darren’s suicide are unknown, Darren claimed that he felt embarrassed about his sexuality, and therefore was unable to cope with the social consequences of being gay (Chronicle 2014). It is important to understand the struggles of gay men and women because the issues they face are often dismissed or not taken seriously. Their voices are often muffled into silence when dominant social groups either disagree with the gay lifestyle, or simply ignore their existence in society. Although gay men and women should not feel ashamed of their sexuality, politically conservative and religious ideals have structured society in limiting ways that allows for a hetero-normative culture to flourish. If one doesn’t conform to these traditional standards, one faces discrimination, social stigmas and a general lack of support. Everyone, regardless of sexual identity, race, gender or creed, should be granted equal rights and opportunities.

This research provides insight into the lives of gay men and women, and unveils the struggles faced in familial and societal life. According to LaSala (2000), disclosing one’s sexual identity to parents is considered to be the most stressful experience a gay individual is confronted with. LaSala (2000) asserts that homosexuals wish to reveal their homosexuality to parents and family members because they hope for more honesty and closeness in their lives. After coming out to oneself, many gay and lesbians strategize the ways in which they plan to “come out” to their friends, and possibly their parents as well Baptist (2008). Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) suggest that many gay and lesbian individuals insist that they should be recognized as homosexual and completely accepted by their families. Unfortunately, joyful responses or complete acceptance to a child’s newfound homosexual identity are considered to
be rare (Martin; Hutson; Kazyak; Scherrer 2010).

Family is the one institution which is most difficult to become unattached to; it is vital to be connected with family, and to have a stable network of support. LaSala (2000) asserts that although it is psychologically healthy for individuals to reveal one’s sexual identity to family members, parents tend to react with shock and disappointment upon hearing the news. Gay men and women who have been ostracized by family members must face special problems in this world that heterosexuals may never have to experience. According to Padilla, Crisp and Rew (2010) gay men and women are not only vulnerable to the traumatic events of all youth, but they must also face family rejection, school harassment, and abuse in response to one’s declaration as gay.

It is important to care about this issue because many gay men and women who came out family members have experienced inequality in familial settings, and must deal with this discrimination or discomfort in their own families. The original contribution I plan to make regarding the lives of gay and lesbian individuals will clearly represent the struggles and problems they have faced in familial life. The original contribution brought from this research reveals different issues gay men and women have faced in society, such as issues within religion, conforming to a hetero-normative culture, and dismissing negative gay stereotypes.

This project is based on three main research questions:

1) In which ways do parents respond to children’s sexual identity? This open-ended question will hopefully reveal how one’s parents reacted when one first came out as either lesbian or gay, and how one’s parents may feel about homosexuals in general. The question will reveal any difficulties experienced by either the parent, child or a combination of the two. It will reveal both negative and positive reactions to the child’s homosexual identity.
2) How much emotional support do lesbian and gay youth receive from immediate family? This research question will attempt to measure parental acceptance between homosexual youth and parents. This question will reveal the positive or negative circumstances gay and lesbian youth have encountered from their families due to one’s previous outing as gay. Parents may reveal either negative or positive feelings towards their son or daughter’s “coming out” moment. This question will reveal how family members have dealt with the realization of having a gay child, and how the parents have reacted in response to the news.

3) Has the relationship between lesbian and gay youth and their parents changed after coming out? This question will reveal how previous parental relationships may have been altered after the outing, in either positive or negative ways. I believe it is important to discover if one’s parents reacted positively or negatively, because it may reveal the ways in which lesbians or gays may have been discriminated against by family members after the outing, assuming that there will be some level of discrimination. If parents speak openly to their children about homosexuality in a positive light, then this may show acceptance, or at the very least the desire to understand one’s child. If parents are rude, harsh or stern in response to their gay child’s outing, this may lead cut-off emotional, financial or personal support from family members.

