Stress of the Minority

If an artist were asked to sketch the image of the modern-day gay, lesbian, and bisexual movement, would he or she draw rejoicing faces, uniting together in the name of love and social equality, or would he or she draw the truth? Of course, it would depend on how knowledgeable this hypothetical artist is in regards to the personal politics that revolve around gay and lesbian affairs which, make no mistake, are pushing social boundaries to farther and greater lengths than ever before. And with such boundaries being pushed there is, in turn, a complex dilemma also evolving. It takes the form of subtle isolation, still very much prevalent in the LGB community—a social segregation, it could be called, which is hardly a newfound expression for this minority. Nevertheless, this separation from the ever-demanding “mainstream” is unique in the fact that the very “norm” culture that is popularizing homosexual activity is the same one that is pushing it away from its accepted conventions. Again, complex. America is now constantly displaying homosexuality in its media, gay marriage is becoming legal on fronts that used to be entirely against the notion, and the general public’s distaste with the queer lifestyle has seemingly shrunken in size. Why then, are homosexuals still socially isolated, and more importantly, why is there such a disproportionally high rate of mental illness in the LGB population?

Ian H. Meyer addresses this mental health issue in his study, Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence in which he writes, “Researchers’ preferred explanation for the cause of the higher
prevalence of disorders among LGB people is that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a stressful social environment that can lead to mental health problems in people who belong to stigmatized minority groups” (Meyer 2). Yet to many it seems that now, more than ever, there is an absence of stigma; it has nearly become customary, naturally ethical even, to defend the sexual orientation of others. With the rise of anti-bullying campaigns and promotional entities such as Youtube’s “It Gets Better” series, this absence seems justifiably evident and close to conclusive. The reality, however, is that there is still societal backlash, albeit difficult to see through the eyes of a someone not directly affected by it. This backlash, no matter how inconspicuous it may be, must be acknowledged and seen for the harmful thing that it is. Its effects can be witnessed most readily through the lasting impact on the mental health of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, and ultimately best understood through the processes that take place in a homosexual’s personal life as he or she faces a world that is merciless to anyone deemed “different”. From coming out of the closet to establishing an entirely new identity and finally struggling to integrate into conventionality, no sketch in the world can accurately describe what it is really like to be gay.

To be closeted is to experience a life without disclosing the true nature of one’s sexual orientation, and many homosexuals choose this alternative simply out of fear or shame. Fear, on the lowest end of the spectrum, of being judged or treated differently, and on the highest, for personal safety. The difficulty with “coming out of the closet” is that it becomes intertwined with sexual identity. As Mary Lou Rasmussen writes on this subject, “The notion that sexual identity is somehow essential becomes conflated with the idea that coming out is also somehow
essential” (Rasmussen 4), and thus the first and likely most important difference in a homosexual’s public image: the imperative feeling that one must disclose their sexual orientation to others in the first place. Here there is a division line, and with it comes the struggle for personal identity, which does not cease with a gay identity either, as Rasmussen states “identity is necessarily meditated by varying circulations of power relating to age, family background, economic position, and race” (5). In this turbulence there is a conflict of “who am I now?” and “who was I before?” The coming out process is also unique to the homosexual population in the fact that it does not have a regular, scheduled date of occurrence. It can happen at any moment in a gay person’s life, and if it is to occur after countless years of establishing an already set up identity within society, it can become an issue for the individual. Whoever they were before is now lost in the stigma of “being gay”. As if homosexuality overrides anything that they once were, coming out means much more than a simple announcement; it is in many ways a rebirth of character. The compromise that attempts to be made amidst the destruction and rebuilding of perceived personality is a difficult one. It makes the stress of the minority all the more common.

