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Gender Roles, Homophobia, and the Closet: Experiences of Queer Women

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at

Eastern Michigan University

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Dedication

This research project is dedicated to all women who believed they needed to fit a social script that doesn't fit who they are on the inside and to those woman who had the courage to break the social rules of what a female is supposed to be. To my partner, thank you for giving me the courage to accept myself and break free of the closet. Without you as an example of pride and confidence in your identity, I wouldn't have developed the positive self-image of myself as a queer woman that I have today.

ABSTRACT

The culture in which a woman is a part of sets expectations based on their gender. This paper explores how the relationship between prescribed gender roles, internalized homophobia, and coming out of the closet are related. A focus group of seven women who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and queer was conducted. The findings suggest that gender roles do limit the way women view themselves, that religion is the largest contributor to internalized homophobia, and that gender expression changes throughout the coming out process as these queer women developed a stronger sense of their identity. Future research should include voices of trans* individuals and women who have been out for more than ten years.

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INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBTQ) women are treated as second class-citizens in the United States of America by denying them basic human rights such as protection against violence and discrimination. According to a report by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs that was released in 2014, lesbians represented 19% of hate violence survivors, and, compared to overall survivors, transgender women were 6 times more likely to experience violence when interacting with police (NCAVP, 2013). When committing violence against themselves, LGBT women were three times more likely to make an attempt at suicide than men (Haas et al., 2011). These alarming rates are an important reason why more research on the experiences of LGBTQ women needs to be conducted. In American society heterosexuality is assumed and gender is viewed dichotomously. For women whose gender identity or sexual orientation deviates from the expected norm, the heteronormative environment of this culture creates a challenging environment to discover one's true self while feeling pressure to fit the dichotomous norms. From the perspective of human communication, a heteronormative culture produces a fundamental system of thought that clearly discriminates against homosexual people (Eguchi, 2006). This study investigates the influence of the messages queer women received about their roles as a female in society and homosexuality as they relate to feelings of homophobia and the act of coming out of the closet for queer women. A focus group was conducted with women of different sexual identities that fell on the spectrum of sexuality to explore their experiences with gender roles, homophobia, and coming out of the closet. I choose to use the term queer women when referring to women who adopt non-normative sexual identities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or women who prefer not to label themselves) in this paper as a term of

inclusion, I will argue that the gender roles expectations for women in American society have an influence on internalized homophobia and the coming out process for queer women.

Literature Review

Gender, Sex, and Everything in Between

The term sex refers to a person's physical body including their chromosomes, genitalia, and reproductive organs. Crooks and Bauer (2011) define sex as "biological femaleness or maleness" (p.112) and categorized sex by genetic sex, which is related to sex chromosomes, and anatomical sex, which is determined by observable physical differences. The term gender can be harder to define and scholars propose different perspectives on how to study this cultural phenomenon. Crooks and Bauer (2011) define gender as " term or concept that encompasses the behaviors, socially constructed roles, and psychological attributes commonly associated with being male or female" (p. 112). Millis (2001) refers to gender as the sociocultural constructed roles, behaviors, and attributes that societies give to men and women. Gender displays are appearances, behaviors, and other indications correlated to a person's particular gender established through culture (Goffman, 1976). Goffman (1976) understands gender displays as the "conventional portrayals" of social factors that are correlated to gender. While physiological characteristics and some behavioral tendencies differentiate males and females, socialization has an impact on the way we relate gender roles by limiting, shaping, and exaggerating those tendencies. Our culture uses sex and gender as a main frame work organizes social relations (Ridgeway, 2009). Ridgeway (2009) states that behaviors are coordinated through these frameworks by correlating membership to a category with stereotypes. Reinforcement of strict gender expectations can

limit a person's potential and harm their sexuality (Crooks & Baur, 2011). For example, a man may resist being nurturing for fear of being labeled feminine, or a woman may resist being assertive for fear of being seen as threatening or masculine. West and Fenstermaker (1995) argue that gender is used as a mechanism to create social inequality in our culture.

The gender roles, or expectations for persons based on their assigned gender, are socially constructed by culture, meaning that they are communicative phenomenon shaped by the messages sent from our peers, family members, and other sources of information such as the media. According to Bem (1993), gender is viewed by society through "lenses of gender" which makes the assumptions that men and women are physically and psychologically different and that men are naturally the dominant sex. These assumptions about gender are perpetuated and normalized by the media, particularly television (Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009). The roles observed by television viewers contain psychological traits and self-concepts, as well as family, political, and occupational roles (Lipman- Bluemen, 1984) that are expected in everyday life.

Social psychologists assert that men are supposed to be viewed as independent, competitive, and aggressive while women are supposed to be seen as dependent, nurturing, and passive (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). Men and women internalize these beliefs that women are meant to be feminine while men are meant to be masculine and try to fit their identities into these dichotomous boxes. When we define gender in dichotomous terms we fail to see the spectrum of gender identities and expressions that exists in society, therefore leaving no room for people who diverge from the expectations that society has deemed for what a woman should look like or act like. Queer women are automatically breaking

society's gender norm by being attracted to other women (who may express themselves on a dynamic range of femininity to masculinity).

This research project explored the relationship between gender expectations felt by queer women and coming out with a non-heterosexual identity. In the results section, I discuss how parental and peer expectations influenced internalized homophobia in the participants. Queer women may choose to stay *in the closet* about their identity for fear of not being accepted by family, friends, and the general society because of gender expectations. In order to understand the metaphor of *the closet*, we must understand what it means to identify as gay or lesbian.

