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Performing “Normal”

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Before I walk into the door of my parents' home, I change the way I behave. I slow my breathing so I can both relax and talk slower. Talking fast makes me sound shrill. I make sure the weight between my legs is evenly split. It helps me seem more stiff and rigid so I don't stick my hips out. I also widen my stance. This helps me take up more space so I don't seem docile. I do all of this almost instinctively. Not just in front of my parents, but in front of my straight friends, strangers, and even other gay folk.

It's not an experience unique to me. It's a phenomenon which shows how intrinsically connected performativity is to queer issues. I will argue that this comes about from a need to perform masculinity at all times for fear of being watched and in order to compensate for stereotypical views of gay and queer men. I will then show that there are deeply held associations between masculinity with straightness and femininity with gayness even amongst gay men. Queer studies holds the ability to tackle and subvert these associations between performativity and sexuality both now and in the future.

Michael Hobbes interviewed many different gay men as part of an article on gay loneliness in the Huffington Post (Hobbes). He tells us about one man, named Grant, who was self conscious about the way he stood (Hobbes). Grant watched his male teachers and tried to mimic the way their legs were apart and their arms were at their side in order to exhibit the kind of masculine appearance he wanted (Hobbes). Another man by the name of Martin used to be worried about being too effeminate because he didn't want to be associated with 'bottoms' in the queer community (Hobbes). Martin would deepen his voice when he orders a drink at a bar and didn't even realize he was doing it after a while until his boyfriend pointed it out several years

down the line (Hobbes). Hobbes argues that performing masculinity is one of the ways men attain “sexual capital” or gain self-worth in our community (Hobbes).

We feel the need to perform masculinity at all times. Michel Foucault explains that this need arises from a high surveillance society similar to Jeremy Bentham’s “panopticon” (Barker and Scheele, pg 65). In a “panopticon”, there is a single guard tower in the very center surrounded by a dome of cells (Barker and Scheele, pg 65). This causes all the prisoners in the cell to self-monitor their behavior because they could be getting watched at any point in time (Barker and Scheele, pg 65). Foucault notes that people police their own behavior so they can present themselves in a way they think “counts as normal” (Barker and Scheele, pg 66).

This constant surveillance and self-policing is an issue that can bring about a lot of anxiety and depression for queer men from how it impacts self-perception (Hobbes). It seems interesting that men like Martin, Grant, and myself try to perform masculinity so rigorously that it can affect our mental health. Hobbes suggests it is because the more masculine we behave, then the more straight we appear to others (Hobbes).

Gayle Rubin argues that there is a sex hierarchy where those in the “charmed circle” of the hierarchy get to have the privilege of being normal and socially accepted (Barker and Scheele, pg 49). Meanwhile, those in the outside are ostracized for their unacceptable behavior and must keep their activities hidden from the judgement of others (Barker and Scheele, pg 50). One of the areas inside the charmed circle is heterosexuality whereas homosexuality is on the outer border (Barker and Scheele, pg 49). While this hierarchy covers acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior, it may have an explanation for our desire to be seen as straight by

our peers. By acting straight, we gain the ability to climb the sex hierarchy when we wouldn't otherwise. We come closer to normal in the eyes of others.

In my formative years my father would tell me not to play with dolls or dance. In tenth grade my teacher told me he did not mind me being gay because I was not in his face. Just last weekend I sat next to my teammate on my Mock Trial team who is also gay. A feminine gay man from another school walked by us and we both mocked him after he passed for not acting more "normal". These moments and experiences are shared throughout the gay community. It is the pervasiveness of heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity is the idea of heterosexuality and the gender roles associated with it being the benchmark of normality in society (Barker and Scheele, pg 84). This is similar to Rubin's charmed circle but discusses what is normal and expected instead of what is socially accepted (Barker and Scheele, pg 49, 84). The idea is that the "normal" relationship in society is one between a man and a woman (Barker and Scheele, pg 84). Queer relationships are therefore something that will only exist as a token on the sideline in heteronormative culture.

Heteronormativity impacts the way queer men view themselves within the queer community as well. It leads to people like Martin and Grant emulating hyper-masculine behavior in order to "blend into straight society" (Hobbes).