This initial separation from the heterosexual norm that so many gay people face results in a form of shame, which Jennifer Moon discusses in her essay Gay Shame and the Politics of Identity, in which she categorizes shame as a force that “distinguishes the queer from the normal, not because there is anything inherently shameful about having deviant desires or engaging in deviant acts, but because shame adheres to (or is supposed to adhere to) any position in social alienation or nonconformity” (Moon 363). While this seems more than problematic, having heterosexual norm be the established spokesperson for what is and is not acceptable, there is also Kohlhauf 4
the fact that the LGB community itself mimics the heterosexual sense of inclusivity. Where pride parades first arose from a statement of visibility, of wanting to inform everyone around that the homosexual lifestyle is indeed existent, it has now become an attempt towards integrating further into societal customs. The counterproductive nature of this attempt, however, lies in the extreme lengths that many LGB members go through to look “acceptable and wanted”. White masculinity plays a huge role here for gay and bisexual men, as the homosexual community’s own personal norms have unconsciously begun to dictate what should be publicly seen and what should not. The typical traits desired of gay couples are now white, masculine or “straight acting”, and other small aspects that move gay and bisexual men towards “heteronormative” (362) ideals. Identity festers off popular appeal, and suddenly those who stray from such appeals become neglected, overshadowed, and purposefully hidden away. Race, economic status, and disability also all work to put further shame and stress in queer identities and “makes clearly visible the inconsistencies, contradictions, and inadequacies that are central to all identities, especially those marked by sexual deviance and shame” (365). With buzzwords such as deviance and shame trailing behind homosexual stigma, it is no wonder that the public’s opinion is so often ruthless and unforgiving.

Gay marriage is becoming more and more accepted on a federal level. To the public, however, a family composed of two fathers or two mothers is not seen as just a “family”, but rather, a “queer family”. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann analyze this divergence by identifying the term “family” as referring to “groups of individuals and/or [those with] financial commitment to each other, whether or not they cohabit, are related by blood, law, or adoption,
have children, or are recognized by the law” (Bernstein & Reimann 3). Heterosexuals are not required to have children to be considered a family, and yet homosexual partners that are able to get married are still just considered partners. The notion of family becomes tied in, once again, with this ideology of heterosexual living, which is not budging for any newcomers. A queer family, children and all, struggle just as much, if not more, as the rest of the LGB public in this effort to blend in and “confound heteronormativity, contest the hegemonic family ideal, and complicate lesbians and gay politics” (5). It is the original concept of a family that has for so long become the grounded finality, the end-all impression, to which homosexual families must both conform and fight against. Conform in the conventional sense, of having children and raising them in an appropriate environment; fight against by changing this concept of a husband and wife family structure, while still holding onto the ideals of its core values and traditions. It is a difficult endeavor to pursue, and the concept of identity slithers its way back in, on all levels of social progression; it makes a mark, leaving behind stress, shame, fear, and other negative emotions that become predominant in a homosexual’s life.

Undeniably, these elements are the underlying causes of high rate mental illness in the community. Many will argue that homosexuals, if so afflicted by the inability to truly integrate into heterosexual norms, should merely fall back on “gay customs.” Gay communities, unfortunately, also carry the quality of being rather inclusive, as mentioned earlier with recent white-masculinity trends. Sometimes based either on body type, specific sexual fetish or preference, race, or age, LGB becomes even more divided and disjointed, and the extent of individual sub-communities suddenly becomes massive in scope. Such group identities, however,
“are essentially for individual emotional functioning, as they address conflicting needs for individuation and affiliation” (Meyer 6). This sort of emotional functioning is often times disregarded. With high prevalence of poor mental health comes a “higher prevalence of suicidal behavior” (13).

The short and long-term effects of subtle non-inclusion is brought about, in the end, by the many different factors that a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person must face throughout his or her life solely because of their sexual orientation. Factors that “extend stress theory by suggesting that conditions in the social environment, not only personal events, are sources of stress that may lead to mental and physical ill effects” (Meyer 4) and “have a strong impact in the lives of people belonging to stigmatized social categories” (4). With enduring these impacts and juggling what and who to be, true acceptance in modern American society is impossible, as much as it may seem otherwise. The many passing laws, the media glorification of LGB rights, the apparent widespread acceptance- beneath all these things is negligence, and when asked to sketch the image of the modern-day movement, the hypothetical artist withdraws.