Heterosexism and Homophobia

According to social psychologist Erikson (1963), the most significant developmental task an adolescent experiences is identity formation. For a person who does not identify with the expected sexual preference of heterosexual, an additional task is needed to develop a positive self-identity (Troiden, 1989). This extra step in identity formation is a difficult process because of conflicted feeling of needing to conform to an expected heterosexual identity and an internal need for homoerotic desires. There are unique factors that differentiate queer women's experiences from men that impact their identity formation; these factors include experiences of sexism in women's lives, repression of female sexual desire, impacts of the feminist movement, and gender-roles socialization. (Faderman, 1984; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Roth, 1985; Vargo, 1987).

Although there are new terms emerging that give a more accurate description of the disapproval and discrimination against LGBTQ people in society such as heterosexism,

homonegativity, sexual stigma, and sexual prejudice, homophobia is still used most broadly (Ahman & Bhugra, 2010; Szymanski & Chung, 2002). Psychologist George Weinberg coined the term homophobia and described it as the “irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals” (Weinberg, 1994). Using the term homophobia does not accurately describe the attitudes of our culture because it is not a true phobia; however Weinberg’s definition includes “hatred of homosexuals”, which is more accurate. For these reasons, the term homophobia is used in this paper. Cultural institutions such as the government, media, school systems, and religious institutions reinforce heteronormative discourses, which does not approve of homosexual relationships or desires. The ingraining of negative assumptions and attitudes towards lesbians and queer women is represented by the term “internalized homophobia” (Shidlo, 1994; Sophie, 1987). Although previous studies have looked at internalized homophobia in men (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010; Eguchi, 2006; Morman, Schrod, & Tornes, 2013, Rowen & Macolm, 2002), there is little research that has been done in the area on lesbians or queer women and internalized homophobia (Szymanski & Chung, 2008; Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001). For practical and theoretical purposes, internalized homophobia in lesbians should be examined separately from that of gay men (Szymanski & Chung, 2002).

Internalized homophobia is an important construct to study for several reasons. Shidlo (1994) suggests that as a result of living in a heteronormative and heterosexist society, (1) internalized homophobia is a basic developmental experience for all lesbian and gay people, (2) it is linked to psychological suffering, and (3) in clinical therapy, reducing internalized homophobia is often a main goal for lesbians and gay men. An ongoing intrapersonal communicative conflict can be produced for people attracted to the same sex while trying to

figure out who they are from the cultural institution of heterosexuality: creating internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia is “described as dissatisfaction with being homosexual and as being associated with low self-esteem and self-hatred” (Ross & Simon-Rosser, 1996). Homophobia and internalized homophobia can have psychological consequences such as poor self-image, low self-esteem (Rowen & Malcom, 2002), and loneliness (Szymanski & Chung, 2002). Williams (2002) asserts that “self-injurious behaviors including substance abuse, eating disorder, self-mutilation, and suicidality” are well-known effects of internalized homophobia. Rowen and Malcolm (2002) found that “high levels of internalized homophobia among behaviorally homosexual men are associated with less developed gay identity and higher sex guilt” (p. 77). Homophobia impacts homosexuals’ views of their own identity and forms a communicative barrier from expressing authentically (Eguchi, 2006). This is an area that needs further research in order to better understand the impact that internalized homophobia has on the communicative act of coming out and expressing gender and sexuality.

Homophobia is a practice of patriarchy, which, in some cases, is used to preserve traditional values and social order. For example, gender roles on television and other media that reinforce dominant heterosexist ideologies (Ivory et al., 2009). By enforcing laws that discriminate against non-heterosexual people, such as the federal government not recognizing same-sex marriages or protecting against discrimination, LGBTQ people become second-class citizens in the eyes of the law and, therefore, society. Literature suggests (Eguchi, 2006; Ivory et al., 2009) that homophobic views maintain heterosexuality and the patriarchal system of gender roles.

This investigation explores the pressures that queer women feel to conform to a heterosexist society and the effects of living in a homophobic society may have on how a person communicates their homosexuality. Due to their internalized homophobia, homosexual men struggle to form healthy sexual identities and communicate differently with both homosexual and heterosexual people (Adams, 2010). In fact, homophobia and internalized homophobia can function as a source of conflict in communication activity (Eguchi, 2006). Internalized homophobia is “described as dissatisfaction with being homosexual and as being associated with low self-esteem and self-hatred” (Ross & Simon-Rosser, 1996, p. 15). Having lower levels of self-esteem and a less developed identity form interpersonal boundaries that limit interpersonal communication and create conflict in men (Eguchi, 2006). Eguchi (2006) asserts that gay and bisexual men struggling with internalized homophobia experience stress because they are a part of a minority within the social structure. Although this research can give insight into internalized homophobia, it cannot be generalized to female-identified persons because they are at a double disadvantage by being oppressed as a women and as a gay person. For this reason, more research is needed on queer women and their experiences with homophobia and coming out.

The Closet

The term “coming out of the closet” has been defined as “the process whereby gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals inform others of their sexual identity” (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997, p. 478), or as a “rite of passage” that gay men and lesbian women encounter (Gray, 2001, p. 181). Coming out is a lifelong process (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991) in which an individual does not exclusively come out once and for all. Every time a

person starts a new job, meets a new friend, or has any interpersonal communication with a new person, a queer person must decide to disclose or keep their identity secret. For some people, identity is explicitly based on our cultural norms and stereotypes of gender. If, for example, a man is comfortable in his gay identity, he may talk in ways that are viewed as more feminine because he is not limited by gender expectations. Some perceive that being of a non-heterosexual identity is to “be free from the constraints of societal norms and order” (Eguchi, 2006, p.350). For people whose appearance fits the standards of the heteronormative society, they face general questions, for example, from a hairdresser such as “So, do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?” In those moments, a queer woman must decide to either be honest with themselves and a new acquaintance about their personal lives or stay within the safety of the closet and conform to the expected heterosexual answer. It can be especially hard to come out in these instances when a hairdresser, for example, is holding a sharp pair of scissors and their views of homosexuality are not known. Situations such as these show how staying in the closet may be a less threatening alternative to openly discussing personal relationships with a same-sex partner.

