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Coming Out¹ as a Straight² Man:
One Heterosexual's Sexual Orientation Questioning Process

Comprehensive Paper

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Abstract

Throughout the field of student affairs and work in social justice, practitioners often use the word “questioning” when discussing sexual identities. This term usually refers not to heterosexuals, but to individuals who will eventually identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. In fact, we often assume that heterosexuals, especially men, would rarely undergo such a process, as their identity is the majority, privileged, and expected. In fact, some research shows that this may not be the case and that many more men than one might expect may be questioning their sexuality. The author will explore his own experiences in navigating a process of sexual orientation questioning as a heterosexual male in high school and college through the form of a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) (Nash, in press). Finally, implications will be offered for the field of education.

As I awoke from my sleep, I was immediately in a state of shock. I frantically thought to myself “What does this mean?” “Where did that dream come from?” “Does it mean I’m gay?” “Did that dream *make* me gay?” My dream felt like reality and remained clear in my mind’s eye for days. I constantly replayed the visions of lovingly kissing and embracing my best friend, Mark, over and over without being able to find answers to my questions. Although the dream led to a great deal of anxiety and fear in my real self, my identity while sleeping had certainly derived much pleasure from the experience.

Little did I know that my dream that night at age sixteen was only the beginning of a long and difficult process of questioning my identity. In fact, my sexual orientation wouldn’t become completely clear to me until nearly six years later toward the end of college. My sexual orientation questioning process would result in the loss of some dear friends, as well as the addition of many new and wonderful ones. It would include tears and laughter, constraint and freedom, confusion and clarity, unease and peace.

The following narrative is my story as best I can recall it. The names of those involved have not been changed. It is the story of a heterosexual who wasn’t sure. It is the story of a former Q. The story of a heterosexual who questioned whether or not he was a heterosexual. It is the story of a heterosexual who continues to question heterosexuality.

Intent

This narrative has developed over the course of several years, though it is only now that I commit it to the printed word. Writing my story is, without a doubt, an act of personal cleansing.

However, my primary reason for writing this paper is to perform an act of disobedience and protest against the homophobia and heterosexism that plague our world. Personally, I hold that both phenomena are among the most detrimental social diseases that we face.

Theoretically, I believe that homophobia and heterosexuality are inextricably connected to and function to support a culture of sexism (Pharr, 1988). Thus, an attack on one is an attack on all three.

I have four goals for this piece. First, I hope that my words might cloud the reader's beliefs regarding heterosexuality and promote a greater understanding of the diverse ways in which one might live sexual orientation and gender.

My second goal is to share my story so that, in the future, similar narratives may be more easily accepted and familiar. After telling my story in several arenas, I have come to believe that it is rather novel as listeners are often confused and amazed by my declaration of uncertainty *and* heterosexuality. This became even more obvious as my research on questioning yielded very little. Though I recognize that the telling of my story is unique, I thoroughly believe that my experiences are far from new.

Third, through sharing my narrative, I hope to further promote the notion that homophobia and heterosexism are detrimental to all members of our communities (Blumenfeld, 2000), rather than the idea that they function to solely create privilege for heterosexuals and the oppression of homosexuals and bisexuals.

Finally, I hope to encourage educators, including student affairs professionals, to consider the fact that many of their students may be navigating very difficult struggles regarding their sexuality. In order to assist all students, I believe that educators should develop more spaces where sexual orientation and gender variance are accepted and even encouraged. Such initiatives are, in my opinion, as important for those individuals who we might assume to never second-guess their sexuality as they are for anyone else. More specifically, I hope to encourage the

development of spaces where it is acceptable to question, and where the end results of such processes are greeted with open arms and without judgment.

What, exactly, is “Questioning”?

In general, the word “questioning” is a fairly neutral and even bland term simply referring to curiosity or inquiry. However, in some fields of education, particularly higher education and student affairs, as well as various areas of social justice work, questioning possesses a much more specific meaning. Throughout many parts of this country, political organizations, advocacy groups, educational units and student clubs, who work towards the greater inclusion of sexual minorities in our communities, use the word in the same breath as the terms "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," "transgender," and "ally." Questioning is also sometimes referenced simply by the use of the letter "Q" in acronyms like LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, and/or Ally) that are often part of the titles of the aforementioned organizations.

