

Stigmas of Homosexual Men and the Formation of Gay Identities

“The very first day of college orientation, I made friends with two girls who asked me if I was gay within the first hour we met. When I affirmed their assumptions, they told me it was ‘cool’ and said ‘It’s fine, you can be our gay best friend,’ which took me back and I knew I needed to look for friends elsewhere. It was my first experience being open and flamboyant and that was the only and immediate category they had cornered me into.”

--R. Stanfield, *undergraduate student*.¹

Stanfield’s commentary on his experience as a gay male in relation to female friends and acquaintances is a considerably widespread experience of homosexual men. The “Gay Best Friend” is a label that is frivolous, yet destructive. It makes him sound like an accessory, a collector’s item or a complementary presence based merely on his identified sexuality. The social constructions of the gay male have become synonymous with the connections between gay men and straight upper-class women. The gay male has become a complementary presence for the straight woman in his objectification and stereotypical depiction in our society. Patrick Riley quotes in his CNN article, “...the gay man gets turned into a commodity...the gay man allows women to feel exotic, like they’ve suddenly found themselves an exciting pet or fancy outfit that will get them comp tickets to Broadway shows.”² This further speaks to the stereotypes society maintains about gay men. They are characterized by constructions of femininity. They are expected to enjoy shopping and fashion and maintain a steady level of sassiness and flamboyancy. Further support for this is evident in McLelland’s article: “In these cultural

¹ Stanfield, Ryan. Interview held Saturday, April 13th, 2011 3:45 pm. Ryan was asked about his experience being a young homosexual male in college and his relation to women in that context. He answered questions about his interactions with women and the experience of being gay and what that meant to his relationships with others and how his homosexuality might influence or change those interactions.

² Riley, Patrick L. “Gay men, straight women: enduring bonds.” <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/07/living/gay-best-friend> (7 August 2012). p. 2

products (referring to movies and television), gay men are overwhelmingly associated with fashion, style and consumption—characteristics that render them of interest to women.”³

Is the homosexual male so sub-human, so far from social normalcy that he can't just be a *friend*? The term coins his presence to the person he is relating: the first requirement is that he's gay and the afterthought places him as friend. And if he is a woman's *gay* best friend, can there only be one spot for a homosexual in her life? Do gay men have to compete for that slot in the lives of their friends?

“The idea of the gay best friend has always made me feel subject to gender discrimination as well as sexual orientation discrimination, which not a lot of people truly understand.” – *T. Stadtlander, undergraduate student.*⁴

It is apparent that men who identify as homosexual face stereotypes of their identity based on social constructions of their sexuality. The homosexual and overall LGBTQIAA community has expanded greatly in the past ten years and truly embodies queer culture and acceptance. This takes its form in the growing numbers of support groups, community organizations and clubs like “Gay-Straight Alliance” or “Advocate” at educational institutions. Companies like Human Rights Campaign and Amnesty International have honed in on gay rights as part of their human rights agendas. Same-sex marriage is being discussed at greater lengths and legalized at a faster pace than ever before. Evidently, social constructions are changing.

Unfortunately, the social constructions of what it means to be a gay man in pop culture remain constraining and degrading. The first hit show on television to highlight openly gay male characters was 1998's *Will & Grace*. The show was a first of its kind and did a great deal to

³ McLelland, Mark J. *Inside Out: Queer Theory and Popular Culture*. University of Wollongong Research Online. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1156&context=artspapers> (2005). p. 4

⁴ Stadtlander, Thomas. Interview held Friday, April 19th, 2011 9:45 pm. Tommy gave an 8 minute recorded interview on his experience with his upper-class white female friends and how he felt discriminated against as the distinct “gay” in his friend groups. His reports of female interactions were similar to those of Stanfield. He also spoke to the gender binaries that have affected his experience as a gay male.

