

Heterosexual in a Heteronormative Society

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My second cousin, John, has been in a relationship for 14 years, but was forced to make tremendous sacrifices because of his sexual orientation. John worked and resided in Japan for 5 years, where he met his partner, Chris. John was relocated to New York, where he and Chris maintained a long distance relationship for nearly 8 years. “Why didn’t Chris just move to the United States?” I asked. John replied, “Things aren’t that simple for gay men. For years Chris tried to obtain a visa allowing him to reside in the United States, but was unable to do so.” I felt ashamed for being so naive as to assume a solution could be so easy and uncomplicated.

He explained to me that same sex partners do not qualify for citizenship in the United States. Furthermore, the United States doesn’t recognize gay marriage (or civil unions) as a qualification for obtaining a U.S. residency visa. In order for John and Chris to be together, and to be recognized as a couple, they each had to make a considerable sacrifice. John found a new job and John and Chris, together, relocated to Munich, Germany. This was the only place that my cousin was able to find a job that would cover expenses for both Chris and himself, as Germany recognizes Civil Unions. Chris does not speak the language and spends much of his time home, alone, while John is at work. While this situation is not ideal by any means, it was the only way they could be together. I was naive to think that such a simple resolution would be plausible. As a member of the dominant cultural group, I have never faced challenges such as these. Had John been heterosexual, and Chris had been female, the problem could have been more easily resolved without question.

I had only met my cousin once prior to my trip to Germany, and knew very little about him, as he maintains only minimal contact with my family, who has never accepted him because

he doesn't suite their idea of "normal." I had stayed with him for a few nights when I had traveled to New York with some friends in 2008, but our conversations were superficial, as we were only getting to know one another. Prior to him moving to Germany, John's sexual orientation seemed to be a mystery to the family. It wasn't until my trip to Germany in 2010 that my cousin told me the story about him and Chris. This conversation was eye opening, and was a cultural experience for me in that my heterosexual identity became more clear, as I was forced to acknowledge the privileges I had as a member of the dominant group. As a heterosexual, LBGTQ issues have never directly affected me. While I had always considered myself an ally, and an advocate for gay rights, I had never taken into account my participation in the problem. I had also never realized all that I had taken for granted as a heterosexual in such a heteronormative society. Homophobia pervades our culture, and regardless of our sexual identity, each individual experiences the harmful effects of homophobia (Warren, 1993). I decided to look back and reflect on my experiences as a heterosexual.

### *Looking Back*

My parents keep boxes of all of my childhood projects, awards, report cards, etc. Every few years I look through these boxes to remind myself of who I was, and how far I have come. I open an old, battered box, with "Michelle's stuff" scrawled on the lid. I pull out my report card from fourth grade, with instructions requiring me to have my mother and father sign the report card and for me to return the signed copy to my teacher. This is the first time I recognized the heterosexist language that is perpetuated even on my grade school report cards. "How is it that they can assume that I have a mother *and* a father?," I thought to myself.

As I continue to think about this, I realize that I too am guilty of this rhetoric. I recall working for the recreation department in Chino Hills when I was 17 years old, and I remember

asking the children to get their permission slips signed by their mother and father. As a member of the dominant group, and as an individual who had a mother and father, and whose parents have been married for 25 years, the thought had not crossed my mind until now that several of these children probably did not have both a mother *and* a father. As noted by Blumenfield (1992), the family is the primary socializing agent; “It is from parents and guardians that we learn which behaviors the culture deems appropriate to our anatomical sex, often by example” (Blumenfield, 1992, p. 26). I had been exposed to only one type of “family” in my life, so I did not account for the possibility of an alternative type of family when I requested that the children have their parents’ sign their permission slips. How is it that it has taken me this long to realize this?

I began to feel uncomfortable, guilty, and ashamed as I came to realize my own participation in the problem. I continued to dig through the boxes, finding more evidence of my heterosexist education. Heterosexism can be defined as the belief that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation, thus normalizing heterosexuality (Blumenfield, 1992). I came across a project from grade school, which had required me to write a story about my future. I thought back and vaguely remembered the assignment. Each student was asked to write about their future family, their future husband or wife, the number of children they would have, pets, etc. Basically, we were each expected to write about the nuclear family, and that is exactly what we did. Alternative notions of family would not have crossed our minds. As Warren (1992) contends, it is through the process of socialization that people are expected to adhere to strict social and gender-based roles based on their sex. While the socialization of a child often takes place at home, it is then reinforced in schools (Blumenfield, 1992). As Michael Warner (1999) notes, “People are constantly encouraged to believe that heterosexual desire, dating, marriage, reproduction, childrearing, and home life are not only valuable to themselves, but the bedrock on

which every other value in the world rests” (p. 47). If a student had written their paper in a way that deviated from the ideal nuclear family, the child’s parents would have been contacted, because the child would have been deviating from what is considered “normal.” The immediate reaction to this deviation would be fear and worry.

### *Enculturation and Heteronormativity*

Enculturation is the process by which a person learns the requirements of the culture by which he or she is surrounded and thus acquires values and behaviors that are appropriate or necessary in that culture (Berry, 2007). As part of this process, the influences which limit, direct, or shape the individual (whether deliberately or not) include parents, institutions, and peers. If successful, enculturation results in competence in the language, values and rituals of the culture (Berry, 2007). Those who do not adhere to the cultures social norms, ten are categorized as “others” and are thus excluded from the in-group.

Heteronormativity is the term used to explain how heterosexuality is constituted as the norm in sexuality. The perceived “normal” and “natural” status of heterosexuality is presumed through the process of normalization. Consequently, heterosexuality takes on “an unquestionable position of being the “true” sexuality, the natural order of things, primarily through the way that it is linked to the male–female biological binary and procreation” (Robinson, 2005, p. 20). The normalization of heterosexuality is encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life. Thus, the normalization of heterosexuality is a social phenomenon that is actively negotiated in our culture, with the dominant discourses working to construct a cultural binary of heterosexual (us) versus homosexual (them) (Robinson, 2005).