I have found several definitions for the term questioning, yet, in my opinion, none adequately define the word. Thus, the following is my attempt to create my own definition:

Questioning refers to a person who or the process by which an individual attempts to understand, find, and/or solidify their true sexual orientation and/or identity during a period of uncertainty. Persons of all sexes, genders, and sexual orientations can experience such a process.

Although this definition assumes that heterosexuals might question, Hollander states that programs serving such individuals “suggest that questioning youth be viewed as having a homosexual orientation but an unformed gay or lesbian identity” (Hollander, 2000, 174) often to the disservice of the questioning individual (Hollander, 2000). My own experiences support this

argument in that I have encountered several situations in which persons presume that questioning is simply one step towards an individual's inevitable realization of their gay or lesbian identity. This is not meant to pass judgment regarding this term or to imply that some practitioners have been negligent. In this heterosexist and hetero-normative world where heterosexuality is assumed, promoted, and privileged, it isn't poor logic to assume only LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender) persons question. It certainly makes sense that individuals who have zero homosexual experiences would not question. It also may very well be true that all LGBT persons are questioning at some point in their lives, but the reverse of this statement is not true—all who question are not LGBT. Such assumptions regarding the end results of one's questioning process do not recognize the fact that at least some heterosexuals, like me, have actively questioned their sexual orientation.

An important inquiry regarding this topic is the discussion of just how many people question. Based on the research of Remafedi et al., Hollander states "one in four early adolescents may be reasonably considered questioning" (Hollander, 177). However, Hollander's leap is extremely weak. The one in four that he cites refers only to the fact that 25.9% of the 12-year-olds in the Ramafedi study selected "Not sure" when asked to answer a complicated multiple choice question including six possible answers regarding their own sexual orientation (Remafedi et al., 1992, 715). While some of these 12-year-olds may have been genuinely questioning their sexuality at the time they took this questionnaire, I contend that the majority of this 25.9% answered this way because they did not understand the question, not because of their sexual orientation uncertainty. This becomes particularly obvious when one considers that this data was taken between 1986 and 1987 when knowledge regarding sexual orientation was presumably less abundant. Furthermore, the number of individuals who were "not sure"

decreased considerably for each age group until its lowest point of 5% for the age 17 cohort. However, 18-year-olds, who are much more capable of understanding such a question, selected “not sure” at a rate of 8.9%, thus creating a peak at the end of the data set. This figure is particularly interesting, especially for student affairs administrators, as we can infer that nearly 9% of traditional-age incoming college students are currently questioning their sexual orientation.

Other data shows that many more than 9% of people question their sexual orientation. In their groundbreaking and often quoted studies of sexuality, particularly male sexuality, Alfred C. Kinsey et al. (1948) found that:

At least 37 per cent of the male population has some homosexual experience between the beginning of adolescence and old age.... This is more than one male in three of the persons that one may meet as he passes along a city street.... Some of these persons have but a single experience, and some of them have much more or even a lifetime of experience; but all of them have at least some experience to the point of orgasm. (623)

It is safe to assume that a homosexually derived orgasm is an extremely powerful and provocative event, particularly in a homophobic culture. Thus, males having such experiences must, at least at some level, question their sexual orientation.

Demographic information regarding prevalence of homosexuality varies somewhat, though the most liberal statistic, also offered by Kinsey, is that 10% of males are homosexuals (1948, 651). When this figure is subtracted from 37%, we can infer that 27% of male heterosexuals have questioned or will question their sexual orientation. Furthermore, this statistic may actually be quite low as it does not account for the myriad forms of questioning that do not necessarily involve orgasm such as romantic feelings, dreams, kissing, or emotional connections

between persons of the same gender. Somewhat similar figures regarding female experiences also exist. In later studies, Kinsey et al. found that, although rates of homosexual orgasm were significantly lower, “a quarter of all the females had recognized erotic responses to other females” by age 30 (Institute for Sex Research, 1953, 453). Based on the research of Kinsey, we can safely assume that, at the very least, one third of all people will question their sexual orientation during their lifetime.