educate the American public about tolerance and acceptance of others, but the media's power in portrayal weighs with a heavy hand.⁵ Although there were two gay men portrayed – one as a very “straight-acting” lawyer—the character most remember is Jack, for his flamboyant behavior and feminine nature. The character represents and reinforces stereotypes of the gay male. Jack is a struggling actor and singer who talks with a very distinct tone and diction that identifies him instantly for having a “gay voice.” More TV shows have reinforced the stereotype including, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Glee* and *Modern Family*. Although these shows typically have an “atypical” gay male who doesn't act like the stereotypical homosexual, there always exists the presumptive overly feminine, emotional and completely un-masculine male who the audience laughs at because he deviates so far from the usual behaviors expected of men. The male characters have their female counterparts to whom the gay men are complementary. In *Will & Grace*, the gay men are frequently in scenes consoling their female friends on their recent break-ups, dating problems, sex lives and fashion choices.

The pairing of the gay male and the upper-class female has ideal and healthy aspects to it. The relationship does not usually have sexual complications, making it a unique union between members of the opposite gender. Women also get the opportunity to better understand the workings of the male mind and how men think of sex. The gay male also provides a presence of confidence to the straight woman, both as a source of her own confidence and as an outgoing male presence that emits an aura of fearlessness in his interactions with his female friend that she

⁵ Riley, Patrick L. “Gay men, straight women: enduring bonds” <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/07/living/gay-best-friend> (7 August 2012). Riley, an independent writer for CNN describes the nature of *Will and Grace* comparatively to his own relationships with women: “*Will and Grace* underscored the dynamics and complexities that exist inside this unique bond, from the difficulty the gay man has coming out (even to his best girlfriend) to deciding to have a child together when neither friend's knight in shining armour has shown up.” p. 2 (web)

doesn't always see with her straight male friends.⁶ The bold nature of some prominent gay men has created the image of a confident, bold man who feels 'fabulous' and isn't afraid of any criticisms and loves who he is inside and out. This is also a dangerous media stereotype because not all homosexual males are confident in themselves, in their bodies or their gayness at all. Still, the woman in the relationship does not go without stigma herself – the "fag hag" is a derogatory referral to her assumed interactions with gay men.⁷ Hags are also considered a woman who has meaningless sex with gay men. Recently, the new term "fruit fly" has been used to describe a woman who hangs around gay men frequently and integrates herself into gay culture. Both are used to label a straight woman who associates with gay males on a regular basis.⁸

The designation of the "Gay Best Friend" highlights several important distinctions about the homosexual experience. The individual is categorized as an 'other', a subhuman category in this regard. *Friend* is a neutral term in both gender and sexuality. *Friend* denotes an individual who shares an experience and emotional benefit with another or type of alliance in other terms. *Friendship* alludes to the shared experience of camaraderie, like that between Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn as they traversed the Mississippi or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The label of "gay friend" puts the identification of being homosexual before the concept of friendship. This makes the "Gay Best Friend" a term that refers to someone who is collected amongst a group and stands out merely for his sexual preference in relationships. The

⁶ Meyers, Seth Psy.D. "Why Straight Women Are Attracted to Gay Men." <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-is-2020/201207/why-straight-women-are-attracted-gay-men> (6 July 2012).

⁷ Ibid. Meyers writes: "The 'fag hag' refers to a woman, usually in her 20s or 30s who loves hitting the gay bars with her gay male friends on a Saturday night on the town. Often, the women who get labeled as 'fag hags' are overweight, insecure or uncomfortable with the idea of frequenting straight bars where they could potentially meet men who are interested in them. Instead, they feel more comfortable removing the sexual factor that exists at straight bars and prefer the harmlessness that comes from socializing with gay men in gay surroundings" (web)

⁸ Musto, Michael. "'Fag Hag'? 'Fruit Fly'? By Any Name, They're Bigger Than Ever: Get to know the girls who like boys who like boys." <http://www.villagevoice.com/2013-03-13/columns/the-gay-mans-plus-one-michael-musto/> (13 March 2013) Musto asks several women about their experiences being labeled as "Fruit Flies" or "Fag Hags" to which they respond very positively.

categorization makes him an *other*; he becomes distinguished from other types of friendship on the basis of his attraction and sexual identity. The *other* is an interpersonal social construction of communication that allows strangeness to define, identify and divide people from one another.⁹

