

Socialization Turns To Terrorization

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Almost all living creatures can be defined by their sex. For some species, female reproduction organs exist along with male organs, but for anything with two or four legs, an animal's community role is shaped by particular sexual characteristics. Though these roles are most often awarded due to primal instinct, nowhere is the line between male and female so clearly distinct as in animals who do not operate based solely on animal instinct: the human. Like our fellow animals, we as humans stick to our gender, and those who do not toe the line between the two are treated harshly. This is partly due to the fact that children are socialized into their biological gender almost as soon as they exit the womb and are swaddled in blue or pink blankets. As babies mature into toddlers and then into children, they continue to perceive behaviors and interests that are seen as inherently masculine or feminine, such as the difference in playing with dolls or trucks. There exists this subtle yet undeniable stigma between sexes, and a sense of danger in stepping outside of one's biological sex. This is not simply something that makes little boys like bugs; it is something with much more serious repercussions. This socialization is likely what makes young males call each other by derogatory names implying that boys who are not masculine enough are female or homosexual. Antigay violence in schools is born from heterosexist socialization from both peers as well as adults at school and enforced by the divisive and hateful use among adolescent boys of derogatory names such as "fag" or "faggot."

The accepted norm of heterosexism in society creates important niches that children and adolescents especially feel pressure to fall into. Looking at homophobia and heterosexism,

however, requires a deeper look at the role gender plays in society. Tales of damsels in distress or brave soldiers impervious to defeat abound from communities from around the world and from all eras. These long-standing gender stereotypes also feed into heterosexist ideals. “For example, male students are often encouraged to embrace athletics, competition, or fighting to demonstrate their strength and influence” (Klein, 2006, p. 55). Girls, on the other hand, are prizes to be won or sexual objects to be desired and eventually possessed through displays of masculine prowess (Pascoe, 2007). This relationship between masculinity and femininity shows quite clearly the heterosexist ideals that make men appear dominant, and for women, promotes misogyny. This is seen in schools through a variety of traditions, events, and even in everyday behavior in classrooms. Though most schools are coeducational, the differentiation between genders is entrenched into nearly all aspects of school life. At some school graduations, “boys and girls [are] assigned different-colored graduation robes” (Pascoe, 2007, p 30). Even school dances such as prom and homecoming in which a male is expected to invite a female implies both heterosexism in the boy-girl pairing, as well as male dominance in being the inviter and not the invitee. Teachers also influence heterosexism in their interactions with students. Though heterosexual marriage is often used as examples in nearly all subject matters from biology to history, it would be incredibly rare for a sex education teacher, for example, to explain interpersonal relationships and sexuality within the context of a homosexual relationship (Pascoe, 2007). Through flagrant heteronormativity as well as specified gender roles, concepts of masculinity and femininity are instilled in schoolchildren, who feel pressured to fit into these commonly acceptable niches.

The link between masculinity and heterosexism makes many adolescent boys identify peers who they do not believe are “manly” enough as homosexual and assign them derogatory

terms such as “faggot” or “fag” as a means of separating homosexuality from masculinity (Pascoe, 2007). Since many males are indeed pressured to be hypermasculine or more manly than others, the “drive to become successfully male within the context of any given culture’s definition of ‘successful’ is therefore a contested effort, carried out in a social environment and contingent upon comparing the self to others” (McCann, et al., 2009, p. 202). This comparison, held alongside the assumption that masculinity itself is defined partly in competitiveness, or the need to prove oneself as macho or manlier than others, necessitates those who wish to be masculine to triumph over those who do not fit within the boundaries of masculinity as society dictates. Indeed, society also dictates that those who do not practice heterosexual activities are less than masculine. Because of this, many men develop a certain type of homophobia that is a “social construct, not a phobia in the psychological sense, and as such is learnt through interaction and observation of which styles of male behavior are valorized and which are devalued” (McCann, et al., 2009, p. 201). In the case of adolescent males, this homophobia is expressed through the commonality of the way of referring to one another as a “fag.” This type of namecalling is considered by many males and females alike as the worst name they could call a boy (Pascoe, 2007). However, the term takes on many uses among adolescent boys that have nothing to do with actual homosexuality but rather things from teasing a friend to bullying a nerd. One young man teased as being a “fag” often “wore his pants high on his waist, as opposed to the low-slung style favored by most boys, and tight-fitting shirts tucked into his pants, cinched by a belt” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 35). Since this student, named Huey, did not fit the stereotype of the modern masculine boy, he is essentially also separated from heterosexuality in terms of what he is referred to as. Indeed, “heterosexuals, in particular, tend to express a strong commitment to their heterosexuality and they tend to view homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexual,

and trans-gendered people as distinctly Other” (Lillian, 2007, p. 736). The separation of heterosexuality and masculinity is the driving force behind this name-calling, as even “most guys explained their or others’ dislike of fags by claiming that homophobia was synonymous with being a guy” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 55). For boys growing up in such incredibly heterosexist environments, they must choose to be heterosexual and masculine or homosexual and a “faggot”, regardless of their actual sexual preference. In order to preserve masculinity as it is received from culture, boys call each other “faggots” and tease each other when they do not act as society dictates.