Certainly, there are more inquiries regarding the phenomenon of questioning that deserve attention in future research. What experiences might trigger questioning and at what age does it tend to begin? What behaviors might be expressed by a questioner? How might social services best foster healthy questioning processes in individuals of all sexual orientations? How long might we expect a questioning process to last? Hopefully, these topics will be the focus of future research on questioning, and I hope that my narrative might provide some insight to those who choose to do such work.

About the Author

Before moving on, I believe it is important to share some biographical information so that you can better get to know me and my background. I grew up in what some might assume to be an incredibly average American family (a statistical breakdown of this country would certainly show this to not be the case) in the rural Midwest. My parents are still married and I am the youngest of three children. I attended an incredibly small school for 13 years at which all grade levels, Kindergarten through 12th, were taught under one roof. My educational environment lacked diversity of nearly all sorts. In fact, I would guess that the school was 99% White, which includes myself. There were no Blacks, no Asians, and I can recall maybe five Latino/as. There were absolutely zero people who were out of the closet regarding an LGBT identity. Perhaps this

is not surprising as racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs were thrown about as if they were candy at a parade. Also, there are no out LGBT individuals in my family... at least none I know about or who show up at family reunions.

As I look back on my upbringing I am somewhat baffled as to how I came to the place where I am today, writing about this topic. As I ponder, even more questions come to mind: How did my community, teachers, and mentors affect my questioning process? What affect did male gender roles have on this experience? What are the experiences of the many other questioning heterosexuals like? What might have made this process easier for me? What might have been a worst-case scenario if I had more of a negative reaction or experience?

High School: The Beginning

My dream involving Mark was only the first of a series of similar visions and experiences. Mark was an extremely close friend with whom I shared all my secrets, save one. I believed I was in love with him, but I could share this emotion with no one. For the next few years, he, as well as other men I knew and some that I did not, would make appearances in my sleep. Some dreams would involve kissing, a few involved sex, and sometimes I would simply find myself embracing other men. Although they only occurred approximately two or three times per year, these dreams and their potential consequences were strong enough to regularly monopolize my thoughts. Even though the overwhelming majority of my fantasies and physical attractions involved women, I was unable to understand my sexual orientation, as I had never heard of any heterosexuals who had anything but attractions to the opposite gender.

At first, these homoerotic feelings were extremely stressful for me. Though I considered myself accepting of homosexuality, I could not separate myself from the homophobic world in which I was raised and was somewhat disgusted by and fearful of the thought that I might be

gay. I knew it was irrational, but I believed that if I were to entertain such fantasies in any way, I might end up making myself gay. Thus, I tried my best to ignore these thoughts and put them out of my mind.

I soon became more and more comfortable with and even started to enjoy these sleep fantasies. Perhaps it was because of further exposure or maybe I was realizing the contradiction between my homophobic responses and the politics I wanted to espouse. Either way, my related anxiety level started to decrease.

Although my stress lowered, my secrecy regarding this part of my life did not. In fact, before college, I only once shared information about such dreams with one of my peers at school. As my friend, Josh, and I sat in art class working on our projects and trying to keep each other amused, I felt a need to share. Josh was one of my most open-minded and best friends and I felt it would be safe to tell him that, the night before, I saw myself having sex with a nameless man. Perhaps it was internalized homophobia or perhaps it was my fear of how Josh might respond, but as I told the story, I turned it into a joke. I told him that I thought it was gross that I had enjoyed myself in the dream and gave every cue imaginable to let him know it was okay to laugh. As class let out, I immediately regretted telling Josh as well as the manner in which I did so. Unfortunately, the damage had been done and by lunch, many of my peers knew the story and were poking fun at me in the hallway. For my own initial comfort, I continued acting as if I too found it comical and tried to laugh as they inserted my name in to gay jokes. I do not know whether Josh would have been more supportive if I had not led him to believe that my story was meant to be humorous. I like to hope that he would. Perhaps it was because of my size, my status as a football player, or my popularity at the school, but I was very lucky in that the ridicule I experienced ended there. Regardless, it became even clearer that it was not safe to share these

stories and if I didn't want to be ostracized, I needed to keep my mouth shut. Heterosexuality was clearly mandatory and I would be endangering myself to break this rule.