Fifteen gay men and five lesbians were interviewed for this project. Most interviews ranged between twenty minutes to an hour. Their personal accounts regarding stories of family issues and acceptance demonstrate the unique struggles faced by gay men and women in societal life. Three dominant themes, hetero-normative values, religious conflict and gay stereotypes were clearly represented as strong indications of conflict throughout the interviews; these findings will be expressed in detail on the following pages.
Literature Review

The key themes that appeared throughout the literature review include: initial negative responses to homosexuality, religious conflict, and the importance of familial acceptance. Of the articles I reviewed, two were case studies of specific families, one was a content analysis of advice books regarding a child’s homosexuality, and the last was an ethnography of a family; this also included interviews of the parents of a gay son. Of the four articles I reviewed, one is a two-phase study which used a questionnaire on two different occasions to collect data, another is a secondary analysis that collected data from a large online survey, the next study used online surveys from respondents, and the final study performed a cross-sectional analysis of the (BRFSS) data system from Massachusetts.

Initial Negative Responses to Homosexuality

Almost every article in the literature review revealed an intense and negative response to homosexuality after coming out to family members. While there are some positive reactions, most are overwhelmingly negative. According to Wisniewski, Robinson and Deluty (2010) “Coming out” has been defined “as the process by which one declares his or her identity to be homosexual to family, friends or others who assumed the person to be heterosexual. Wisniewski, Robinson and Deluty (2010) assert that the coming out of gay offspring almost always presents itself as a challenge, and positive familial interactions are rare; although there are some positive reactions from parents, parental responses are usually negative. According to LaSala (2000) parents have been found to react with shock, guilt, anger, embarrassment and rejection when they learn that they have a gay son or lesbian daughter.

Baptist (2008) discovered the initial reaction of most members of the family was shock, confusion and resistance. LaSala (2000) found that parents require a grieving period after
learning about their child’s homosexuality. LaSala (2000) asserts that most mothers and fathers assume their children will grow up to be heterosexual, and when this ideal is broken parents experience a loss, because some parents feel as if they’ll miss out on experiences, such as attending their child’s wedding and having grandchildren. Baptist (2008) found that after Jack came out to his parents they initially stumbled into an area of confusion and negativity due to their son’s homosexuality, but they later emerged with more understanding and tolerance for homosexuals. LaSala (2000) also found that parents should be re-educated about gay lifestyles. LaSala (2000) asserts that accurate information about gay lifestyles may enable parents to take a less rejecting view of their son or daughter’s homosexuality. Baptist (2008) acknowledges the initial emotional turmoil experienced by families and proposes that over time, negative feelings will eventually dissipate, and parents of a homosexual child may even embrace gay culture. Maccio (2010) found that those who participated in SRT received highly negative feedback from family members regarding their sexuality.

Maccio (2010) asserts that if one experiences disappointment or hostility from parents then this may reinforce stigma among lesbians and gays. Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) assert that learning that one’s child is gay could be as devastating as losing a loved one. In their review of parental advice books, Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) found that the parents will experience grief upon learning that their child is gay or lesbian, and to overcome such grief the parent should seek expert help. According to Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010)’s research, all three categories of books (accepting, accommodating, and disapproval) described parents as grieving and suggested expert intervention, and all three categories of books also suggested that parents use their instincts, skills, and knowledge as “good parents” when managing their child’s disclosure.
According to the advice books investigated by Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010), a child’s disclosure of a gay or lesbian identity is understood as a traumatic occurrence for parents; the books describe the child’s outing in a negative light. Contrary to popular belief, Wisniewski, Robinson and Deluty (2010) discovered that, according to the evolutionary parental gender hypothesis, when distress and coercion are observed in response to a child’s homosexuality, it is expressed more frequently and more intensely by mothers as compared to fathers. Padilla, Crisp and Rew (2010) reported that not only were mothers more coercive, but positive reactions from the mother were more important to youth than receiving support from a LGBT support group.

The results found from previous research are relevant to my research project in a multitude of ways. Many studies have previously discovered that parents tend to react negatively to the news of homosexual offspring. Since this trend of initial parental reactions has already been proven, the future interviews I plan to conduct may show similar parental reactions. I can expect that most respondents experienced initial negativity.

