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They Define You Still

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External Influences on the Identity of the Gay Male
Inclusion Statement

The following essay examines the analysis of gay male identity, a recent area of study in the past half century. It acknowledges the humanity of this group, a group that has been historically demonized as well as marginalized. By assigning gay men labels, stereotypes, and negative qualities, external forces have been able to strip them of their humanity. They even believe the demonization that they are given and it impacts who they are as not their true selves. While the essay individualizes specific experiences, the same overarching theme of humanity in terms of group definition steers the concept behind it.

Where does a sense of self come from? For human beings, it is possible for one to partly establish who or what one is as an individual. But outside of the individual realm there is a cavalcade of forces that contribute to the shaping of one’s identity. Identity, among other things, is the distinguishing character or personality of an individual (Webster 2012). Simply existing in society allows individuals to be exposed to reflections of themselves that serve as a basis of perceived selfhood. Though we may not realize it the concept of reflexivity is found in routine aspects of everyday life, whether it be conversation, what is said in the public domain, interactions with mass media, or the words that we simply use to define other people. Thanks to language and communication, reflexivity is universal. Let us consider, for example, the Native American. Classified for centuries by others as the “noble savage”, this continues to be a stigmatizing label that the group as a whole and the individuals within it struggle to shake. Or perhaps the Muslim Middle-Eastern, who was talked about as a terrorist and traitor by ignorant others in the months and even years after September 11th, 2001. Human beings of all classes, colors, creeds, and persuasions are vulnerable to outside forces influencing a sense of self, but for the sake of specific evidence the case of the homosexual male will be examined in the following essay.

By analyzing media messages, labeling, and hate speech as facets of outside influence, it will be made clear how these external forces play a large role in the way gay men construct their identities. To complement my research I will draw examples from my own experience as a gay male with gay counterparts to illustrate my relevant personal connection to the topic. But this is not just a gay rights issue. It’s an aspect of human communication. And like the human race itself, results of externally influenced selfhood will always vary.
Taught to us from the moment at which we can recognize speech and use it ourselves, labels are an elementary component of publishing identity. By assigning a label to one’s self, a person adopts a name that dictates the personal qualities by which they wish to be known. And when a person is labeled by somebody else, it can be assumed that the label they receive is a result of who the extra party believes or expects them to be. This type of labeling is referred to by communication experts as “altercasting”. Marwell and Schmitt (1967) have found that through altercasting, “language can force people into a certain identity and then burden them with the duty to live up to the description, which can be positive or negative.” When we receive labels from outside sources, views of ourselves can be forced upon us whether we like it or not. Presently and historically, society is host to a cavalcade of labels for homosexual males. Unfortunately the majority of these labels are pejorative, due to an antigay rhetoric that has dominated public commentary for centuries. Examples of this less-than-flattering terminology are the epithets fairy, butt pirate, fruitcake, pansy, cocksucker and fudge packer. Even though some of these terms have been adopted as ironic and humorous tags in the gay community, much like the ‘N’ word in the black community, words used to describe gays with negative affiliations are proven to have a devastating effect on how gay men establish who they are in relation to the rest of the world.

Without question, the most popular moniker used to describe and subjugate the homosexual male is the ‘F’ word…and I’m not talking about “fairy”. Five-hundred years ago, “faggot” was a term used to designate a bundle of sticks or twigs that can be used as firewood, but it has since evolved to encompass contempt for people deemed useless in society and is therefore used as a disparaging synonym for male homosexual (Webster 2012). Officially deemed hate speech by the American Civil Liberties Union, “faggot” is a typically homophobic marking that can be found in several outlets of interpersonal communication between gay males and extrinsic influences. By and large, school settings are sadly a safe-haven for the ‘F’ word and those who use it, instilling fear in many of the students it is used to define. Approximately ninety-two percent of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) students report hearing homophobic remarks such as “faggot”, “dyke”, or “that’s so gay” frequently or often (GLSEN 2003), a testament to the vast exposure of homosexuals to adverse altercasting. In a smaller yet still concerning statistic, about eighty-four percent of LGBT students report being victim of verbal harassment from their peers, presumably involving the word “faggot” at one point or another. During the early developmental years, the reception of labels designated as insults can have a harmful impact on the homosexual male’s self-image. Adolescents who are harassed with antigay sentiments such as “faggot” experience lowered self-esteem, self-invoked isolation, and depression regarding their same-sex oriented status (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon 2007). In addition, multiple studies in the United States and abroad conclude that the suicide attempt rate of LBGT adolescents is three to six times that of their heterosexual peers (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention 2012).
In other words, gay labels from outside sources can ultimately lead impressionable and
strong-minded gay males alike to distinguish themselves as outcasts, unworthy, or
undeserving of life. In my own experience I can remember being called “faggot” as early as
sixth grade. The name-calling occasionally occurred in school but was more frequent in
parks or other public areas. A specific incident in which I heard “Harrison’s a faggot”
screamed from a boy on top of the monkey bars of Moxley Playground, caused the seventh-
grade me to alter my walking-home route and wish myself to be forever hidden. Hearing gay
slurs inserted embarrassment into my identity, a feeling I sometimes still struggle to
overcome even after becoming “comfortable” with my sexual orientation.