Hobbes believes that the reason this happens is because masculinity is fragile and must be constantly defended or performed (Hobbes). This becomes amplified in gay communities more so because every member has the need to constantly reaffirm that masculinity (Hobbes). In American culture, "homosexuality challenges the traditional ideology of heteronormative gender roles and norms" (Eguchi, pg 195). So a queer man will compensate with more masculinity to

overcome how “people will automatically question his masculinity” based on his selection of another man as a sexual partner (Eguchi, pg 195). In the United States, gay men are automatically associated with stereotypical feminine qualities like being emotional, outspoken, or overly concerned with appearance (Eguchi, pg 196). The way a queer man performs his gender may be directly affected by these cultural perceptions associated with his sexuality.

Implicitly, gay men like myself fight against a feminine representation of ourselves because of how demonized femininity is even within queer communities. Across multiple studies and interviews, gay men have a dominant preference for masculine men and distaste for feminine men (Hobbes). One study had 90% of gay men preferring other masculine men and also desiring to be more masculine themselves (Hobbes). For gay men, it seems that a label of being attracted to men has become confounded with being attracted to masculinity.

When I go to gay clubs or otherwise meet a gay man throughout my day I make the same kind of determinations based on the way they behave. If a man is acting effeminate I lose interest. There is rarely malice associated with the act. It happens almost implicitly. It’s easy to when everything you are raised around suggests the hope of entering the charmed circle if only you reject that femininity associated with being gay.

Shinsuke Eguchi did research concerning how deeply ingrained this need for masculine performativity is to some gay men (Eguchi, pg 193). Throughout this study, profiles of many gay men on the site “straightacting.com” stated preferences for guys who “like working on cars”, “wear flannel shirts”, “drink beer”, and “wear baggy clothing” (Eguchi, pg 201). These stereotypically masculine characteristics are seen by these gay men to epitomize what it means to be a man (Eguchi, pg 201). They are also associated not only with being a man, but specifically

with being a straight man as suggested by the name of the website and the label for these characteristics: “straightacting” (Eguchi, pg 201). Eguchi notes how the rhetoric of these gay men searching for straight acting men shows a belief that the only difference between straight men and straight-acting gay men is sexual preference in the eyes of society (pg 201).

This desire for hyper-masculine performativity is paralleled by a contempt for feminine performativity amongst gay men on the website (Eguchi, pg 202). One user says “If I wanted a woman I would date women but I like men” and justifies it from an experience with a feminine gay men in college who was “loud, obnoxious, and in no way shape or form manly” (Eguchi, 202). Another user laments how being with a feminine gay man would make him “gay by association” (Eguchi, 202). These concerns betray a perception of feminine performativity and gayness as both intertwined and undesirable.

Judith Butler argues that gender roles such as masculinity and femininity are performative (Barker and Scheele, pg 80). This does not mean we choose to perform in any one way or another, but rather that gender roles are less of an identity and more of a behavior (Barker and Scheele, pg 80). The men on straightacting.com consider themselves men as an identity first and from there it follows that they must act masculine so being gay, or feminine, subverts that identity. Butler’s analysis of gender might suggest a solution from the dissonance some gay men may feel. If gender is the performance rather than the identity, then the performance can come first without being dictated in a certain way. Butler, however, reminds us that we are influenced by “strong cultural discourses” that can “sustain the gender norms” (Barker and Scheele, pg 80). She argues that gender performance is a “copy of a copy” rather than an original display of oneself (Barker and Scheele, pg 80). The problem would be how we can never really step outside

these cultural discourses in our performances and the solution would be how we can do something different to subvert the way we copy gender (Barker and Scheele, pg 81). This means that both the problem and the solution may exist within the way our performance of gender and our sexual identity interact.

Queer theory can push back against those social stigmas by helping us better understand how performativity and sexuality work against and with each other. Performativity is a queer issue not only because of how essential sexuality is to how we perform masculinity or femininity but also because of how much the interaction impacts queer communities and the way they perceive and treat each other.

Works Cited

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Shinsuke Eguchi. "Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: The Rhetorical Strategy of "Straight-Acting" among Gay Men" (2009), *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 38:3, 193-209, DOI: 10.1080/17475759.2009.508892