**Religious Conflict**

Same-sex oriented individuals sometimes find themselves at odds with their religious beliefs Maccio (2010). Many religions, especially conservative ones, denounce homosexuality as a sin and sanction heterosexuality, which leaves homosexual followers struggling to reconcile their sexuality with their faith in God Maccio (2010). After Cindy came out to her parents on holiday break, her parents reacted terribly; she was told by her parents that she was at risk of damnation according to their churches teachings LaSala (2000). Her parents, Ruth and Bob, saw Cindy’s lesbianism as proof that she needed to see a psychiatrist to change herself into a heterosexual LaSala (2000). Tillmann (2010) found that although Gordon, a homosexual male
who is in love with and dating his partner Todd, his father would be happy if he were to “find a nice girl” despite Gordon’s explicit homosexuality.

In order to abide with familial wishes of heterosexuality, some faithful followers of the faith would rather attempt to change their sexual orientation in order to retain the religious and social rewards associated with heterosexuality, and others would go through a heterosexual conversion in order to remain a part of the church community Maccio (2010). According to Maccio (2010) sexual reorientation therapy is practiced around the world by professionals and non-professionals alike, in ministries, residential facilities and private practices. Maccio (2010) asserts that SRT is an attempt to change one’s sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. Maccio (2010) found that the likelihood of participating in SRT increased as the level of religious fundamentalism increased, so the more religious one is the more likely one is to consider changing one’s sexual orientation.

Baptist (2008) discovered through the case study of Jack and his family that religious conflict hindered the acceptance of gay individuals. Rebecca, Jack’s sister shared in an interview regarding her brother’s homosexuality, “…it is sinful that you are having sexual interest and sexual practices with someone of the same gender…God looks wrongly upon that. I just feel that it is wrong….I wouldn’t say that I’ve changed my ideals towards the Catholic Church, but mostly I don’t know” Baptist (2008). Baptist (2008) notes that besides the family seeking acceptance in the community, home, school and work, acceptance from religious institutions was also sought. Baptist (2008) acknowledged how the family’s search for an accepting church community made them question their religious beliefs with the Roman Catholic Church, the family’s home church that they had previously belonged to as parishioners.

Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) acknowledge the existence of a tumultuous
relationship between homosexuality and religious institutions in America; throughout their research, they found that the accepting and accommodating advice books go to great lengths to offer parents tools for reconciling religion and their child’s sexual identity. Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) discovered that the advice books demonstrate that resolving potential religious conflict can be accomplished by accepting that children are part of a new, “gay friendly” church, changing denominations to accommodate homosexuals, or by reinterpreting Biblical passages. Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) found that when parents reinterpreted the teachings of the bible, it helps parents normalize gay and lesbian children; the books also suggests ways in which their children can be both religious and gay or lesbian. Although accepting and accommodating books attempt to accept gay children, the disapproving advice books emphasize religion as a pathway for making gays and lesbians “normal” heterosexual individuals (Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer 2010). Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) discovered that the authors affiliated with religious conversion organizations suggest entrusting one’s child to God, and praying as means to normalize gay identity and as a way to alleviate worry that was produced upon the knowledge of a child’s gay identity.

From previous research regarding homosexuality and religious conflict, I expect to uncover in future interviews similar feelings of judgment, non-acceptance of homosexual lifestyle, and conflict of religious beliefs with sexual orientation in the lives of gay believers. I may now expect to find that some of the respondents I plan to interview will discuss feelings of neglect from religious settings. This research also reveals how cultural aspects of society, such as religion, adapt their ways to conform to modern society. It may show the progress some religious institutions are making to accept the formerly unaccepted people into churches.
Importance of Familial Acceptance

It is extremely important for gay members of a family to feel included in family life. Those who are not accepted by family members because they are gay often feel ostracized and excluded. According to Padilla, Crisp and Rew (2010) they discovered that for gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents, parental acceptance of sexual identity is an important aspect of a strong family relationship, and thus, has important ramifications for their healthy development.

According to Baptist (2008) the coming out of lesbian women affected their relationships with families and friends in terms of changes in communication, relationship structure, and beliefs. Baptist (2008) revealed quantitative and qualitative changes in his family; the quantitative change was noted by the increase in Jack’s family from the four-member given family to the six-member chosen family; the qualitative change increased personal bonding in the family, and Jack’s family became more of a communicative unit. Yet Baptist (2008) asserts that there was initial strain in family relationships before the family completely bonded as one; the family’s bonding was a result of their sharing and conversing about their “coming out” struggle. Baptist (2008) discovered that after sharing one’s sexual identity, relationships with family members ebbed and flowed between closeness and distancing. Jack found that conversations with family members helped him to feel accepted (Baptist 2008).