My fear and silence regarding questioning was in no way irrational or foolish. Not only did I have this experience, but I also witnessed classmates being harassed on a daily basis because others presumed that they were homosexuals. Many of my peers around the country did not face better situations. In their 2003 National School Climate Survey, GLSEN found that 94% of LGBT students reported verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation and that 39.1% reported experiencing physical harassment for the same reason (GLSEN, 2003). Similar or worse experiences were certainly being had by LGBT youth while I was in high school and only a year after I entered college, a young University of Wyoming student named Matthew Shepard, who was only two years older than me, was brutally beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die for being gay.

College: Gaining Confidence

In the autumn of 1997, I entered my first year of college at a very large public school that is part of the Big 10 Conference. The frequency with which I had homosexual fantasies decreased during my first year away from home but, unfortunately, the homophobic nature of my environment did not. I lived in a residence hall housing nearly 500 first-year students on a floor of only men. There was one man on the opposite side of my floor who we presumed to be gay. He was rarely spoken to and was never invited to be a part of the developing community. Even though I believed the two of us had very similar interests, I never associated myself with him in fear that I too might be labeled.

Male gender roles were also very strictly enforced among these men. During the year, my roommate, Brad, became friends with another Adam who lived down the hall. They constantly

spent time together and were becoming an extremely close pair. Eventually, they started to get ridiculed by their friends for being gay lovers. I wish I could claim innocence in this situation, but I too participated in this hazing intended to ensure that Brad and Adam reflected what we believed were appropriate behaviors for men.

These occurrences, coupled with being in a new place with all new people made it even more difficult to process my questions. Similar to most new college students, the development of friendships and community while at school was extremely important to me. Thus, the potential for being rejected was too dangerous, and I decided to again tuck my sexual orientation questions away in the back of my mind, as far as possible, in hopes that I would forget.

As I transitioned into my sophomore year, I made the decision to sever my relationships with many of the men from my first year. Not only was I able to recognize the unhealthy effects of this community on my mind and body, but I was also extremely fortunate to be hired as a Resident Advisor (RA) in the residence halls at my school. My new responsibilities in this role, as well as the intriguing, exciting, and supportive community of coworkers that I found myself in, made it fairly easy to make this transition which would probably be one of the most important choices of my college years. For the first time in my life, examples of sexual orientation variance in a safer environment were presented to me. I soon became friends with some out homosexual people and issues of creating a supportive environment and being an ally to LGBT persons were regular topics of conversation.

I also enrolled in my first Women's Studies course and started learning some of the negative effects of sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism. I read about the tenets of true womanhood and how these virtues, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter, 1966), functioned to empower men while marginalizing and oppressing the lives of women. I

also started to comprehend the tight grip of gender roles and how they negatively impact people of all sexes. In addition, the course allowed me to start exploring how gender roles, homophobia, and heterosexism function to enforce compulsory heterosexuality (Pharr, 1988, 16-17) and how people who break ranks are categorized as bizarre and sick.

Both of these experiences helped rush my questioning back to the forefront of my mind. My dreams returned and I was actively processing my past and present day homosexual emotions. I started feeling more attractions to men while awake and, once again, I was entertaining the idea that I might be gay. This time was different though as I did so without shame and much less fear. For the first time, I wanted to start talking to people about this part of my life.