The fear of publicly being one’s natural self can also be caused by ‘F’-bombing, as
manifested in the act of “staying in the closet”. In “He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a
Sissy”, queer activist Tommi Avicolli goes into painful detail about encounters with the word
“faggot” during his time in the Philadelphia Public School System. In one passage, the
author recalls asking a classmate why he had punctured his arm with a sharpened pencil
point and being met with “Cause I hate faggots” as a response (Avicolli 1983). Citing these
types of interactions as a factor, he goes on to state “Realizing I was gay was not an easy
task.” When coming to terms with cultural definitions of homosexuality and his own sexual
identity, Avicolli recalls “I resisted that label-queer-for the longest time. Even when
everything pointed to it I refused to see it…No gay history was ever taught. No history faces
you this morning. You’re just a faggot. Homosexuals had never contributed to the human
race. God destroyed the queers in Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Not unlike “He Defies You Still”, gay poet and novelist Paul Monette’s Becoming a Man: Half
a Life Story deals with the author’s grade school belief that “gay equals wrong” as a witness
to bullies calling a bookish classmate “homo”. Monette didn’t fully come out of the closet
until his mid-twenties, using humor to distract peers from his sexuality and maintaining a
split public/private persona in the meantime (Monette 1995). Along with facts and figures,
stories similar to Avicolli’s and Monette’s can be found in a plethora of other publications by
gay authors from different time periods, demonstrating the ongoing legitimacy of labels
from external influences playing a role in shaping gay identity.

Though tags with negative denotations are a bold example of altercasting, words that can
appear to be more neutral are also capable of hanging over establishment of selfhood. The
word “gay” is simply defined by Webster as “homosexual”, but alongside “same-sex” it has
also been proven to carry connotations that reflect cultural stigma, bias, or prejudice. This
notion is solidified by communication philosopher Kenneth Burke’s (1966) theory of God
terms and Devil terms. Whereas God terms are evocative of what society views as positive
(liberty, freedom), Devil terms dictate what is viewed as negative (communism, torture). In
the spoken and written discourse of the American moral majority and religious right, “gay”
is commonly maneuvered as a Devil term. Last year, “America’s oldest Catholic newspaper”
The Pilot published a column titled “Some Fundamental Questions on Same-Sex Attraction”
in which reporter Daniel Avila attributed same-sex attraction to “a spiritual explanation that
indicts the devil” (USA Today 2011). “Gay” or “same-sex” marriage flip flops between fundamentally right and morally wrong throughout different political bodies of the United States and is often used as a scare tactic to gain conservative votes during elections (Hunt 2011). Beyond ideas of right and wrong, stereotypes also have a way of attaching themselves to “neutral” homosexual labels. Despite the fact that “America’s openly gay minority [is becoming] more visibly interwoven into society” (Quenqua 2009), misguided beliefs about who they are and what they do still persist in the mainstream. According to several academic studies of heterosexual citizens and a slew of media depictions (Will & Grace, Glee, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, etc.), the word “gay” is typically laced with stereotypes of fashionability, femininity, promiscuity, drug abuse, and godlessness. Regardless of whether or not these assumed qualities are to be viewed as good or bad, gay men often feel misunderstood or misrepresented because of them.