Choosing to stay in the closet is suppressing a large part of a person’s life and identity. LGBT populations have faced oppression for most of present-day history and this oppression can be internalized to the point that a queer woman may not even be willing to admit to herself that she is attracted to women. People may be afraid to admit to themselves that they are attracted to a person of the same-sex for fear of rejection or fear of being different than the majority of people, leaving them trapped in a metaphoric closet by their own internalized homophobia. Tony Adams (2011) interviews Elena who describes how the normalization of heterosexuality complicated her identity formation:

There are people who identify as heterosexual because that's who you're supposed to be. You're not supposed to be gay. You're not supposed to deviate from the idea of having 2.5 kids, a dog named Spot, a house and a husband. People can internalize ideas and live in a fairy tale world, a world that says you have to be straight in order to make it. Such ideas don't legitimize homosexuality. (p. 67)

This excerpt helps us understand the complexities of disclosing sexual identities, especially to family members who have expectations of their children being heterosexual and following traditional values and lifestyles. These normative ideals of what people are supposed to do with their lives make it difficult to communicate to a family that one's desires for life do not meet the norms of society.

Tony Adams (2011) describes several conditions for the closet to exist. First, a person must understand what it means to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer and have awareness of some level of their same-sex attraction (p.43). The second condition of a closet forming is recognizing that same-sex attraction, which constitutes a nonheterosexual identity, results in a marginalized social status that the majority of the population does not practice or validate (p. 45) Another condition that Adams describes is that the closet only makes sense if a person embraces same-sex attraction or a LGBTQ identity. For example, a porn actor may engage in physical acts with another person of the same sex, but money may be their motivation for their actions, not an attraction or feelings (Escoffier, 2003, Seidman, Meeks & Traschen, 1999). The example Elena describes illustrates this condition of the closet: the person who identifies as heterosexual because it is what is expected of them and they never questions their own desires or identity. A person may be heterosexual-identified but engage

in physical acts with a person of the same sex out of attraction. The person may be closeted and experiencing internalized homophobia illustrated by their heterosexual identity. They may identify as heterosexual to avoid oppression or marginalization but enjoy engaging in sexual behaviors with the same sex. These examples show that sexuality can be fluid and there are not always terms that fit everyone's sexual identity. Binary boxes of gender (male/female) and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) do not provide accurate labels for many queer women. For this reason, I argue that gender and sexuality should be viewed on a spectrum. This is a perspective that the participants of the focus group agree with which will be discussed later in this paper.

Although the area of sexuality research within communication studies has been growing in recent decades, the majority focuses on heterosexual people and relationships with little to no reference to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer people. Research that has been done on LGBT populations has been primarily with men, providing little empirical evidence addressing the effects of gender roles on queer identifying women. For these reasons, it is important that more research be done on how we communicate gender and sexuality and the influences those messages have on expressing identities. By understanding the ways in which gender and sexuality are limited by our communication, a more open and accepting environment in our society will be experienced by LGBTQ people by our legal and social systems in the future. This investigation seeks to begin to fill the gap in the area of communicating gender roles and the social consequences of viewing gender dichotomously on queer women. Therefore, the current study investigated the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the perception of gender roles influence internalized homophobia in queer women?

RQ2: What is the relationship between internalized homophobia and coming out of the closet?

RQ3: Do gender roles change after coming out of the closet? If so, how?

Method

Participants

Participation in this study required everyone to be at least eighteen years of age, woman-identified, non-normative sexual orientation identified, and out of the closet to at least the majority of people in their life. Seven women who identified their sexual orientations as Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Queer, Pansexual, or “likes women” were recruited to participate in the study. Four participants identified their race as White/Caucasian, two as Black American, and one as half white and half black. All participants had at least some college education, one was in her second semester of college, four were upperclassman in their undergraduate programs and two had some graduate level education. Participants ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-seven years old ($M = 23.4$). Six participants identified as female and one participant listed their gender as “f or other.”

Recruitment for this focus group utilized convenient and snowball sampling methods. Initial recruitment messages were sent to specific Facebook friends that the researcher knew identified under the umbrella of queer identities and were of varying ages. In addition, an ad was placed in a local LGBT newspaper seeking interested participants and an email was sent to Eastern Michigan University’s EPIC (Eastern’s Pride and Identity Coalition) seeking participation.

Interest in participating was shown by either returning a Facebook message or an email stating interest. Then, the potential participants received an email that detailed what

their participation in the focus group would entail followed by a link to an online doodle survey to find the best day and time for everyone along with details of what their participation would entail. Snowball sampling was then utilized by asking those interested to inform friends that might be willing to participate who met the criteria of being a queer woman that is out to most people in their lives. These recruitment efforts yielded 18 potential participants; however, only seven were available at the day and time chosen by the researcher for the focus group.

Procedure

Participants were asked to meet in a conference room at the Equality Research Center on Eastern Michigan University's campus to ensure a safe space for queer conversation. Some participants brought extra friends with them, making the meeting space feel slightly crowded. To increase the comfort of the participants, the focus group was moved to a larger conference room down the hall. Since the meeting was held after normal business hours the conference room still made for a safe, private space to hold the meeting. Pizza and soda was provided for all participants the half hour before the focus group was called to order. This allowed for the participants to casually introduce each other and learn a little bit about the other participants before discussing personal experiences. Once all participants arrived, the group was called to order and began by the completing informed consent forms (See Appendix B). The researcher orally explained each portion of the form along with providing a copy for each participant to take home. Next, the participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire (See Appendix C) before beginning

the conversation. Once all informed consent forms and demographic questionnaires were completed, the researcher began the focus group with the first question (See Appendix D).