Institutionalized heterosexuality thus becomes “legitimate” and the norm by which all other sexualities are defined as illegitimate and abnormal (Robinson, 2005). Within this culture, “the

normalization of heterosexuality is rendered invisible and diverts attention and critique away from the macro and micro social, economic and political discursive practices, including those operating in educational institutions that construct and maintain this hierarchy of difference across sexual identities” (Robinson, 2005, p.20).

Throughout my life my parents have always told me that one day I would fall in love with a wonderful man, I would get married and I would have children of my own. This assumption was never called into question. As I look back now, I recognize the ways in which my parents have interacted with me through this heteronormative lens, assuming that marriage and family was normal and natural. In essence, I successfully adhered to my cultures’ norms; enculturation helped mold me into an acceptable member of society. It wasn’t until college that I began to question this notion of “normal.” Normal for whom? When I think back to my childhood, homosexuality was nonexistent in the dialogs that took place between my parents and myself, it was absent from my childhood education, and it was virtually invisible in the media that I consumed as a child. It wasn’t until after high school that several of my old high school classmates began to “come out of the closet” one by one. How could I not have known? It seems that I too interact with others through the assumption of heteronormativity. I assume others to be heterosexual until I am told otherwise. Again, I begin to feel guilty and ashamed, as it is evident that I have conformed to dominant social structures that continue to marginalize homosexuals.

Going to college in Long Beach, a city with a large LGBTQ population, was an entirely different experience for me, as homosexuality became more “normal” to me. I suddenly had many gay friends, and became an advocate for gay rights, signing petitions, writing letters to congressmen, and challenging the protestors who marched across the streets with signs reading “Yes on 8.” But I still reaped the benefits of being heterosexual. Just because I considered myself

an advocate for their cause, didn't mean that I understood the full extent of the problem. It wasn't until my trip to Germany that my heterosexual identity became more clear, as I was forced to acknowledge the privileges I had as a member of the dominant group.

When John told me his story, the issue suddenly became more personal for me. The extent of my understanding had been limited to the discourse surrounding Proposition 8 and equal rights. The internal struggle of "coming out" to family and friends, for instance, had never occurred to me. John told me that he could see that I was an ally, and he knew that I was different than my parents. He said, "I love your parents because they are my family, but they grew up in a different world than you did." He went on to say, "For a long time I never revealed my identity as a gay man to my family. What was the point? No matter what I could say it was not going to change their opinion. They believe that this is a choice, but why would anyone choose this life for themselves?" I empathized with his narrative, as I knew, just from the political ideological battles that took place between my parents and myself, that no matter what I said to parents, they could not see things from my point of view. I too felt that it was pointless, and not worth the energy.

I appreciated John sharing this personal story with me. I could see that he somehow trusted me, but still, I sensed that he did not fully believe that I truly understood or appreciated the gay mans' struggle. There was something about his tone of voice that made me feel stupid and naïve. I felt as if I somehow had to defend myself, yet I couldn't understand why I felt this way.

As I sit, writing this paper, I still contemplate why I felt the need to defend myself. My cousin was not attacking me personally, but was opening up to me, so where is this discomfort stemming from? I then thought back to a discussion that took place in one of my classes at Cal

State Long Beach. A question was posed to the class, “What if you had a child that was gay? Would you be upset?” I remember now that I had experienced the same discomfort when I heard this question. I thought to myself, “I would love my child no matter what their sexual orientation might be!” But as I thought longer, and let this question resonate, I realized that I did not have an answer. I do not know how I would feel. How could I *not* be upset having a child that was homosexual, knowing the challenges that they would face in this homophobic world? I was uncomfortable because I was being forced to acknowledge my own bias. I don’t want my children to struggle, just as I never had to struggle.

*Today*

Last week, I reached out to my cousin to discuss this dialogue that has been haunting me for the past year and a half. I am thankful that this conversation took place via the internet, because when I brought up the subject to John I immediately felt embarrassed. To my surprise he too remembered the conversation we had had in Germany in 2010. I explained my feelings of guilt and shame, without fully understanding the origin of these emotions. His reaction to my sentiment took me by surprise. John said, “Michelle, of course you cannot fully understand the struggles faced by the homosexual community, but that is not something you should be ashamed of, and you should not take that to mean that you are not truly an ally.” He went on to say, “Despite the generation gap between you and myself, you are the only person in my extended family that I believe really ‘gets it’, and if I did not truly believe you to be an ally, I would not have invited you into mine and Chris’s home.” I now felt even more ridiculous and stupid than I had felt in 2010. I had taken his tone to be condescending, when in fact, he was sincere. Perhaps it was my own insecurities that had lead to this interpretation. I realize now that my discomfort had stemmed from my own identity as a member of the dominant culture.

*The Trouble with "Normal"*

“Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (Halperin, 1995, p.62). Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded in social institutions, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts (Warner, 1999). The realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are.

Queer theory's main objective is exploring and contesting of the categorization of gender and sexuality. Identities are not fixed, they cannot be categorized and labeled. Because identities consist of many varied components, so to categorize by one characteristic is wrong. The theory's goal is to destabilize identity categories, which are designed to identify the “sexed subject” and place individuals within a single restrictive sexual orientation (Warner, 1999). As Queer theorist, Michael Warner (1999) notes, to be fully normal is impossible, as everyone deviates from the norm in some way. Therefore, non-normative behaviors are, in fact, the statistical norm, thus complicating this notion of normalcy.

## References

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