Mark had recently moved to the area and we were again spending a great deal of time together. One night, while in the middle of a long and deep conversation, Mark asked me about the sticker on my door. I had placed a rainbow striped sticker on the outside of my room's door that said "ALLY" in hopes that I could communicate my support of LGBT identities to the residents of the building. Mark told me that he was confused regarding its meaning and wanted to know if I was gay. As he asked me these questions, I knew it was time to start communicating my identity to others—no matter what the consequences. I explained that the sticker was part of a departmental program to make residence halls safer places and that I strongly supported it. I then told Mark that I really wasn't sure about my sexual orientation and that I had been spending a lot of time contemplating it. He then asked me when this started and I told him it began around the middle of high school. I also told him that, although I was not attracted to him currently, I had been in the past, which started my uncertainty. Though surprised, Mark seemed to respond well to this information and I was comfortable with my decision to share. Unfortunately, his

comfort would prove to be superficial and our relationship would never be the same. Mark and I soon started spending less and less time together. I often felt lucky if he returned one out of five phone calls and I soon realized that Mark would only spend time with me when his girlfriend, Jill, was around as well. One day, when I ran into Jill on campus, she told me that Mark hadn't responded to any of my phone calls because I had said "I miss you" on his answering machine leading him to believe that I hoped to pursue a sexual relationship.

This rebirth of my questioning was much easier than before, but it certainly wasn't effortless as I remained in an extremely homophobic world. Though I was saddened by the loss of a great friend, I never regretted sharing these stories with Mark as it helped me to gain a sense of honesty and integrity that had been missing due to my secret. Telling him also helped me gain the confidence needed to share my identity with others. I would soon tell a few people about my uncertain sexual orientation with much more positive results than before. Although these individuals reacted in an accepting way, I still longed for more. I needed someone who could really understand what I was feeling and share similar experiences. No one I talked to could do this for me until I told my story to my mentor—a gay man.

Opening the Flood Gates: Confiding, Sharing, Exploring

As an RA, I became good friends with Brian, one of my supervisors. Brian was a higher education and student affairs graduate student when we first met and later went on to become a full-time professional staff member at my undergraduate institution. Brian and I worked and lived next to each other for three years and became very close. Brian was not only my supervisor, but a mentor, teacher, ally, and dear friend as well.

One evening, during the summer before my junior year of college, Brian and I went out to dinner at one of our favorite restaurants. As we sipped our diet cokes and ate our burgers and

chips, Brian started to tell me a very personal story. It took me a few moments to catch on, but I soon realized that he was coming out of the closet. In fact, Brian had recently made the decision to disclose his gay identity in all arenas of his life and I was very proud to be one of the first people he had told. After we spoke for a while, I decided that I would tell Brian about my questioning. As I shared my uncertainties, it felt as if the brick wall that stood in front of me was starting to crumble. All of a sudden, someone was truly hearing me. Brian and I had very similar experiences and he was thus able to offer the support, information, concern, and advice that I so desperately needed, but could not find.

A few months later, as Brian and I sat in one of our university's cafeterias, again discussing sexual orientation, Brian started to tell me about the "Kinsey Scale." I had never heard of such a thing and listened intently as Brian described this seven-point continuum of sexual orientation. People rated as zero on the scale were exclusively heterosexual while sixes were exclusively homosexual. Most importantly though, in between these two extremes were five other options including heterosexuals who had homosexual experiences, bisexuals, and homosexuals who had heterosexual experiences (Kinsey, 638). Once again, a light bulb lit up in my head. I realized that, although they might, my feelings did not necessarily mean I was gay and that, as Kinsey states:

Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner

we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex. (Kinsey, 639)

I don't think I will ever be able to fully express how liberating it was to connect with Brian in this way, nor will I be able to adequately thank him for everything he did for me. Brian's friendship, knowledge, and support allowed me the opportunity to really work through my questions and eventually become the man I wanted to be—a man like him. I soon connected with other gay men like Brian's partner, Dan, and our friend, Seth. Seth, a coworker of mine as an RA, had been a friend for well over a year before we discussed our sexual orientations. Seth and I would parallel each other as we were both questioning our sexual orientation during college. He would eventually realize his identity as a gay man and I would identify as heterosexual. These three men, as well as some other amazing folks, provided an extremely supportive community for me in college where my questioning was encouraged and I was able to do so without unease over being judged. Without them, I honestly fear where I might be today and wonder if I would still be struggling as a questioner.