Tillmann (2010) notes how Gordan’s father, Tex, is unwilling to accept his son as gay; according to Tex, “There are no gay people in my family at all…I don’t know Gordon’s whole story, but I’m not happy about it. I’ll be honest with you. He would have a lot to offer a woman. Look, I like Todd, but both he and Gordon seem like guys who shouldn’t be gay. Gordon’s not feminine; I don’t think Todd is either. But that’s my perception of what a gay person is.”

According to the case study by Tillmann (2010), Gordon’s mother, Marilyn, feels similarly in
some respects: “I feel badly about his struggle. In our family, we don’t really discuss this. I wouldn’t have a problem telling people, but Tex does so I don’t say anything…but look, all is accepted…we have a problem with the relationship, but that’s the way it is…you don’t want your children to be homosexual. You’d prefer them to get married, to live normal lives.”

According to Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes and Boehmer (2012) found that approximately two-thirds of gays, lesbians and bisexuals reported receiving adequate social and emotional support from the parent they first disclosed their sexual orientation. Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes and Boehmer (2012) found that gay and bisexual males with unsupportive parents were significantly more likely to report binge drinking; lesbians and bisexual women with unsupportive parents were more likely to report lifetime drug use. Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes and Boehmer (2012) conclude that coming out may be associated with better health for lesbian and bisexual women, and parents that react non-supportively may contribute to children’s increased odds of depression and hazardous substance use. Padilla, Crisp and Rew (2010) found that for sexual minority youths, parental support is a critical aspect in their ability to develop a strong relationship with parents, which in turn helps youth develop healthily.

Previous research has indicated that familial acceptance is vital for a one’s wellbeing and promotes a healthy lifestyle. It is important for homosexual youth to feel supported by their families, especially when society can be cruel and unforgiving. These previous findings will be applied to the research through noting how families influence the wellbeing of gay youth.

The key theoretical points learned from the literature review include the importance of familial support, and how the lack of support from family members may lead to drug usage or abuse. Various accounts have reported religious conflict with regards to sexuality and religious beliefs, and it is true that most parents initially react negatively to the news of gay offspring.
These topics have helped to refine the research, because now the main worries and concerns of homosexual life and livelihood are understood. The methodological review has helped to determine that in-depth interviews will be used for this project. The target population specific to my study are gay men and women. They were selected to participate in the study through the use of flyers and snowball sampling. Respondents were given in-depth interviews regarding their sexual orientation.

**Research Methods**

The study is concerned with the coming out moments of gay men and women, and how one’s sexuality has affected familial and societal life. The respondents were informed about the sociological study for a senior capstone project through the use of flyers distributed various places around U.N.T. Respondents either contacted the number on the flyer directly, or were asked personally if they would participate in the study. The rights of human subjects were respected during the interviews, and the IRB application was completed prior to conducting interviews. Before the interviews begun, respondents were notified about the interview procedure, that one may share as little or as much as one desired, and that if one felt uncomfortable at any time during the interview, the interview may stop and won’t be used for anything pertaining to the project. Each interview was recorded using a personal, password protected Samsung tablet. The interviews were saved on the device, and later transcribed from the audio into documents. The results were gathered by video-recording the voice of respondents with the tablet during the interview, and later transcribing the information into text. It took approximately two weeks to completely transcribe all of the interviews. Each interview ranged in length—the longest being an hour and the shortest only seven minutes. The same seven questions were asked to the respondents, and additional probe questions were also used when
appropriate. After conducting the interviews, the patterns in the data were coded into three dominant themes which appeared throughout most interviews. Every theme was color-coded so that patterns between interviews were easy to identify and compare with one another. The results for the study arose out of the patterns which emerged through the five in-depth interviews. The following themes that arose from the interviews are: hetero-normative values, religious conflict, and negative gay stereotype. These main themes appeared over and over in the majority of interviews. Since ground theory was utilized in the interviewing process, no specific codes were expected to appear.