The interjection of stereotypes from external parties into distinguishing identity as a gay male “is part of an ongoing social dialectic through which one’s sense of self develops while it also defines interpersonal relationships” (Herek 1984). In some cases, young homosexual males choose to reject the label of “gay” altogether to avoid being categorized by the hetero-normative majority. They feel that “gay” is a word coined by heterosexuals to indicate abnormality and lack of acceptance, not to mention one that carries undesirable “political baggage” (Spillane 2005). Granted, not all gay men that are stereotyped by the terminology of an outside force experience an identity struggle as a result. Like any other set of stereotypes assigned to any other minority group, the set assigned to gay men has its roots in truth. Gay men are even known to vocally stigmatize each other in casual conversations. When catching up with Sam, an older man I stood up for a date in March, I informed him about my new job as a gas station cashier. His reply was “That’s not very gay of you”, implying that because of my sexuality I’m too feminine or trendy to be working in such a macho environment, even though I don’t even touch the gas pumps. As a basic element of social categorization, stereotypes contained within the terminology of one’s culture are a reality for the groups that differ from others in visibility, lifestyle, or hierarchal status. All humans are subject to being stereotyped as individuals or members of a particular group, consequently pushing them to view themselves “in terms of group characteristics” (McCrae, Wieber, & Myers 2012).

Another outside force that can influence the identity of the gay male, or anybody for that matter, is discourse. As social psychologist Michel Foucault defines it, discourse pertains to formalized beliefs that are clued into the language about a specific topic. It can affect the way people view things, how they perceive reality, and what roles they assign to other individuals or groups. A discourse can be formulated through a conversation between two people, a group discussion, and even through mass media. Foucault (1972) found that “Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication. Those who are in control decide who we are by deciding what we discuss.” Stemming from the notion of discourse, Meyerhoff (1996) reasoned that “Social identity theory treats an individual’s various group identifications as central to a development of
self and the basis for many kinds of behaviour, not the least of which is linguistic behaviour.” In short, discourse is a narrative that goes beyond single terms and encompasses the way society talks about and frames what is believed to be true.

Until 1973, the American Psychiatric Association perpetuated a discourse that to be gay was to be mentally ill. With the advent of AIDS in the 1980s major news outlets used hysteria to create a national discourse that being gay meant having the disease. In turn, homosexual men were largely demonized by mass media and citizens who construed its messages as scientific fact, labeling AIDS as “the gay cancer”. Due to enlightenment and progressive understanding, these two discourses have essentially dissolved from the public domain in the past several decades. However, ideas about gay men are still constructed by the language of our culture today, having a profound impact on the way they shape their identities.

One discourse that is created by media and citizens alike in the present day is the idea that gay equals victim. Stories and reports of gay-bashing, assault based on sexual orientation, and even hate crimes resulting in murder can be heavily circulated in a variety of mediums. Though there is a component of truth to the idea that identifying or simply being homosexual is unsafe (as drawn from my earlier analysis of hate speech), not every gay male is subject to the types of attacks that are highlighted by the language of the mainstream. In 1998, the murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming spawned a national outcry from news outlets such as ABC and CNN, giving a face and definition to the term “antigay hate crime”. While extensive media coverage was effective in shining light on a pressing issue that had essentially never been touched before, it also led many young homosexual men to believe that they could be next. Minority men and women studied in response to reports of Shepard’s death expressed traumatization, demonstrating that the event “challenged participant fundamental assumptions of benevolence and meaningfulness of the world and worthiness of self” (Noelle 2002). Thirteen years after the tragedy in Laramie, gay rights activist Waymon Hudson contended, “On a personal note, the murder of Matthew Shepard was a defining moment for many LGBT people of my generation. As a young gay man, I looked at the pictures of his face and could see my own” (Huffington Post 2011). Reactions like these are undoubtedly shaped by the event itself, but without public discourse and external commentary the event would have most likely failed to register with homosexuals and heterosexuals alike.

A more recent example of media discourse influencing gay sense of self comes from 2010, a landmark year for publicized antigay assault. The same year that the “Latin Goonies” gang brutally beat three gay men in The Bronx (CBS New York 2010) and 13-year old Texan Asher Brown shot himself because of “relentless” homophobic bullying at school (Melloy 2010), Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi jumped off the George Washington bridge after his roommate harassed him by taping his sexual encounters with other men and showing them to friends at a viewing party of sorts (The New York Times 2012). Clementi’s story was heavily circulated in the national news media and quickly went viral thanks to online
journals, blogs, and a slew of other websites that chose to weigh in on the eighteen year old’s suicide. During this public outcry in Fall 2010, my good friend Andy Garcia had recently landed in Boston from the suburbs of Connecticut to attend college. When homosexual Andy first received the news of Clementi’s death in a classroom at school, he can recall feeling “uncomfortable”, going on to say “It could have been me. At that time I wouldn’t talk about being gay in front of strangers...I just didn’t want it to lead to me getting hurt.” His revelation complies with Ambady, Hallahan, and Connor’s (1999) findings that gay men and lesbians will often manipulate their behavior and mannerisms to avoid being easily identified and therefore put at risk for prejudice, violence, and hate crimes. Andy has since grown more comfortable with his sexuality, but his former fear of being gay in public and being attacked on the basis of identity demonstrates how powerful hate crime stories are in creating a discourse that influences sense of self.