One of our favorite pastimes was going to "Union," our beloved local gay bar, especially on Sundays for show tunes night. Union was a place where men could be intimate friends, regardless of whether there was a sexual attraction between them and without many of the shackles of male gender roles. Gender variance, for the most part, was accepted in this community and for the first time, I was in a place where men hugged each other to say hello and goodbye. Men were allowed to be emotional. They were allowed to be cooperative and didn't need to constantly compete with each other. Most importantly, at Union, men were allowed to care about each other and not hide it. The men at Union gave me a completely new understanding of what life could be like as a man.

I was also accepted, with open arms, for who I was at Union. One particular evening, Jill (Mark's girlfriend) came with me to meet up with Brian and Dan for a drink. As I went up to the bar, I noticed that the bartender was a classmate of mine from one of my Women's Studies courses. As I was paying her for the drinks I ordered, she smiled and said "I can't figure it out. You're in my Women's Studies class and you're in a gay bar, but you are with a woman. Are you a fag or what?" Immediately, I laughed and responded, "I don't know, but I'll let you know as soon as I figure it out." The bartender, without hesitation, responded "Oh, okay. That sounds good to me" and gave me a look as if to say, "That's just fine. I've been there too."

Trouble with Gender and Feminism

After becoming part of this great community with Brian, Dan, Seth, and others, as well as learning about Kinsey's work and how it allowed for someone to be "primarily heterosexual", it didn't take long for me to realize that this label would best describe me. Furthermore, as I came to better understand that while my level of attraction to persons of the opposite gender remained constant, my homosexual attractions regularly ebbed and flowed and were always at a level lower than my heterosexual impulses. Such a label was indeed the best to describe my sexual orientation. More specifically, I would rate myself as either a one or two on Kinsey's scale as my homosexual feelings seem to fluctuate occasionally.

Even after I was fairly certain that I was primarily heterosexual, I still had a great deal of trouble identifying myself as such. I had decided to minor in Women's Studies and became very dedicated to feminism through this coursework. My Women's Studies classes were my most challenging and eye-opening academic experiences during my undergraduate years. They were also the most enjoyable and if I had to do it again, I would major in Women's Studies. This coursework also helped me become committed to working against homophobia, heterosexism,

and sexism. Yet, I often ran into problems, as I was unable to integrate two identities that seemed to be in constant conflict—heterosexual masculinity and feminism.

In college, examples of heterosexual masculinity were abundant, but they always seemed to be homogeneous. I found my heterosexual male peers to be expressing and enforcing “a masculinity that is defined by power, control, dominance, and sometimes violence” (Media Education Foundation, 1999). They were sexist, homophobic, and downright rude. For example, while attending dance clubs, I was constantly appalled and sickened by the behavior of such men whose actions would clearly be labeled as sexual assault if perpetrated on a city street or in a classroom. I knew that I was primarily heterosexual, but I did not know *how* to be a heterosexual while remaining a feminist. I honestly felt that if being a heterosexual man meant acting in the way my counterparts did, I would much rather be gay or asexual and thus, my questioning process continued.

As I was unable to square my feminist values with heterosexuality and masculinity, I continued to entertain the idea of assuming a gay identity, despite my heterosexuality. From my perspective, gay relationships were punctuated by equality, support, and genuine care for one another, which were the exact qualities I hoped for in a romantic partnership. These attributes are certainly not true across the board and homosexual couples face many of the same problems as heterosexuals. However, from my perspective at this time of my life, the examples I had of homosexual relationships were in great contrast to the available models of heterosexuality and appeared to be much more attractive.

It was, of course, very important for me to define what it meant to be a heterosexual male on my own terms. Luckily, a great ally would once again come to my aid. Jeremy and I became very close friends while working together over the summer for our university’s orientation

department. Jeremy showed me, in his own way, that it was possible to be a heterosexual male, yet remain respectful, caring, and emotional. Jeremy, though he may not know it, helped me to define my own form of heterosexuality.