The researcher utilized a focus group technique taken from feminist methodology while conducting the focus group in order for the participants to feel empowered by the focus group. Feminist perspectives challenge traditional power given by privileged positions and aim for empowerment (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). The research method allowed for the participants to have control over the conversation, to allow interactions among the participants to drive the conversation, and to prevent the researcher from acting as a rigid moderator (Leavy, 2007). In order for the women to have control over the conversations each participant was given a handout with bullet pointed topics the researcher hoped to cover in the meeting. The women were told to feel free to bring any and all of these into the conversation throughout the evening in any order they felt fit into the conversation. This technique, adopted from feminist methodology, was used instead of asking participants to strictly answer only one question at a time, which then gives the power of the conversation to the researcher and creates a hierarchy within the meeting (Leavy, 2007). To first get started and to keep the conversation focused, the researcher asked several open-ended questions during the focus group (See Appendix D). The conversation lasted one hour and twenty-four minutes before participants had to leave for other obligations. Participants' names have been changed and all names used in this section are pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy.

Results

Immediately following the focus group the researcher recorded initial themes and observations. The dialogue was transcribed onto a Microsoft Word document to allow for careful analysis of the focus group. Several rounds of coding allowed for the themes discussed below in the results section to emerge. The primary investigator transcribed the results from the conducted focus group using Microsoft Word and the voice recording on a LG G3 LTE phone. Once transcription was completed, immediate emerging themes were noted. Then the researcher went through the transcription to code individual stories that were shared by the participants. The researcher next went through the transcript rereading the stories carefully for accurate coding until the themes that emerged were exhausted. Finally, the research completed a web chart to connect the themes that emerged during coding and organize main themes and subthemes. This method of analyzing data comes from Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), which allows for qualitative data to be sorted into themes that emerge after coding without restrictions.

Emerging Themes

After several rounds of coding there were four main themes that emerged. These main themes include Internalized Gender Roles, Identity Communication Experiences, Identity as a Process, and Religious Homophobia. Expectations for women's roles in society (for example, being submissive and sexually attractive) were associated with the development of both gender identity and sexual orientation for these women. The internalized homophobia felt by participants affected how they came out and whom they came out to. Identity Communication Experiences were expressed in two forms: verbally coming out or by

nonverbal communication such as clothing choices. Religious organizations produced the most negative messages about homosexuality and strict gender roles, which hindered the participants in their identity formation and contributed to their internalized feelings of homophobia.

Internalized gender roles. Social constructions of gender have been deeply internalized by the sample of women used in this study. Even for women who are educated and gender conscious, the pressures to conform to gender roles are still present in their lives. The focus group began with a discussion of the messages they were sent, mostly through parents and society, about how being a woman is explicitly linked to being feminine and the expected roles that feminine and the expected roles that feminine bodies have in society. When asked what roles women serve in society the participants used terminology that referred mainly to physical attractiveness, such as “really big boobs,” “lots of make-up,” “wear sundresses,” and “shaved.” The physical attributes of a woman’s body were a major theme. One participant, Jennifer, a feminine pansexual woman, expressed how much she hated having hair on her body saying:

I don’t like hair. I don’t mind if other people have hair but on my own body, for whatever reason, I don’t like it. I think even if I were in a male body I would still shave it all because I don’t like it. I don’t like the way it feels but like that’s just because I don’t want to feel like a cat. Personally.

Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998) found that the vast majority of the college students they studied shaved their body hair because of perceptions of femininity and attractiveness. Terry

and Braun (2013) study body hair as well and assert that removal of body hair is a gendered phenomenon. These findings are consistent with Jennifer's attitudes towards hair on her body. The length of conversation about body hair during the focus group indicates that this is a strongly reinforced message in society.

Participants discussed how women are expected to have an "infantile vibe" and being cleanly shaved helps maintain that perception. These ideas suggest the participants' perceptions that women need to be sexually attractive to have social worth. However, participants discussed that women are not supposed to have orgasms, being sexually active, or express their sexuality for purposes other than attracting men. These women were exposed to social messages indicating that the main component of their worth comes from their sexual attractiveness yet are not supposed to be sexually active. According to the participants, women should be "fragile," "weak," "submissive," and "sweet and kind" to be accepted as a "good woman" in society. When participants were asked to describe men's roles in society, terms included "being successful," "ambitious," "a good athlete," "aggressive," "noble," "strong," "not emotional" and "overly sexual." The social value of a woman, according to participant discussion, is based on her physical appearance and her ability to reproduce while men are valued for characteristics that lead to advancement in their careers. This demonstrates the oppression that these women have to live with and the gender binary that is in place in society.

A second perception of a woman's gender roles is their ability to be sexually reproductive. Some of the necessary roles the participants felt they needed to fit in order to be accepted as a female in society were to "have a working uterus," "make babies," "being a homemaker." These are problematic assumptions for queer women (and women of other

sexual or gender identities) who may choose not to naturally reproduce. These standards also cast a role for women to needing someone (i.e., a man) to be assertive, protect them, and permit them to reproduce. For these subjects, this reproduction based role continues to oppress women by reducing their social options. Motherhood is an important role in society, but the messages sent to these women show that this is their only role: Be sexually attractive for men and then reproduce.