Throughout the interviews, the selected respondents spoke freely about personal life stories and experiences, and discussed how their sexual identity has impacted their lives in positive and negative ways. There were two main requirements that respondents were required to meet to participate in the study: 1) one must identify solely as gay or lesbian and 2) one must have already come out to family members. For the sake of this research project, bisexuals, transsexuals and other sexualities were excluded from the study in order to specifically focus on the coming out experiences of gay men and women. Since twenty in-depth interviews cannot represent the entire population of America, the results from this study cannot be generalized to understand any group besides the gay men and women. The results from this study will only apply to gay men and women who have come out to their parents.

One of the main purposes of the project was to specifically focus the issues gay men and women face in daily life. The original goal for the project was to interview an equal amount of gay men and women, yet unfortunately too few lesbians participated in the study. This was an unseen obstacle that was encountered while recruiting respondents. In the future, more time will be allowed to gather the appropriate proportion of respondents.
Results

The interviews were the only source of data collection for the research project. The key results are represented as three distinct themes that emerged from the interviews. The following themes are hetero-normative values, religious conflict and negative gay stereotype. These dominant themes arose in almost every interview; many of these themes support previous research findings.

**Hetero-normative Values**

The practices of hetero-normative values are expressed as dominant views held by the hegemonic culture, which encourages its people to conform to traditional gender roles and practices. Gay men and women have been largely discriminated against because their sexuality does not conform to standards of what is considered “right” or “normal” by societal standards. Many gay men and women feel forced to conform to traditional gender roles of how men and women are encouraged to behave. Because gay relationships do not conform to these set ideals of what society deems acceptable, they are often confronted with objections about their lifestyle, actions and overall place in society. This underlying theme was present throughout all twenty interviews and the ideas of what is expected of men and women were made clear:

“…I always say that, from a feminist standpoint, it’s almost the same as how a woman is taught to be pretty at all times, and you have to be the cook, the maid, and basically…the slave of the household. On the opposite end, it’s just the same for males, like you need to be dominant; you’re being forced to look a certain way…trying to feel confident and to feel more like the alpha male. Every man is trying to get to that point.”
The need to conform to the hegemonic culture is a struggle many gay people face. In order to blend in with society, some individuals have gone to the lengths of dating the opposite sex in order to conform to such limiting social customs, “…I didn’t go through that whole “I’m bisexual” phase because I never had an attraction to women…if I ever had a girlfriend or if I ever kissed a girl it was more society demanded it, you know, why don’t you have a girlfriend? Are you gay? Are you a faggot?” In American society, men and women are expected to become heterosexual, because heterosexuality is considered the norm; any sexuality which strays from the path of heterosexuality is often regarded as deviant, or “wrong”. “…people don’t automatically assume I’m gay, they assume I’m straight…and me trying to be the people pleaser makes me want to keep that up, but it’s just easier to play into what they assume.” Many gay men and women not only desire to be accepted by society, but also from family members and peers. “I get paranoid about whether [my parents] are secretly disapproving of the ways I’m presenting myself, and the fact that I’m not seeking out relationships with women or conforming to typical male gender roles and stereotypes”.

LaSala’s assertion was proved correct in the research; LaSala (2000) stated that most mothers and fathers have hopes of their children leading heterosexual lives and conforming to social principles:

“My mom told me once, I wasn’t sad when I found out you were gay, I was sad at the idea of my hopes and dreams for who I wanted you to be died…since I was a little boy she dreamed of me getting married, and all of those things that your parents project on you, you know, the idea of meeting a wife, and me having grandchildren…you know, she said that she had to let all of those dreams of hers die for me.”
Many gay men and women become conflicted when confronted with issues of the individual vs. society; many gay men and women would like to live peacefully being oneself without fears of discrimination or unequal treatment, yet the hetero-normative culture demands that one conforms to these rigid standards of how one should present oneself in public settings. “When you see me you don’t see…a lesbian. I don’t have a lesbian sticker or anything, but if I was to dress differently, or look less normal, uh, I think I would definitely be treated differently”. Many gay individuals have sacrificed their personal beliefs and feelings about their sexuality in order to fit the status quo, yet the consequences of such actions may prove to be unhealthy and damaging to one’s psyche:

“The consciousness of a closeted gay person is very chaotic, it’s not stable… with the LGBT community it’s a conscious thing when you’re in the closet…like, should I continue lying to myself, or face that my family may not accept me, my friends may not accept me, society as a whole generally doesn’t accept me, so therefore what do I do? Am I happy lying to everybody, lying to myself, or will I be more happy being honest while still having a gun in my face?”