Though this behavior is incredibly common in males, when it goes unchecked it has the potential to breed violence and more aggressive forms of homophobia among bullies, as well as self-destructive tendencies among LGBT students themselves. One of the reasons antigay behavior evolves into violence is that teachers and administrators do not take it seriously enough. At one school in particular, “teachers must have heard students use derogatory words such as fag, gay, dyke, or, as in the previous instance, switch hitter, with one exception I [the author] never heard any reprimands” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 38). By allowing this type of name-calling to exist, teachers are reinforcing the heterosexism and homophobia that is taught both inside and outside the classroom. Ignoring a problem does not make it go away, and by ignoring homophobic slurs, teachers and administrators allow the root of the issue, homophobia itself, to grow. At this same school where teachers did not punish students calling other antigay names, one openly homosexual student, named Ricky, faced more than name-calling, but physical violence (Pascoe, 2007). He says that “this is the only school that throws water bottles, throws rocks, and throws food, ketchup, sandwiches, anything of that nature” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 70). When another incident—where he was threatened and was forced to leave a football game—

occurred, he reported it to an administrator who told him it would be taken care of, but was rather never spoken of again (Pascoe, 2007). It is the job of a school not only to educate students, but to supply them with an environment where they can learn at least without the threat of being tortured on a daily basis. Though the community Ricky lived in is small and quite conservative, protection for LGBT students is still lacking: “research found an absence of civil protections in education statutes and a dearth of parity in public policy and civil rights protections for all students regardless of their sexual orientation throughout the United States” (Russo, 2006, p. 115). Nationwide, students like Ricky remain unprotected from the homophobia that has practically been bred into them. By allowing this violent and hateful behavior to occur without serious punishment, antigay feelings and actions still continues to grow. When boys grow from adolescents to young adults, many of them take the heterosexism learned in middle and high school with them to college. Violent, destructive behavior that once was written as “boys will be boys” can have tragic outcomes. One of the best-known cases is the brutal murder of homosexual University of Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard (Brooke, 1998). Investigators said “the suspects lured Mr. Shepard from the bar by saying they, too, were gay, and one of the women said Mr. Shepard had embarrassed one of the men by making a pass at him” (Brooke, 1998). Though no one can really know what the murderers were thinking, it does not take a stretch of the imagination to deduce what role sexuality had in motivating the violence. By “making a pass” at the murderer, Shepard could have possibly triggered the same feelings that make boys call each other “fag”; it is a threat to his heterosexuality and, by extension of heterosexist socialization, his masculinity. After this tragic incident, laws and protections were passed for students who are harassed, but many of them still do not give LGBT students equal rights (Russo, 2006). Even still the social stigmas still exist, and one homosexual

student at Georgetown University said, “a lot of us are afraid of reporting it” (Brown, 2009). This fear and anxiety is felt by nearly all LGBT students, and for some, it can manifest itself in tragic ways. A recent study “found that when gay, lesbian, and bisexual students were compared with their peers, they were four times more likely to have attempted suicide” (Fineran, 2002, p. 67). The violence of heterosexism is not limited to heterosexual on homosexual physical violence, but can be self-inflicted. Name-calling is truly the catalyst for antigay violence on all levels because it creates environments for LGBT students that are stressful, hateful, and destructive to the point that they feel their only escape to end their own life. Though teachers write off homophobic slurs and turn their back on the hate in front of them, it grows and evolves into physical violence, manifested through anything from rock throwing, to murder, to even suicide.

Because gender and sexuality are such omnipresent forces in society, men and women feel pressure to embody the characteristics of their gender and thus their half of the heterosexual equation. Adolescent boys are taught that a man is be strong, invulnerable, and popular among the opposite sex. From this place, homosexuality becomes negative, insulting, shameful. Boys insult each other by calling their peers “fags” when they do not fit into their gender role as they should. This behavior, brought on the socialization they encounter at school, goes unpunished and in many cases grows to violence against homosexuals. Heterosexism in schools is socially unjust because it breeds violence among a particular group of people and fosters discrimination and division among people. It grants some people more rights and protection than others, and on a more practical, almost non-political scale, it interrupts the schooling of many children who face bullying. Unfortunately, the correction of heterosexism and homophobia means the rectifying of society as a whole and the undoing of centuries of social practices.

References

Brooke, J. (1998, October 13). Gay man dies from attack, fanning outrage and debate. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>

This is an article written shortly after the murder of Matthew Shepard, a student at the University of Wyoming who was homosexual. The case itself has been extremely important in the passage of laws giving protections to LGBT students, most notably the Matthew Shepard Act. This article deals with the details of the crime, discussing the possibly homophobic motives of the killers. This article is useful because it shows a real world situation in which antigay violence in the taking of an innocent life.