The categorization of this type of friend characterizes the individual from the onset of the term. The homosexual is already a different “species” and denoting the homosexual’s classification as a friend as completely different from other friends maintains this pigeonholed experience.¹⁰ The generalized assumptions are that the “Gay Best Friend” is someone who loves to go shopping for dresses and lingerie with his female friends, provides relationships support and a special kind of therapy for women in their relationships, acts flamboyant and is flippant, wears bright colors, clean-pressed and expensive clothing, highlights his hair and probably walks with a feminine hip sway and a tilted wrist.¹¹

The concept of the “gay best friend” derives from the notion that the upper-class female needs an effeminate companion to accompany her on shopping trips, salon visits and to gossip about her latest squeeze.¹² This notion is not only narrow and confining; it creates the identity of

⁹ Gurevitch, Z.D. “The Other Side of Dialogue: On Making the Other Strange and the Experience of Otherness” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 91, No. 5. The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 1179-1199. Evaluating and realizing the other gives way to self identification. To identify the other, the distinction must be made that there is something strange or the someone is a stranger to the perceiver. “Making strange” the other distances the familiar from the other and reconstructs definitions of the two parties.

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality -- Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, March 1990. Michel Foucault describes the coining of the homosexual “species”: “We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized...less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” p. 43

¹¹ Biery, Roger E. *Understanding Homosexuality: The Pride and the Prejudice*. Austin, TX: Edward-William Publishing Company, 1990. Biery refers to Martin Levine’s work, *Gay Men: The Sociology of Male Homosexuality* on the stereotypical gay person: “Supposedly thin and hairless, they walk with swishing gaits, talk with lisping voices and wear bras and skirts. Naturally the all work in ‘feminine’ professions -- hairdressing, designing, decorating. Gay men are viewed as exemplars of style and art. Sophisticated and trendy, they inhabit a world of gourmet cuisine, high fashion and chic night spots. Witty and bright, they dominate artistic, intellectual and literary salons. Their sensitive and creative souls bring about strong interest in ballet, opera, and theater.” p. 50.

¹² McLelland, Mark J. *Inside Out: Queer Theory and Popular Culture*. University of Wollongong Research Online. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1156&context=artspapers> (2005). The ‘lifestyle gay’ displays his

the gay male based on the needs and desires of the advantaged female. Homosexual identity has little or nothing to do with the complementary accessorizing of women and such an idea is destructive to the development of the self amongst homosexual men. From these harmful associations come blatant ignorance surrounding the complex struggles and human expression of homosexual men. The result is a narrow definition of homosexuality and stereotyped frame of gay men, each that lack consideration of varying masculinities and personal identities.

Social constructs of homosexuality are more prevalent in modern society through representations in the media and social movements. The Gay Rights Movements of the 1970s brought the notion of ‘gay’ out into mainstream media and conversation. The transformation of what it meant for men to identify as homosexual thirty years ago to what modern society holds as stereotypes and definitions of the gay man has failed to produce norms of equality.¹³ Rather, the time has strengthened the differences between straight and gay while casting homosexuality as ‘the other’. For instance, the “gay best friend” who is qualified first for his sexual preference and referred to secondarily for his value as a companion. It is his gayness that sets him apart from other friends in a menagerie of sorts and puts his worth on a separate qualifying block from other friends who are presumably straight, or ‘normal’. The stereotype rejects the gay male further from normalcy due to his sexuality. In this seemingly small denotation, the homosexual man is cast from normalcy based on his sexual identity, even though it may be seen as a way to signify an honorarium of sorts. It continues to separate society’s perception of him as normal. The

homosexuality on the surface and is an active consumer and reproducer of the materialistic middle-class way of life. His association with “purchasing power” gives him a place in American capitalist society. “Gay men as girls’ best friends are rendered safe for mainstream consumption through the focus on their non-sexual relationships with women (not their sexual relationships with other men). p. 3.