One participant, Stacey, who refused to label herself (she identified her sexual orientation as “likes women” and her gender as “female or other”), spoke about how her mother expected that her daughter to have long blonde hair and be the cheerleader type. Her mother never reinforced that she must like boys, but that she must be feminine. She stated, “She always had the hardest time with how I looked. She was like why can’t you be feminine and like girls?” When Stacey did start to date women, her mother’s gender expectations switched to the roles of men, “She would pressure me, like, you have to take care of them. Like she wanted me to be the husband.” When Stacey expressed her interest in women, it was expected that she would take on more masculine gender roles. This idea is a problematic stereotype for queer women. Kurdek (1993) found in a study of straight, gay, and lesbian couples with no children that lesbian couples were the most likely to split household tasks evenly among partners. The study concluded that gender was a powerful variable in determining how household tasks were divided in heterosexual couples, but no single variable held as much power for gay or lesbian couples. These internalized gender roles set up the stereotype that in lesbian relationships one partner has to play the feminine role and one has to play to masculine role. Stacey stated, “There was femininity and there was masculinity. There was no in between. No gray area.” Stacey’s mother’s comments are an

example of how gender is viewed strictly on a binary system in American culture. While explaining the expectations her mother had for her, Stacey became frustrated and irritated that her mother did not understand how her internalized gender roles created a conflict inside of her. The expectations to meet binary gender roles made it difficult for the queer women in this study to process their identity and to openly express their sexuality.

Identity Communication Experiences. To express their non-heterosexual identity, these queer women “came out” by either verbally stating “I’m gay” or using nonverbal descriptors, such as their gender expression, to proclaim their non-heterosexual identity. Two subthemes emerged, Expected Homophobia and Non-Verbal Identity Expression.

Expected Homophobia. The majority of focus group participants expressed a definite coming out story or statement in which they made a commitment to proclaim their identity, usually by verbally telling someone important in their life “I’m gay.” Jennifer, a feminine pansexual woman, tells the initial coming out statement that she made to her mother.

I was worried that when I told my mom I was gay, at the time I thought I was only into chicks because at that time I couldn’t have been less interested in guys. But I remember thinking that she was going to be upset about it and so I told her in a public place so that she couldn’t yell at me. And I was like “So, I’m gay?” and I almost said it like a question. And she was like “Ya, ya I know. Can you pass me the coupon?”

She expressed how upset she was that her mother did not have a reaction to her statement. She expected a big uproar of emotion after she had worried and finally worked up

the courage to tell her mother, but she was met with acceptance, or at the least tolerance. This quote illustrates the internalized homophobia that Jennifer felt fearing her mother's negative response to her sexuality. She perceived her preference for same-sex partners as a negative trait and was scared to tell her mother because of her possible negative reaction. When Jennifer was not met with negative feedback, she was surprised, but realized this was her own internalized homophobia while retelling this story in the focus group. Jennifer stated, "I'm actually annoyed. I've been expecting some type of reaction for a very long time now, and then, nothing. It was almost internalized homophobia to the point that when [the expected homophobic reaction] wasn't met I was almost... disappointed."

Stacey, the participant who refused to label her gender or sexuality, tells her coming out story in a humorous way. She expressed how homophobic she was at the time and that she was scared to tell her family. Although her father had asked her once directly if she was gay, she immediately denied it and said, "No, I'm not a faggot!" But later in her life she came to terms with her sexuality and wanted to come out to her family. She wrote a letter, put it in the mailbox, and ran away to the park. Once she got to the park she called her father and told him that there was a letter in the mailbox for him. She said

I went to the park with my friends and refused to answer my phone. He's a scary guy. When I did answer he was like "Why aren't you answering your phone? I know you're gay, Stacey. Who doesn't know you're gay?! But you ran out of the house and you didn't tell me where you are. No one cares that you're gay, Stacey! Just tell me where you are!"

This coming out experience was traumatic for her because of her own internalized homophobia. Like Jennifer, Stacey perceived a horrible reaction from her parents but was not

met with the homophobia that both Stacey and Jennifer expected and shared internally. Both women perceived their sexuality to be a condemnable offense that would bring negative consequences. However, when they came out, both of their parents didn't seem to care very much at all; Stacey's father was concerned for her safety and Jennifer's mother seemed to already know and not mind. Researchers have argued that feelings of internalized homophobia are linked to low self-esteem, a poor self-image, and loneliness (Rowen & Malcom, 2002; Szymanski & Chung, 2002). This research gives insight into the way Stacey and Jennifer felt during their initial coming out statement. Because they had low-self esteem and a poor self-image, they perceived a negative reaction from their family member.

Although it seems that both Stacey and Jennifer were met with at least tolerance of their sexual orientation the reaction of their parents could have been a silencing mechanism. In both cases, after coming out to their mother or father, Jennifer and Stacey's parents did not invite discussion of feelings and, instead, changed the subject quickly. More in-depth discussion on these cases is needed to know if their reaction to their daughter's coming out silenced the conversation because of their discomfort with homosexuality or if they truly did not care how their daughters identified.

Nonverbal Identity Expression. The second way that the queer women in this study expressed their non-heterosexual identity was through nonverbal communication such as gender expression. Natalie, a self described Black American (she did not identify as an African American because she cannot trace her heritage to Africa) lesbian who expresses herself as a masculine woman (she discussed how she is not trans* and has no desire to transition to be a man, but does not fit the standards for a cisgendered woman either) stated, "You get this sense of liberation that you can do away with who you used to be. You don't

even realize you identified with and you feel you have to make a statement and that statement has to be bold. For everyone that statement is different.” For many of the participants, a verbal coming out statement was not enough to proclaim their newly found sexual identity, they needed to change their physical appearance in order to fit their identity. Natalie discussed how people often make a bold coming out statement so that everyone knows that they are gay and cannot be mistaken for a heterosexual. This was specifically for dating and finding dating partners. She states,

That was one of those things. It became this idea that if you want to pick the girls up, because it was a game back in the day, you have to look a certain way to pick the girls up. You have to have a persona that says you know what, “Yes, I’m gay and you’re not going to mistake me for anything other.”