Brown, E. (2009, October 31). GU rally decries antigay violence. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

This article, like the last, shows real life scenarios in which students are targeted for antigay violence, specifically in college. I thought it would be good to have an article addressing post-Matthew Shepard violence. This article also touches on the fear some students feel about reporting violence, tying in the mental health issues associated with antigay violence.

Fineran, S. (2002). Sexual harassment between same-sex peers: Intersection of mental health, homophobia, and sexual violence in schools. *Social work, 47*(1), 65-74.

In this article, Fineran discusses how both sexes treat each other in schools. It talks about girl-on-girl bullying, but also about how this same-sex bullying has roots in heterosexism. It discusses a very important point in my paper, which is the suicide rate of LGBT student due to the bullying they receive.

Klein, J. (2006). Cultural capital and high school bullies. *Men and masculinities, 9*(1), 53-75.

This article discusses the role of social and cultural capital in high school and how bullying is an expression of those higher on the cultural scale further repressing

those without as much cultural capital within the established culture. Males who are seen as effeminate, nerdy, or different are picked on for not representing the traditional male ideal with societal confines. This article is important to my paper because it helps depict the role of bullying and gay bashing by explaining the cultural implications of such behavior.

Lillian, D. L. (2007). A thorn by any other name: Sexist discourse as hate speech.

Discourse and society, 18(6), 719-740.

In this article, Lillian discusses sexist discourse and how this not only promotes inequality among people, but how it is also hate speech. She addresses this hate speech as often being homophobic both among men and women. I used this article to address name-calling itself and its hateful nature.

McCann, P. D., Minichiello, V., Plummer, D. (2009). Is homophobia inevitable?:

Evidence that explores the constructed nature of homophobia, and the techniques through which men unlearn it. *Journal of sociology: Australian sociological association*, 45(2), 201-220.

This article gives background information on homophobia itself, describing it as a social construct or stigma as opposed to an actual psychological fear. It also explains that homophobia is generated through interaction with other males to learn what is acceptable male behavior and what is not. This article provides good analysis and background information in setting the stage for my topic.

Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*.

Berkeley: University of California Press.

This book follows boys at a high school as they move through adolescence within

the patriarchal and hypermasculine traditions of high school. Pascoe explores these boys in their relationships with girls, but also their relationships among each other as they strive to be “real men.” This source is largely the basis of my paper and is useful to me because it discusses the role of masculinity in boys and how that drives homophobia among adolescents.

Russo, R. G. (2006). The extent of public education nondiscrimination policy protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students: A national study. *Urban education, 41*(2), 115-150.

This article discusses the various statutes and protections of LGBT students in the public school system and how effective they are. What has been found is that civil rights of LGBT students are lacking in many areas of the United States. For my paper, this article shows that although some protections have been enacted for LGBT students, on the whole they are underprotected and not granted the same civil rights as heterosexual students.

Course Reflection

Through core, I grew more comfortable with and adjusted to class discussion in a coeducational environment, and in my work, I improved my research capabilities within analytical writing, as well as expanded my knowledge of social justice issues mostly within the United States.

I come from an all-girls high school. It is a high school that nurtures girls to think critically, build female (heterosexual, of course!) relationships, and express their opinions persuasively and eloquently (and to be good Catholics, but I digress). So, unlike girls at coed schools, I became pretty outspoken in class and always felt comfortable in my small, lady-powered community. When I came to college, therefore, I knew how to express my opinions in class and how to do it in way that would translate both to my instructors and my peers. However, the first day of core, there was the small class and material I was passionate and opinionated about—but something was not quite right. Oh, yeah, there were boys. So, needless to say, it took a few weeks to get comfortable, to stop being shocked when my schoolmates were supposed to grow facial hair, and to finally be able to find my high-pitched voice among all of the baritones. Core helped acclimate me to coeducation learning because it helped me feel comfortable once again to sound off during class.

My work also changed thanks to core. The only analytical writing I had done in high school was for English, analyzing novels and all of that. The sheer amount of citation needed to write in the social sciences took some getting use to, as well as the work before sitting down to write a paper. Looking at my first rough draft, just about every other line had “citation?” written after it. Using evidence to express my opinions is something I’m sure will help me in my career at UCSC, and a skill I’ve begun to hone in core.

Finally, I feel like my eyes have been opened to issues that simply don't exist at private school, or even in my community as a whole. I've looked at poverty and injustice, but I've never truly seen it, never thought about it and where it comes from or how to stop it. Core has changed how I see the United States, which was not very positive to begin with, so that's saying something, I think. Core even changed how I look at LGBT rights, something I was already aware of and passionate about. I know feel like I know more about the roots of it, as well as the tragic ends. On the whole, I feel like I can think more about the bigger picture of an issue.

I feel like core was an incredibly positive thing for me, something that helped ease me into life and schoolwork at UCSC. It was beneficial for me to have a place where I could try and fail or try and succeed at my new school without huge repercussions. It has also exposed me to important issues that I feel connected to and passionate about, and hope to move toward fixing in the future.