My own experience with the “gay equals victim” narrative can be summarized in an encounter with my mother six years ago. When I first disclosed my homosexuality to her at the tender age thirteen, she told me to avoid telling anybody else or acting upon homosexual instincts at all cost so that I wouldn’t endure beatings from my peers and my younger brother wouldn’t either. Though gay bashing could have been a reality for me as a gay male in the public school system, I never endured physical violence as a result of my sexuality in middle school or high school. My mother’s bold belief was obtained by a discourse pertaining to antigay crimes and her own fear of what could actually happen to me, in turn having an effect on the way I viewed my safety and identity in my early years as an out gay male. The possibility of being attacked for being gay is not a lie fed to the gay community by outsiders, nor is it a myth constructed by the community to emphasize inequality, but the way it is delivered to and received by impressionable gay men can ultimate give them a perception of themselves that does not come from within. Whether or not it resonates is entirely up to the individual, although it is inarguably a talked about fact of life that the gay male must learn to overcome in order to achieve acceptance of his own identity, comfortability in his own skin, and a view of his own experience that isn’t dominated by revulsion.

Going beyond the case of the homosexual male, identity constructed from a collective social context is found in members of various other sexual, racial, and ethnic communities. Reports of the Korean American Press cast members of its own ethnicity as crime victims, problematic laborers, and people who are largely discriminated against, causing these ideological roles to internally resonate in the individuals of the minority (Bai 2010). The communicated notion of disability and the word itself are often constructed to stress inferiority by those who are able-bodied, whether it is intentional or unassuming. As a result, people who have acquired impairments tend to develop a “disabled identity” that stems from “the negative status imposed upon people when they become impaired” (Galvin 2003). Moving away from minorities, gender roles imposed by the language of any given society often force individuals of both sexes to conform to standing on one side of the fence. “Nurse” isn’t an aptly masculine enough title for a male, so we have created the term “male-
“nurse” to satisfy both internal longings for gendered acceptance and external gender expectations. As Germaine Greer (1999) points out in the essay “Masculinity”, “Masculinity is to maleness as femininity is to femaleness. That is to say that maleness is the natural condition, the sex if you like, and masculinity is the cultural construct, the gender.” The “cultural construct” she speaks of is presumably built by members of a given culture to establish an identity for those who are not entirely given the option to establish it themselves. In these and many other trans-demographic instances, sense of self is shown to reflect exterior coercions.

To summarize, there is a multitude of ways in which external forces influence the homosexual male’s internal formation of identity. Through what’s communicated by others, he can receive ideas and beliefs about himself that are not decided individually. Assigned labels dictate what others believe the gay male to be and what he is expected to do, therefore playing a role in defining his reflexive self. These terms can carry stereotypes, negative denotations, and negative connotations, forcing the gay male to use them in evaluating how he is to be viewed in society as well as in his own mindset. In addition to specific words that contribute to shaping their identities, media messages help to create a public discourse about gay men so effectively that it enables them to reflect upon themselves. Given these influences, the homosexual male is left to establish a socially constructed sense of self, using the voices of others as general guidelines. In the scheme of social activism, the effects of outside forces on gay mindsets can be interpreted as a pressing issue, but when considering theories of language and communication it is proven to be universal aspect of human existence. Labels, insults, and discourses are assigned to a variety of groups and individuals for different reasons, allowing no room for one to be more or less susceptible than the rest. They are not entirely definitive, but their internal impact is well documented. On all ends of the social spectrum human beings experience an altered sense of self due to external forces. With the knowledge of this universal truth one may develop a heightened awareness of the language they use, attempt to elevate the discourse, or look the other way entirely. But the fact remains that views of the self are not entirely determined by the self, whether the self in question belongs to a homosexual male or not.

References