Performing heterosexuality as a male feminist is a constant battle for me—I certainly haven't perfected it and I still occasionally fall into problematic forms of masculine behavior. Twenty plus years of lessons in masculinity are not easy teachings to forget and I believe I will have to work to overcome them for the rest of my life. I continue to work towards being a man who uses inclusive language free of bias. I do my best to be a man without an objectifying gaze. A man who isn't afraid of having intimate friendships with other men. One who is willing to bend gender and a man who is involved in social justice work. A man who does his very best to confront homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia and sexism on a daily basis.

Implications

The obvious next question that must be answered is, why should educators care about this issue? If you are an educator, why should you be willing to spend time, energy, or money on this problem? Is it really a problem? Educators certainly have enough work to do and often have to fight for adequate resources in the first place. Aren't there more important issues that deserve greater attention from us? Aren't there more important issues regarding sexual orientation and gender, such as the oppression and violence faced by LGBT persons and women on a daily basis by the hands and mouths of heterosexual men—the people who are the primary focus of this piece? Without a doubt, these concerns are valid and I have certainly given myself the same interrogation. There is no denying that teachers and school administrators have tough jobs and, often, the last thing they need is additional responsibilities—especially when new initiatives come with no attached resources.

Educators, especially student affairs administrators, have, as one of their primary responsibilities, the task of promoting the healthy development of students through education so that they might lead more positive and healthy lives. As professionals, we study student development theories and consider it our duty to address the difficult developmental tasks that students face. If you agree with this and believe that a questioning process would be a difficult developmental task, ask yourself this question: How many heterosexual students have you heard discuss uncertainty regarding their sexual orientation? Have you heard anywhere near one quarter of the students you serve discuss such experiences? One tenth? Have you heard one? There is no doubt in my mind that a great deal of students are having serious emotional and confusing experiences related to their sexual orientation and do not feel comfortable talking about it. If we do not address these issues, we will not live up to our commitments as educators. Again, I do not mean to point fingers or pass blame. Rather, I simply hope to point out an area of weakness where greater attention is deserved.

Secondly, I argue that if you believe in or are working towards ending homophobia and the full inclusion of LGBT persons in our culture, you have a responsibility to be concerned about heterosexuals who question. Primarily, this is because heterosexual questioning is not an issue unrelated to homophobia and violence. About a year ago, as I began my research on questioning, I came across the internet message board of a college fraternity from my home state. The message I found read as follows:

Chuck [last name removed] questioning his sexuality

Fall of 1995 Jim Z., Chuck [last name removed] and Myself lived in room #7.

Chuck woke up one morning from a bad dream. He told everyone he had a dream of performing oral on himself. For more then 3 weeks he thought he was gay, he must have

asked me everyday if this dream altered his lifestyle.

The night of the Teke Halloween party Chuck hooked up with the most fat & ugly girl in the house. At the end of the night there were several Tekes and their dates hanging out in my room. Chuck had taken this pig up into the loft. Mike Blair had left his U.S.M.C. flags hanging over the loft. After Chuck had his way with this creature he stuck his head out from under one of the flags and shouted to the entire room, "Hey guys I'm not gay anymore!" Needless to say the girl put her costume designed by Omar the tent maker back on and was never heard from again. (K., Mike, 2001)

As I finished reading this message, I felt sick to my stomach. There were many similarities between Chuck and myself and I wondered why I didn't act out in the same way. I cringed at the possibility of myself committing such act of hateful sexism as part of my own questioning. I feared what might happen when other questioning men and boys typed "questioning sexuality" into their internet search engines and found this site as I had. My heart went out to the woman who had been humiliated by this experience, and I wished that Chuck had someone to talk to who might have been able to stop him from going down this path. I wished I could have been that person.