Throughout the lives of gay men and women, there appears to be a constant struggle between self-identity and the pressure to abide by social norms. One must either consciously repress oneself to join the crowd, or suffer the consequences of being gay in society. Many gay men and women do feel conflicted when faced with this issue, but often find solace through personal acceptance of the self, even if others aren’t supportive to begin with, “I realized that I had to be true to myself, even if it means I am going to be called out or ostracized… where I come from, people make fun of gay people, and it’s not something that you want to be…” The process of accepting oneself is a road filled with highs and lows; realistically, it may take time for one to
completely accept oneself, in addition to gaining acceptance and support from family members and peers:

“I felt really bad at first for letting people down, but after I became used to it I realized that they were disappointed and I didn’t die, and it was okay. And I felt free to be myself, and that they may not like all of the choices that I make, they may not like the direction my life is taking, they may not like all pieces of me, but that’s okay. So I felt freer to be myself.”

After coming to terms with strict societal expectations, gay men and women reveal how relieving it can be to live proudly and openly out of the closet. Many discovered that it is detrimental to conform to a hetero-normative culture, and sometimes it is better to fight for one’s rightful place in society, and challenge established beliefs of what is considered to be right or wrong:

“I wish it was normal…I mean, think about it in reverse…it straight people weren’t allowed to be straight, and gay people were the ones who were normal, I mean they would hate it. They would want the equality. I just don’t understand how people are so mean about it…we don’t stop straight people from doing what they do. We don’t say you can’t get married because you’re dating someone of the opposite sex…”

Religious Conflict

Throughout the research, religious conflict presented itself as a consistent issue which either conflicts with teachings in the bible, or interferes with personal morals shared by family members on the stance of homosexuality. According to Maccio (2010), many conservative religions condemn homosexuality as a sin; this is a huge conflict in the lives of gay men and
women who are also followers in faith. The research conducted for this study supports Maccio’s assertions; many gay men and women who are followers in faith would like to be accepted for who they are, yet find themselves in conflict with traditional teachings of what the Bible, and other religious texts, says about homosexuality; the following quote demonstrates the conflict felt by many gay men and women:

“I love god, and I want to be a good Christian, I want to be a good catholic, and being gay isn’t that…I can’t be a good catholic and still be gay at the same time, because the Catholic Church doesn’t believe in same sex relationships. So I told myself that I would get married to a woman, and I would let her know that I was attracted to guys, I would also tell her that, you know, because I loved her, and because she was my wife I would be faithful to her.”

Some gay men and women are willing to change, or at least conceal one’s identity, in order to be in line with the practices of religious organizations who speak out against homosexuality. Internal and external components of religious conflict make life difficult for gay men and women to accept themselves. One is inflicted internally by experiencing feelings of shame associated with being gay, the need to conceal one’s true identity from others, and an ongoing struggle between following the will of God, and accepting oneself for being gay. “I remember, being raised in a Christian household and everything, feeling like it wasn’t normal…like I was strange…specifically after I didn’t come out to my friends, because the church told me I was wrong, and I remember feeling weird about it”.

These feelings of associated shame are prevalent among believers in the gay community; supported by the research of Baptist (2008), one is also inflicted externally by confronting negative messages about the gay lifestyle, “…There was a lot of shame associated with being
gay, and it’s oh, this is taboo, this is something I’m not allowed to be, so let’s pray about it, let’s try to force it out, or ignore it.” These messages of inadequacy are often produced by countless conservative religious and political groups which speak out against gay rights, practices and behaviors, “[my sister] preceded to lecture me for hours on end about how I was wrong and how I was going to hell, and how if I would just change my ways I could share in the kingdom of heaven…if I could just not be who I was, because who I am is sick and filthy and wrong.”