Natalie discusses how a coming out statement could be expressing your gender differently, such as cutting your hair short or shopping in the men’s section. Natalie expressed how when she shops in the men’s section at TJ Maxx that no one could expect her to be straight because she is not obeying society’s rule of femininity. Portraying an image that cannot be understood as anything but queer reduces the need to verbally come out to new people. When women wear men’s clothing regularly, it is a queer nonverbal statement. It sends a message that they do not obey society’s heteronormative gender roles. Pharr (1988) states that lesbians challenge heterosexism by stepping outside the lines of the expected feminine gender roles. These women’s examples illustrate how a queer woman can come out nonverbally in her everyday life without having to verbalize her sexual orientation. However, these portrayals of what a queer woman looks like come from stereotypes that have been perpetuated by

television and popular media. Ivy et al. (2009) found that the portrayals of intimate same-sex relationships on television had implications of gendered behaviors and negative stereotypes. Many queer women that wear masculine clothing are expressing how they feel on the inside, which is in line with the stereotyped images of queer women, but some women, like Jennifer, cut their hair short and wear masculine styles of clothing to fit the stereotyped image of a lesbian even though it doesn't necessarily fit their personality. This means of coming out nonverbally therefore works for queer women who identify as masculine or androgynous women. However, feminine (or femme) queer women do not have the ability to be "visibly queer". Femme lesbians may experience invisibility as a public queer women because their gender expression does not challenge feminine expectations (Samuels, 2003).

Identity as a process. As discussed above, many of the participants in the focus group discussed a bold coming out statement to proclaimed their queer identity, as discussed above. However, after this initial statement, developing a gender expression that fit their personality and identity was stated by participants as a "continuous process" and was seen in "definite stages" over time from when they first made that bold coming out statement to their more confirmed identity after years of the process. Paula Rust (1993) stated, "coming out is not a linear, goal-oriented, developmental process" (p.50). Her research suggests that as individuals mature changes in their sexual identity are to be expected in order to preserve their true self in relation to other individuals and establishment.

For the younger participants, the struggle to find their gender identity was still in the beginning phases. Jennifer stated, "I'm at a point where I have been trying to figure out, and have been for a very long time now, that I'm trying to figure out how do I look gay? 'Cause I feel like, at least in my interpretations of a lot of interactions that I have, is that I get a lot of

assumptions that I'm straight because I rarely get hit on by other girls. And it bums me out.”

She expressed how she cut her hair short after coming to college to try to “look more gay” and how she was very unhappy with her decision and is anxiously trying to grow her hair back out now. Another participant, Laurel, who identified as a feminine queer black woman, shared, “I did try the whole dress less feminine thing, or like, dress more masculine but I just look like a girl whose trying to wear guys’ clothes. It doesn’t work at all for me.” She felt that after she identified with the queer community, that she had to fit the stereotypes she saw of butch women. This was a part of processing her identity. She tried out a different gender expression before she found out that it was actually not within her personality to express herself by wearing men’s clothing. These stereotypes come from gender expectations. Similarly to social expectations that women are supposed to be perceived as feminine, fragile, and kind, queer women have gender expectations as well and newly out queer women try to fit the stereotypes that they see within referent groups to fit a certain image. Findings from in-depth interviews with twenty lesbians suggest that appearance is used to maintain authenticity after coming out and finding one’s identity. However, appearances in gay and lesbian spaces is always under the scrutiny of the community and those instances present unique challenges (Hutson, 2010).

Natalie, the oldest woman in the group at the age of 27, said that she has clearly seen herself transition through a process and at each stage of her life she has experienced different gender identities and beliefs that go along with each identity. She expressed how she thinks this is a cultural difference between ethnic groups. She explained,

What I’ve found is that it tends to be very different expressions in different ethnic groups. So for the black community, we might have all

these different labels. So if you are a stud, then you need to be completely masculine, this is how you dress and these are your roles in the bedroom.

She goes on to explain that soft studs have different expressions and different roles within the bedroom based on that gender identity. She stated,

Then, if you are versatile, you are really confused. That means you dress like a female some days and a male some days. And how you act in the bedroom depends on how you dress that day. So you get all these breakdowns of, like, how to express yourself but from what I find is that in other ethnic groups, it is more fluid, its not as rigid.

She explains how within her community she sees very strict gender roles that prescribe behaviors based upon those roles. Fluidity is seen as confusion in her community, while it may just be a woman's way of testing out different gender identities to see what best fits their personality. Moore's (2006) study found three physical appearances of lesbians within black lesbian communities: femme, gender-bender, and transgressive. Moore's research suggests that although black lesbians can be categorized by their gender expression, it does not mean that their personality fits specific gender roles, only that these gender categories are used to organize their social relationships. Processing identities that are outside of the expected norm in society can be difficult, but it is especially difficult for queer women with religious backgrounds.

Religious homophobia. The queer women who were not raised around religion did not mention experiencing discrimination or homophobia at all during their coming out or coming into their identity. However, the rest of the group all experienced some type of

homophobia that stemmed directly from religion, religious interactions, or church activities.

Religious attitudes are supported as a dimension of internalized homophobia by existing research as well (Nungesser, 1983; Ross & Rosser, 1996). Rae, an androgynous lesbian, grew up in a Lutheran church in which her entire family was very involved. Shortly after coming out to her family, her mother outed her to the church and that following Sunday the pastor of the church “gave a long sermon about homosexuality... and I started to feel really guilty about my own lifestyle.” For Rae, this was the beginning of her internalized homophobia. She stated, “I wasn’t fully being who I was. You couldn’t, you just couldn’t.” Rae has since “transcended religion” and identifies as an atheist, but those memories of being ostracized in the church still influence her internalized homophobia in her current life. She explained that while at a Verizon Wireless store recently she was chatting with the sales representative and she consciously chose to refer to her partner of several years as her “housemate” instead of her partner. She said

I made that conscious decision because for me he had already talked about the church and so in my mind, I had this preconceived notion of who he was. I made conscious decisions to say housemate not partner... I still struggle with [internalized homophobia] a lot because I don’t want to deal with all the persecution that I might still possibly get.