¹³ D’Emilio, John. “Capitalism and Gay Identity” *The Gender Sexuality Reader*. Ed. Lancaster, Roger N. & di Leonardo, Michaela. New York: Routledge, 1997. “Although lesbians and gay men won significant victories in the 1970s and opened up some safe social space in which to exist, we can hardly claim to have dealt a fatal blow to heterosexism and homophobia” p. 174.

stereotypes of gay men as upper-middle class, white and flamboyant are incredibly limiting and hardly encompassing of the diversity of homosexual males.

Stereotypes and stigma associated with the gay male include the following false assumptions:

1. “Gay people are located only in big cities”
2. “Gay people prey on straight people as potential sexual partners”
3. “Gay people are always looking for sexual partners”
4. “Gay people sexually molest children”
5. “Gay people ‘recruit’ because they cannot reproduce”
6. “Gay men are feminine”¹⁴

These are all dangerously false and short sight homosexuals into damaging assumptions about their intentions and identities based on the sexual attraction to members of the same sex.

First, although gay people are highly visible in big cities due to the prevalence of LGBTQIAA organizations and support groups, homosexuals live in all areas of the world, rural or urban.

There may also be high numbers of gay people living in rural areas who remain silent about their sexual identities due to stigma and conservative values. Gay communities and visibility no not equate to percentages of actual gay individuals. Second, many gay men find close friendships with straight women, even with the “Gay Best Friend” stereotypes in many of the gendered relationships. Also, relations between gay men and lesbian women are quite common as well.

Gay men are able to sustain close friendships with straight men without coming on to them.

Third, gay men search for partners who are their “type” in very much the same ways that straight individuals pique interest in another. Preferences are based on personalities and physical

¹⁴ Biery, Roger E. *Understanding Homosexuality: The Pride and the Prejudice*. Austin, TX: Edward-William Publishing Company, 1990. p. 52-58 Biery cites George Allport (1958):

“The process of generalizing characteristics or motives to a group of people is called stereotyping...a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) one’s conduct in relation to that category. The stereotype acts both as a justificatory device for categorical acceptance or rejection of a group and as a screening or selective device to maintain simplicity in perception and thinking.” p. 42

appearances, same as any other base of attraction. Gay men are attracted to their partners in the same way a straight male may prefer redheads, skinny women or confident women. Fourth, homosexuality is in no way related to pedophilia. Over 90% of assaults and molestation cases involving children are perpetrated by adult males against young girls, technically making them heterosexual pedophilic situations. Half of men's perpetration against boys was committed by married men, many of whom knew their victims. Again, sexuality (homo or hetero in nature) is not the issue -- it is pedophiles that are the problem. ¹⁵

The negative stereotypes and skewed assumptions of gay men are rooted in the modern society's concept of the gender binary – that there are only two genders: men and women. The social constructions of gender come packaged with the outward sex category. Therefore, someone wearing a skirt, with a ponytail, makeup and a visible chest raised is assumed to be a woman. Women are recognized by their feminine natures, daintiness, cleanliness, displays of makeup and effort into their appearance and fashion and also flirting with men, demonstrating their straight availability. If an individual who is outwardly sex categorized as male displays any behaviors aligning himself with the attributes of femininity is assumed to be homosexual. This concludes that to be gay is to deviate from the norm of heterosexuality, making heteronormativity a pervasive social force. ¹⁶

¹⁵ Biery, Roger E. *Understanding Homosexuality: The Pride and the Prejudice*. Austin, TX: Edward-William Publishing Company, 1990. (p. 47-58) Biery also notes the pervasiveness of stereotypes on terms and associated imagery and triggered responses.

¹⁶ Kite, Mary E., Whitley Jr., Bernard, E. "Do Heterosexual Women and Men Differ in Their Attitudes Toward Homosexuality?" *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Issues*, Volume 4. Ed. Herek, Gregory M. *Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding Prejudice Against Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998. Kite and Whitley address gender roles, sex differences and attitudes towards homosexuality. "Evidence that this belief system is tied to heterosexual's perceptions of gay people comes from demonstrations that men who are described as having feminine characteristics are judged likely to be homosexual whereas women described as having masculine characteristics are judged likely to be lesbian. People likewise infer that gay men have the gender-associated characteristics of heterosexual men. It is noteworthy, however that the association between lesbianism... appears to be much weaker." p. 40.