Conflicts within religious beliefs present challenges not only in the church, but in familial life as well. Some religious families make their stance on homosexuality very clear, and these ideas are often influenced by religion or other outside influences, “My parents were just bashing it all the time, all the time, for years and years and years. Every single Sunday and Wednesday. On the car ride home, during dinner and breakfast…all the time”. Previous findings by Baptist (2008) assert that gay men and women who come from highly religious backgrounds are often times not accepted by family members, and sometimes are sometimes encouraged to change one’s sexual identity. Baptist’s claim was supported in the research:

“the first person I ever came out to was this girl, we were good friends and it was actually at church of all places…I ended up telling her, and the first thing she told me to do was, you have to go talk to our youth minister…at the time I was coming from the perspective of like, I have an issue, I have to get it fixed… I remember they talked about it in church and how homosexuality is against the bible, and so I kind of was coming at it with that whole attitude. And so I went that night to talk to our youth minister about it…I never felt like I was being looked down on as a person necessarily, but…it was focused on “fixing it”
Religious conflict is a serious issue in the lives of gay men and women who desire to be accepted by family members. Homosexuality conflicts with many ingrained beliefs in religion that are non-dismissable to many individuals of faith:

“I thought up to two years ago that I thought [my mom] was okay with it…but I come to find out that she’s accepted it, but she’s never going to be okay with it. She still believes to this day that I’m going to hell…and that she knows that she can’t change me, but she still does believe that it’s a sin.”

According to the research, the most common reaction among religious families was to eventually accept one’s son or daughter for being gay while simultaneously not agreeing with the lifestyle in itself. Many parents also affirmed that homosexuality is not an appropriate way to live life because it is considered to be a sin.

Inaccurate Gay Stereotypes

One of the main functions of mass media is to educate people in society. Various media platforms such as television or the internet help spread information about current events, inform society about the world at large, or to simply keep us entertained. More often than not, gay men and women are portrayed inaccurately in the media, and sometimes even in a negative light:

“a lot of people get shocked because they don’t see me as a flaming queen which is a slang term for like, the over intense effeminate gay male which isn’t negative, but it’s like, people see that a lot so they figure that’s what gay looks like. And that’s just not true. There are gay football players like Michal Sam, there are gay actors, there’s lots of men that are gay but media has put gay to represent anything out of that box”.
There are certain consistent images used in media to represent what it means to be gay, such as the gay, highly effeminate male figure that has an intense interest in traditionally female occupations, such as a hairdresser or makeup artist. These inaccurate generalizations are taken as the whole truth, and are typically believed without thinking twice. Belief and adherence to stereotypes of how gay men and women are expected to act produce issues in how parents or family members understand gay men and women for who they really are. According to the research, most respondents encountered some level of misunderstanding from family members concerning what it means to be gay due to these stereotypes:

“…We’re not the great gay evil that everybody thinks that we are. I mean, I’m a normal person. I get up in the morning, I put my pants on one leg at a time, I try to get through my day, try not to do drugs, try to make something of myself and survive, just like everybody else. And my life is not all like body glitter and parties till 4 O’clock in the morning…I’m just a 30 year old man trying to find a career in this world”.

It is incorrect to assume that every gay man and woman shares the same interests in life, career objectives and overall behavior. Gay men and women share similar values and interests with heterosexuals, and are not vastly different from the rest of the population as the media makes it seem. “You know, because gay or straight, when you’re a teenager I mean, it’s all the same. We all have the same emotional problems. We’re all trying to figure out where we fit in the world”.

Everyone on this planet shares some basic issues that we as humans deal with in life, such as experiencing puberty, losing a loved one, or encountering triumphs and tribulations in life. There exists a common ground between all classes, races, ethnicities, creeds and sexualities. We all experience life as human beings who should work together to discover similarities rather than point out the differences that draw us apart.
The biggest issue with inaccurate gay stereotypes in the media is that these stereotypes tend to draw lines in the sand instead of uniting people as a whole, especially when certain stereotypes are negative or detrimental in nature:

“…with any minority, I feel like society has structured specific obstacles for minority groups to challenge them unjustifiably. You get all these stigmas, like gay men, they just want to have sex with everybody, they’re overly flamboyant yet they can be this weird sexual predator…the image you get is this weird fairy with like a tutu, and really ugly and gross, and kind of just prying on little boys, or somebody else’s’ ass, and you get all these nasty stereotypes…I’ve rarely met anybody who actually abides by that stereotype of a gay man.”