Her previous experiences with homophobic attitudes in the church have served as a trigger warning for discrimination against her lifestyle based on someone’s affiliation with a religious institution.

Jennifer was very involved in her church, organizing youth groups, field trips, and fundraising, along with running Sunday school classes. After having a vague conversation with her pastor about homosexuality, she began to experience discrimination. She was removed as the leader of youth group, replaced as the Sunday school teacher, and within a month of the conversation was stripped of all her responsibilities. Jennifer perceived her church as a liberal religious organization, but she still experienced homophobic attitudes and behaviors that she said contributed to her internalized homophobia and feelings of doing something wrong or immoral just by being attracted to the same sex.

One participant of the focus group, Stacey, who was not raised around religion became incredibly religious herself after she began to realize she was attracted to women. She reported using rough language regularly such as the word “faggot” when her father asked her if she was gay as a way of combating the internalized homophobia she was struggling with. Her parents already knew or had suspicions of her sexual orientation and were not surprised by her coming out to them. However, the fear that these women felt is real and for people who do not have the courage to come out, they can live with that fear for a very long time. Stacey found religion on her own as a way to cope with her internalized homophobia hoping that her newly found religion would save her from being gay. Since accepting her gender and sexual identity, she has left all religious beliefs and identifies as an atheist. Schuck and Liddle (2001) assert that religious affiliation in lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents was linked to reactions of depression, shame, and suicidal ideation. They found that many of their participants turned to spiritual over religious beliefs or abandoned religion all together.

Natalie explained how in the religious African American community it is not uncommon for women who once identified as queer to change their lifestyle to fit heteronormative expectations. She explained how some women within the community became “spiritually delivered” and suddenly found themselves in a heterosexual relationship with a man, attending church regularly, and actively trying to sexually reproduce. She stated that 30 is the magic number and when women get close to that age they feel the pressures of their internal clock ticking away and this is likely why previously queer women begin to live a heterosexual lifestyle. For Natalie herself, she enjoys church but will not regularly attend because of the homophobic reactions of church members that have created internalized homophobia within herself. She stated,

I enjoy going to church and I maintain my spirituality and relationship with God. But that’s a choice I had to make and it was a long process to make that choice. But to this day I will not go to church on a regular basis because of always feeling like I’m singled out. I feel that I can’t dress the way I want to dress if I go to church. I’m always feeling like ‘what if my girlfriend goes to church with me?’ We can’t hold hands. Or what is the sermon going to be about? Or if that person is staring at me because they get gay vibes? This is all internalized homophobia.

Natalie illustrates how her homophobic thoughts keep her from regularly attending church and being an active member of the church community. Schuck and Liddle (2001) indicate that this is a common reaction to religious attitudes among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. The messages that have been communicated through past experiences in her church keep her from attending services regularly and joining in other church activities and add to her

internalized homophobia by making her feel guilt and shame for expressing her gender the way she feels comfortable or by holding her girlfriend's hand.

Discussion

Many of the issues that queer women face within society when coming into their identity and coming out to other people are related to American social prescription for women's gender roles and religious homophobia. The need to be perceived as feminine, motherly, and sexually attractive negatively affects the perception of self for queer women who do not fit those expected standards. These findings support RQ1 (How does the perception of gender roles influence internalized homophobia?).

Religious attitudes and upbringings were the largest contributor to expected gender roles and internalized homophobia. This finding helps to explain RQ2 (What is the relationship between internalized homophobia and coming out of the closet?) When internalized homophobia was felt, the participants were less likely to accept their sexuality or openly identify with it. One participant, Stacey, internalized homophobia so deeply that she became religious to avoid being mistaken for gay. RQ3 (Do gender roles change after coming out of the closet? If so, how?) is a question that needs to be explored further in future research. The participants described how there was a process of changing their gender expression during their identity formation, but discussion about changing their roles as a woman in society were not sufficiently present to respond to this question.

Being oppressed because of homosexuality is, unfortunately, undeniable in a heterosexist world, but queer women also deal with trying to navigate around issues surrounding women's socialized gender roles, particularly when compared to men's gender

roles. These roles and relationships suggest that the worth of a woman comes from her attractiveness or ability to sexually. This is a problem that women face no matter what their sexual orientation is and is a very different struggle than for gay or bisexual men. For this reason, American social expectations are very complex for queer women to navigate. For queer women of color, managing acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity may be compounded because they also face racial discrimination. Gay and Tate (1998) assert that black women were more powerfully affected by their racial identity than their gender identity with their political attitudes. The relationship of racial identity, sexual orientation, and gender roles warrants continued examination.

From the results of this study, I believe that a broader knowledge of gender and sexuality on a spectrum should be taught to people at a young age. Several participants voiced that if they had had more education at a younger age, they would have accepted their identities sooner and experienced more acceptances from family, friends, and other people in their life. Garcia (2009) argues that the current school-based sex education system reinforces inequality through gender, race, and sexuality. The 2011 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) suggests that schools can be more inclusive to LGBT students by having curricula that are inclusive to LGBT topics, have supportive school staff, and allow clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) (Kowciw et al., 2012). School systems should include discussions of minority gender and sexuality groups to be more inclusive of the entire spectrum. Bittner (2012) suggests that queering youth literature could be a way to complement inclusive sex education because it allows a safe space free for teens to explore gender and sexuality without ignorant or homophobic peers. If this were implemented into all school systems, the next generation

would be better informed and experience less discrimination and homophobia. Participants mentioned that they only were able to obtain a better knowledge of gender and sexuality on a spectrum after seeking out Women and Gender Studies or Queer Studies courses in college.