The story of Chuck also made me wonder if there might be a connection between homophobia and questioning in heterosexuals. Research has, in fact, shown that homophobic (as determined by the IHP measure of homophobia) heterosexual men are significantly more likely to be sexually aroused (as measured by penile erection) at the sight of male homosexual sex (Adams et al., 1996). This supports the theory that "homophobia is a result of repressed homosexual urges or a form of latent homosexuality" (Adams et al., 1996, 441). Granted, this study did not survey individuals who admit questioning their sexual orientation, yet I argue that a

few, if not all, of these men can be classified as questioning. Because they report being 100% heterosexual, yet show significant homosexual arousal, I believe that there is at least some denied uncertainty in these men regarding their sexual orientation. Thus, they fall into the category of questioning based on my definition. In addition, the control group comprised of nonhomophobic men showed little to no sexual arousal when viewing the same male homosexual pornography. More research needs to be completed regarding this topic, but there is sufficient information to allow us to hypothesize that homophobia and questioning are linked, resulting in homophobic attitudes, language and violence. In turn, we may also hypothesize that if heterosexual individuals who question are able to process and accept homosexual urges as not incongruent with a primarily heterosexual identity, homophobia may thus be significantly injured.

The problem of how to foster healthier environments for heterosexual questioners and encourage their positive development is a significantly more difficult task. Admittedly, concrete answers to this inquiry elude me and finding them is not the goal of this work. If you are a heterosexual who has questioned, I certainly encourage you to tell your story openly and honestly. At the same time, I fully recognize that doing so is a difficult decision that you must do carefully and on your own terms. I also believe that working towards the increased involvement of heterosexuals into initiatives made by LGBTQIA organizations is a step in the right direction. In the end, this inclusion is congruent with the overall goals of such organizations, which should be to foster an environment where sexual diversity is safe, understood, validated, accepted, and supported. However, such inclusion must be done in a way that does not ignore the extremely important and unique issues faced by LGBT persons.

Although I cannot offer failsafe responses to the issues associated with heterosexual questioning that I have suggested, I can offer you my commitment. Thus, in hopes that you will do the same, I commit to working towards the following goals as best I can in my personal and professional lives:

1. A world where homosexual experiences are not completely incongruent with a heterosexual identity and vice versa.
2. A world where all persons who question their sexuality have supportive environments in which they can do so without shame or concern for the end results of such inquiries.
3. A world where false and oppressive binaries like homosexuality/heterosexuality, male/female, and masculine/feminine have been destroyed.
4. A world where sex and gender diversity are fully realized as the normative reality, rather than strange theory.

Moving Forward

By the time I entered my graduate studies at The University of Vermont, I had finally reached clarity regarding my sexual orientation and gender, as well as how I would choose to express them. I was also ready to share my story outside of private conversations and I began to do so both in class and at work. One evening, while teaching a lesson on the topic of questioning to an undergraduate class studying sexual identities, I shared my story with a room of nearly 30 virtual strangers. Doing so was scary, exciting, invigorating, draining, and empowering all at once. My voice quivered and my nerves caused my hands to shake vigorously as I spoke. When I finished, many of the students seemed amazed by my words and I knew I had challenged many of them to expand and investigate their beliefs regarding heterosexuality. After a few moments of fairly awkward silence, Dot, the course's instructor asked who in the room believed me to be

gay even after I had shared my story of navigating a questioning process as a heterosexual.

Nearly one third of the students raised their hands. Clearly, there is more work to be done, but it is an effort worth making and one that I fully embrace.

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Footnotes

1. For this paper, I will not use the term “straight” (except while using direct quotes) due to the resulting negative connotations towards those who do not identify as heterosexual. If you refer to any English dictionary and read the entry for "straight," you will certainly find the words "honest," "trustworthy," "reliable," "correct," "right," "normal," and "important." You will most likely find “not homosexual” as well. The use of this word then implies that homosexuals cannot possess all of the positive attributes listed above. However, I use "straight" in the title of this paper as a juxtaposition in the hopes that my words might lead to a more complicated view of what it can mean to be heterosexual.

2. Another important note regarding the title and the use of the phrase “coming out” should be made here. I am in no way attempting to say that my experiences as a questioner or as a heterosexual are the same as the coming out processes of the many LGBT persons in this world. As a heterosexual white male, I have a very privileged identity and will never fully understand or experience the oppression faced by so many individuals in this world. I do, however, believe that there are some similarities between my experience and the process of coming out and I use this term as a way to show that sexual identity formation of a heterosexual can very well be an active, thoughtful, and even difficult process and one that is not necessarily a given for all.