Images such as these do nothing positive for all the decent gay men and women in the world. Since these ideas are heavily influenced by the media, it is hard to dissuade those who sternly believe in these ideas because the only understanding of gay an individual possesses is what has been represented on television, “My mother is in chronic fear that I’m going to contract HIV…even though she’s worked in the medical profession…and I guess the images of gay in the media, to her, it’s always the…big flaming queen that you see on reality shows…like Will and Grace.” Family members come to understand what gay means by what they’ve learned in the past to be true, yet these stereotypes tend to do more harm than good, “My mother thought that I was trans, so when I finally did come out in my early twenties, she thought that meant that I wanted to have sexual reassignment surgery because that’s the version of gay she knew”.

These inaccurate stereotypes often cause confusion and misunderstanding about what it means to be a gay man or woman in society. The more one associates with gay individuals, the more likely one may begin to see homosexuality in a different light, or accept an accurate
version of what being gay actually means. “…we’re in a very transitory state right now…like when you thought of gay people you thought of AIDS and promiscuity, you thought of bad things…pedophiles, as to where now it’s like, these are normal people. Gay people are normal people.”

**Conclusion**

An understanding of gay issues and challenges deserve to be acknowledged in the media because, like many other minority groups, gays are discriminated against on the basis of their sexual identity. By interviewing gay men and women, the research shows the difficulties gay men and women have faced after coming out. One becomes educated about the negative social consequences gay men and women are faced with when one adheres to a non-hegemonic sexual identity. Many gay men and women face difficulties in religion, institutions, home life, social groups and various facets of society. It is hoped that as one is educated and exposed to issues pertaining to a friend or family members’ identity that one will eventually come to accept gay men and women human beings who only differ in sexual preference.

The most important findings were three key themes that arose consistently out of the twenty interviews. The themes include hetero-normative values, religious conflict and gay stereotypes. These themes were present in almost every interview, and all findings from this research were supported from evidence previously mentioned in the literature review.

During the research project, many unexpected issues came up that slightly shifted the focus of the research project. The original research plan for the project was to interview an equal number of gay men and women in order to receive a more representative sample. Unfortunately for this project, only five women were interviewed for the project; it was an original goal to somehow compare experiences between men and women, but this goal wasn’t met due to the
lack of women who were interviewed. Potential improvements for future studies include recruiting respondents earlier in the semester so that the required amount of respondents for the study may be located in time. Other improvements include distributing more flyers around campus, and preparing for an alternate research plan in case unforeseen issues arise during research collection.

The original contribution this research offers is an in-depth analysis at how heteronormative ideals influence our lives from the time we are born until we die. Heteronormativity encourages men and women in society to conform to gender roles and appropriate gender-oriented behaviors. When a gay man or woman goes against what is considered to be “normal”, one is faced with backlash and instead of being accepted for oneself, is forced to conform. Many gay men and women are largely discriminated against in religious life, finding it difficult to celebrate one’s faith or be accepted for who one is. There are ingrained beliefs in some religions which view homosexuality as a sin, and many followers of faith accept this to be true and live according to the rules to abide by one’s faith. This is comes as a challenge as one struggles with who they are versus how they are told to behave, according to traditional practices in religion. Inaccurate gay stereotypes perceive gay men and women incorrectly, and cause others to believe in silly exaggerations of the gay character. It is unfair to assume that every gay man or woman is the same. Stereotypes spread misinformation about how certain groups of individuals are perceived, and they are unfortunately accepted as the truth without question. It is important to vanquish these discriminating ideals, practices and views that lead to the unacceptance of gay men and women. As society becomes more aware of the struggles faced by gay men and women, it is hoped that Americans will learn to understand and sympathize with these issues, and allow
gay men and women to become fully integrated into society despite their non-adherence to the hegemonic culture.
References


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