Future research on how gender roles, homophobia, and coming out of the closet are connected should use in-depth interviews, as they would have yielded more detailed information. Interviews would also yield more participants because the researcher could set up separate days and times that work for each individual participant. The focus group method helped to determine that there is a connection between gender roles, internalized homophobia, and coming out of the closet, but did not allow for depth or breadth of their connectedness to be explored.

Future research on this area should also include a broader demographic base of participants. Trans* voices would amplify any understanding of gender roles, internalized homophobia, and coming out. Their experiences with expectations of masculine roles and feminine roles would add an deeper understanding of how these social constructions influence LGBT people's identity formation, coming out process, and the role internalized homophobia plays in both of those. Two trans* individuals were recruited for this focus group, but were not able to participate at the day and time chosen. A second population that is not included in this study is women who have been out of the closet for more than a decade. Their voices can give valuable insight into how they communicate their identity, who they communicate about their identity with, and how that process has changed over many years. This would be valuable information missing from this study because most of the participants were just coming into their queer identity and their experiences with communicating their identity were fairly new.

This paper hopes to motivate more research in this area by contributing personalized narratives that illustrate why communicating identity is difficult in a heterosexist environment that reinforces gender binaries. Producing more credible knowledge on the subjects of internalized homophobia, the influence of gender roles, and coming out stories will hopefully lead to more understanding and accepting cultures. Ones in which LGBT people are not stigmatized, are without fear of isolation or physically endangerment of themselves, and feel both comfortable and free to express their identity.

Conclusion

The expectations of American culture for gender and sexual orientation does influence how queer women communicate their personality, the gender, and their sexuality. Those expectations can be harmful to self-development and self-esteem. In this study, religious organizations and attitudes were found to be the largest contributor towards internalized homophobia and difficulty in expressing one's sexual identity and gender. Coming out is a continuous process that takes many forms including nonverbal expressions and verbal communicative experiences. Although subjects were all relatively new to their identities, their stories illustrate that both sexual identity and gender expression change during the process of coming into their identities.

The stereotypes that are perpetuated throughout our culture, including both media and education, lead to expectations for women that are not consistent with how women, particularly queer women experience themselves and their worlds. Continued study, changes in education, and more conversation may contribute to a social context supporting confidently out and open queer women who are not afraid to break the gender binary.

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Appendix A

Hello,

My name is Nicole Richards; I am currently a graduate student working on a Master's degree in Communication. I am recruiting out queer women to discuss their experiences with gender, homophobia, and coming out of the closet. In order to participate you must be 18 years of age and an openly out queer (lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, transgender woman) identified woman. Although there may be no direct benefit to you participating, other than food that will be provided for free to those that attend and participate, the findings from this study hope to better inform and advance the literature in gender communication and queer studies. If you are interested in participating, please email Nicole at nrichar8@emich.edu with your name, age, and identity. You will then be provided with options for a meeting time and a list of questions that will be addressed in the focus group.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Nicole Richards, B.A.
Eastern Michigan University

Appendix B

Research Informed Consent

Primary Investigator: Nicole Richards
Communication, Media and Theatre Arts Department, Eastern
Michigan University
nrichar8@emich.edu

Faculty Mentor/ Co-Investigator: Sam Shen, Ph.D
Communication, Media and Theatre Arts
tshen@emich.edu

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the influence of the gender roles in the experiences of coming out of “the closet” for lesbian women. This study will advance the literature in gender communication and queer studies.

Study Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you be will asked to do the following:

- Fill out a demographic questionnaire.
- Participate in a round table discussion on your experience of gender roles, internalized homophobia, and being in/coming out of the closet.

Participation:

Your participation in this study will include being a part of a group discussion that will last approximately one hour.

Benefits:

There may be no direct benefit to you taking part in this study; however, information from this study will help us better understand the ways gender roles and gender identity influence the coming out experience of lesbian women.

Risks:

We do not anticipate any risks associated with participating in this study. However, because questions are personal and sexual in nature, you may find some questions upsetting. In the unlikely event that distressing personal concerns arise for you during or after your

participation in this study, EMU students are eligible for free counseling services at 313 Snow Health Center, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197 (Telephone: 734.487.1118; Email: Counseling.Services@emich)

Confidentiality:

All information collected from you in this study will remain confidential. The group meeting will be recorded in order to be transcribed, which allows the researchers to better understand the content of the group meeting. No one will have access to this information except the researchers. All participants will be asked to use a fake name during the meeting and these fake names will be used during transcription and dissemination. Both the transcription and the recording will be kept locked in the Communication, Media and Theatre Arts Department.

Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study; refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. You are free to refuse to answer any question(s) or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Dissemination of Findings

This study is taking place as a course project for CTAC 677: Communication Research. The results of this study will be disseminated in a final paper turned into the course instructor, Sam Shen. Only fake names will be reported in the findings to maintain confidentiality. No personal information will be used in the dissemination of this project. The findings from this study may be used for a future research project during the remainder of the graduate program the researcher is a part of. All records and data will be destroyed after the research has graduated (May 2015). Please initial below if you consent to using the data you provide for future studies.

_____ I consent to allowing all data I provide to be used for future research.

Questions

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use from _____ to _____. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Director of Graduate School (734.487.0042, human.subject@emich.edu)

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Appendix C

Gender Roles, Homophobia, and “The Closet”
Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?

2. Please identify your gender:

3. What is your ethnic background?

4. What is your highest level of education?

5. Please identify your sexual orientation:

6. Would you like the formal report of the findings of this focus group emailed to you?

Yes

No

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

- Growing up, what do you feel it meant to be a woman?
 - What do you feel it meant to be a man?
- How did your idea of what it means to be a woman influence your behaviors in exploring your identity as a sexual being?
- How do you feel these ideas of gender impacted your coming out experience?
- How did your ideas of gender affect the way you expressed your gender?
- Did your gender expression change after “coming out”? How?
- Have you experienced discrimination because of the way you dressed or looked?