Homosexuality has evolved in the past two centuries, but progression towards gay rights may be difficult to define and clearly prove.¹⁷ Sexual relations between homosexuals have been categorized as a grave sin included amongst adultery, rape and incest. Unfortunately, these associations have yet to completely dissolve from the consideration of gay relations. Courts have historically condemned homosexuality as a crime and the judicial system still does not recognize the human rights of gay individuals and couples.¹⁸ The Institute for American Values has placed the rights of gay couples second to the “cherished institution of marriage,” which has long been an association between men and women for property exchange, social alliances and ownership of children. The prevailing argument is that marriage is an fundamental human right, preventing marriage harms children of gay and lesbian parents and there’s no social benefit in preventing their marriages.¹⁹ Marriage is a social institution that has evolved over time with changing culture, religions and vastly different societies. The values associated with marriage vary in history and by location around the globe. It is time for this social institution to catch up to the modern society it ought to reflect – one of inclusion, acceptance and promotion of human rights of each individual.

The discourses of social structure have worked to suppress but in turn to validate the experience of homosexuals. Sodomy, once considered a sin punishable by death has long been

¹⁷ Mushovic, Ineke. “Column: Progress obscures gay inequality”. USA Today. <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2011-08-31/Column-Progress-obscures-gay-inequality/50206878/1> (31 Aug 2011). Mushovic lists the progressive laws and opportunities that protect and help gay people in America, but a much longer and fleshed out list of the inequalities gay and transgender individuals face without protection from the federal government. This includes non-discrimination protections, marriage rights, adoption rights, insurance equality and social security benefits.

¹⁸ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality -- Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, March 1990. p. 38. Michel Foucault accounts for homosexuality’s negative connotations and sinful connotations amongst social control and deviance strategies. Courts had the ability to condemn homosexuality as an act “against nature” considered amongst bestiality and infidelity. Intersex persons were once considered criminals for their anatomical deviations from definitions of the binary sex categories and laws therein.

¹⁹ Leff, Lisa. “Witness: Gay Rights ‘Second To Preserving The Cherished Social Institution of Marriage’” Huffington Post Associated Press. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/27/proposition-8-gay-marriag_0_n_438738.html (27 Jan 2010)

considered the only facet of the homosexual experience, a dangerous assumption that uses fear to propel anti-gay sentiment and distinguishes the term “sodomy” as some Biblically derived shaming device for any individual who engages in homosexual activity. The social control that has formulated homosexuality as a form of perversity has kept gay men marginalized, however it has also given the gay movement a platform on which to build its own movements.²⁰

Movements are only comprised of the individuals who stand behind them, and behind the hatred, stigma and inaccurate assumptions about what it means to be a gay male, stands Ryan Stanfield. He is not anyone’s typical “gay” because he is not a concrete objectification of his sexuality. He is not a gay or a “gay best friend,” but a true companion in the lives of the many people who love and admire him. His sexual identity is not what makes him stand out, but it is his flavor for life and fiery passion for the arts. It is his devotion and loyalty to others and his heart—his heart that feels the same love, wants the same rights and possesses the same humanity as any other heart. It is this heart that makes him my best friend.

“Once becoming friends with you, being gay was never an issue. It was like, I can be open and as flamboyant as possible and it felt comforting and easy. When my friendship developed with you, my gayness wasn’t like tokening, but more of a special marker of our friendship and a level we were at.” –R. Stanfield, 2013²¹

²⁰ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality -- Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, March 1990. Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* chapter on The Deployment of Sexuality notes the importance of social control and discourse. Foucault highlights the importance of language and vocabulary in discussing, oppressing and fighting social orders and conditions. He describes the historical sociological development as such: “There is no question that the appearance in the nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.” (101)

²¹ Stanfield, Ryan. Interview held Saturday, April 13th, 2013 3:45 pm.

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