

Gay Invisibility vs. Gay Identity

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Since the initial defining of the terms homosexual and heterosexual, there have existed sexual identity categories. The categories were created as unequal, with homosexuality being rendered as inferior to heterosexuality, which was assumed to be the natural order of sexuality. In categorizing homosexuals as distinct, they were created as a separate class of people, capable of their own identity. The identity was originally a negative trait socially, and was associated with discrimination and hate crimes (Jagose, 1997). Discrimination has been reduced and the homosexual identity has been integrated into society more fluidly in modern times, but this creates a problem for gay identity (Bech, 2011). A question is raised of whether gay identity should continue to exist, or if the identity should fold into the rest of society to become invisible.

Gay identity began when the medical institution began to define homosexuals as being distinct from the general society, which would later be classified as heterosexual. Mental health practitioners, medical doctors and legal institutions defined homosexuality as being deviations from normal behavior, and individuals who persistently engaged in such behaviors were labeled as deviants. This labeling and exclusion from society resulted in the formation of the gay identity. Homosexuals were rejected by society and therefore created their own culture with its own values and meanings. Initially these identities were minimal deviations that existed within the context of majority society. Beginning with homophile movements and moving through gay liberationist movements and reaching a climax with the Stonewall riots, the identity continued to become more distinct from normative identities (D'Emilio, 1983). Modern homosexuals have more firm identities than their counterparts from any point in history.

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Solid identities are important in defeating stereotypes and reducing oppressive social attitudes toward homosexuals. In modern society there is an increasing level of tolerance for homosexuals as homosexual images become more prevalent through media. Through this mainstreaming of homosexual images though, there is a risk of the loss of the gay identity. Homosexuals have been a socially distinct group for at least the past fifty years, and a full integration and acceptance into society would destroy the unique culture that has developed around the gay identity. In essence, homosexuality would be assimilated into the dominant culture, and then normalized to match the ideals of the dominant culture in all respects except for sexual identity.

While assimilating into society and becoming no longer separate resolves feelings of shame, guilt and fear that are associated with having a deviant identity, homosexuals would become socially invisible (Bech, 2011). Social invisibility would result in a decline of social movements for gays and lesbians, resulting in essentially a stagnation of progress towards equality. The impact of this would be similar to that of the Civil Rights movement's conclusion. At the end of the movement the cultural assumption was that the issues of racism had ended and that the topic was no longer an issue for American society, when in reality racism still exists and it is still a problem, even if it has been mostly removed from social institutions. Some individuals in society are still socialized to have racist attitudes, and without active movements in place, or awareness to the unique identities at work, the attitudes remain and go unchallenged. The cessation of social movements for sexual equality would affect not only homosexuals, but also other sexual minorities. While society is beginning to accept homosexuals, transsexuals have not reached the same level of social awareness or acceptance. Since transsexuals gain legitimacy through the LGBT movements, the acceptance of lesbian and gay individuals would leave

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transsexuals without a strong social movement to further their acceptance and visibility. In addition to transsexuals, alternative sexual identities that are not consistent with mainstream identities would also be without representation. Homosexuals who identify as “vanilla” or “normative” are consistent with society’s expectations of sexual relationships, with the only variable being in the lack of gender difference between partners. The gay identity encompasses more than simply normative ideas. The gay identity over time has accumulated other concepts, such as valuing hypermasculine performativity for gay men, a trait that was acquired during the homophile movements as a result of feminized portrayals of gay men by media. From this value gay masculinity has morphed to become a more diverse sexual identity for gay men. The morphed identities include components of sadomasochism, fetishism and other paraphilic interests (Scott, 2011). In a normalized homosexuality, these alternative sexual discourses would not be tolerated, and would be outcast as being inconsistent with societal norms, as homosexuality once was. In a culture of normalized homosexuality, the inconsistent sexualities would need their own social movement to encourage equal treatment and social acceptance of their unique identities. While assimilation may seem like the easiest option for gay identity, it is really surrendering to normative ideals and allowing gay identity to become invisible.

An alternative to invisibility is proposed in a theoretical construct called Queer Theory. Queer theory advocates for the destruction of all sexual categories to allow each individual to form their own sexual identities (Jagose, 1997). A practical implementation of the queer theory concept is in place in Denmark. In Danish society there has been a recent turn toward a construction of “sexual taste”, in which individuals engage in sexualities of their preference with minimal intervention from the rest of society. Sexuality is both more public and more private in Danish society. A person’s sexual preferences are a private matter, but the concept of sexuality is

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very much public. This change in Denmark was a result of large numbers of women entering the labor market and there being a resulting call for equality in the treatment of women. In the circumstances of Denmark, women did not need to work to support their families, but the growth of industry in Denmark needed their labor, and thus equal pay as men was required to encourage women to enter the workforce. Since that movement in the 1960s, social progress has been moving forward with a removal of gender and sexual boundaries (Bech, 2011). In escaping the confines of static sexual and gender categories discrimination based on those factors is eliminated, as each individual is responsible for defining their own sexuality, not relying on finding their place in societal categories and accepting an associated identity. The problem in this idea is in that society functions on categories, it is a mechanism for making sense of diversity. This inescapable nature of categories is the reason for an encouragement by queer theory to overrun the social vocabulary with a large number of identities, to ultimately make all categorical definitions meaningless, and therefore removing implications and assumptions about each category, based on the limited capacity of the human mind, and even more limited capacity of social consciousness (Jagose, 1997).

Gay identities exist through their creation out of necessity for achieving social equality after homosexual was clinically established as an inferior sexuality. While it may be tempting to assimilate into a culture that seems to have moved into an open and accepting position, doing so would limit access to equality for gay identities that are not part of normative homosexuality. The queer theory method of multiple identities and the Danish method of individual “sexual tastes” should be considered and put into practice to achieve greater social justice.

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