

Healing the Brotherhood and Sisterhood: The Healing Process of Fraternity Brothers and Sorority Sisters of Gay Men and Lesbians

Stephanie “Mo” Moreira

“Coming out” to a brother or a sister can be an emotional affair, but “coming out” to a fraternity brother or a sorority sister can be just as affecting. This is because of the heterosexist and homophobic environment that these organizations often create. This paper focuses on the importance of forming gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) allies in fraternities and sororities for those Greek members who identify as GLBTQ. Since many Greek-letter organizations may be described as “families,” coping strategies for fraternity and sorority members who have been confidants of their gay brother or lesbian sister are discussed by using counseling theories designed for parents and families of gay men and lesbians.

As in previous years, college students continue to find homes in fraternities and sororities. Like their heterosexual colleagues, gay men and lesbians are also joining Greek-letter organizations. Despite the myth that gay men and lesbians may join in order to search for same-sex partners, their reasons for joining a fraternity or sorority are not very different from their heterosexual brothers and sisters. These reasons include “‘friendship, camaraderie,’ ‘social life, parties, having fun’ and ‘support group, sense of belonging’” (Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005, p. 22). No matter the reasoning, the fact still remains that gay men and lesbians are members of fraternities and sororities. A study conducted by Case, Hesp, and Eberly (2005) noted that three to six percent of all membership in fraternities and sororities may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ). The study also hypothesizes that the percentage of GLBTQ membership may be equal to the percentage of GLBTQ people in the population, which is said to be around 10% (p. 22). Each sexual orientation identity is unique and has its own identity developmental process, but those that are specifically defined for gay men, lesbians, and their families will be used to shed light on the process that fraternity brothers and sorority sisters may experience when developing as an ally.

Stephanie “Mo” Moreira graduated from the University of South Alabama where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education. As a member of Alpha Gamma Delta, she continues to work with sororities and fraternities in addition to her role as an Assistant Residence Director at the University of Vermont.

Because most identity development (racial, sexual orientation, etc.) continues throughout the college years, gay and lesbian identity development inevitably takes place while gay and lesbian members are currently involved in a fraternity or sorority. Some gay and lesbian students choose to “come out of the closet” or disclose their sexual orientation, to close friends or to the whole chapter. For others, the environment may feel unsafe due to heterosexist and homophobic language and/or actions. These members continue to “stay in the closet” and hide their sexual orientation throughout their collegiate fraternity and sorority experience.

For most members, if not all, fraternities and sororities are considered a “chosen family,” a group of same sex individuals with whom one finds comfort and shares a common bond. Much like in a biological family, brothers and sisters share experiences that bring them closer together. The amount of time one shares with his brothers or her sisters during the collegiate years is much more than the amount of time that one spends with his or her actual family. Because of this, a member usually comes out to a fraternity brother or sorority sister before he or she comes out to his or her parents (Windmeyer and Freeman, 2000). For the purpose of understanding the developmental process for fraternity and sorority members who have been confidants of their gay brother or lesbian sister, counseling theories intended for parents and families of gay men and lesbians will be used.

The Family Healing Process

The most widely cited theory to counsel parents and families of gay men and lesbians takes its root from the grieving process parents and families go through after the death of a child. The grieving process includes four stages: denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance. Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) describe these four stages as they are used to counsel families of gay men or lesbians. Once the child has disclosed new information about his or her sexual orientation, the family is in shock. Although shock is not an actual stage in the grieving process, it is the most common reaction to the gay or lesbian child's news (p. 7).

Once the initial shock is over, families go through a period of denial. At this time, a separation between the family and child occurs. The gay or lesbian child may fear total rejection during this period, but it is important to note that the family must take this time to “regain their bearings and equilibrium” (p. 7). As denial begins to fade away, anger and rage ensue. These feelings are usually directed at the child. The next stage, bargaining, is the most damaging to the development of a healthy gay or lesbian identity. At this point, the family begins to bargain with the gay or lesbian child. The family tells the child not to act on his or her feelings, not to tell anyone else, and not to bring it up ever again. For some families, the acceptance stage is never reached. For others, the families are able to see their gay or lesbian child as the same child for whom they have always cared and loved. Eventually, these families are

more capable of supporting their child through the trials and tribulations of living in a heterosexist and homophobic environment (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998).

Another widely accepted process for families is described in *Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk about Their Experiences*. According to Griffin, Wirth, and Wirth (1986), families usually go through four stages after learning that their child identifies as gay or lesbian. These include “breaking contact, trying to change the child, ignoring the issue, and accepting reality” (p. 10). In the first stage, families go through a period of pushing the gay or lesbian child away. During this period, the child may not feel supported by the family and may run away. Like the denial stage in the previous process, the family uses the separation time to deal with their own personal feelings about the subject of homosexuality. The second stage occurs when the family tries to impose a heterosexual identity on the child. Some ways the family attempts to do this include: “taking the child to a psychotherapist, leading the child to religious conversion, and/or encouraging the child to have a sexual relationship with a person of the opposite sex” (p. 11).

The third stage is characterized by a deeper, harsher form of denial – ignoring the issue. During this stage, the family refuses to talk about the issue. If this stage is not overcome, the relationship between the family and the gay or lesbian child is broken. In order to rebuild the relationship, the issue needs to be addressed and resolved. The final stage is acceptance. In this stage, the family has accepted the fact that their child is gay or lesbian. The family realizes that their child is the same person for whom they cared and nurtured. Both parties are able to love and accept each other for who they are (Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986).

Telling the Secret

“The only thing predictable about the coming out or disclosure experience itself is its unpredictability” (Clark, 2005). For a gay fraternity or lesbian sorority member, coming out is an integral part of all gay or lesbian identity development models (Cass, 1984; D’Augelli, 1994). According to Clark, the gay or lesbian member thinks and plans about the moment of disclosure for a long time. Thoughts of who to tell and how to tell are constantly on his or her mind.

The moment he or she comes out to another marks the beginning of the ally development process for those the gay or lesbian member chose to tell. Disclosure of one’s sexual orientation affects not only the gay or lesbian member, but also those members with whom he or she shares the information. Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) describe this period of time as a “crisis” for those brothers and sisters in whom the gay or lesbian member has confided (p. 7). For many, this new information has damaged the relationship between the gay or lesbian member and his or her brother or sister. For all, the relationship dynamics have changed.

It is important to note that the gay or lesbian member is seeking support from his or her “chosen” family. As he or she continues to develop a gay or lesbian sexual identity, some of his or her brothers or sisters may begin to develop an ally identity that will allow them to give their gay or lesbian member the support that he or she will need. Conversely, other fraternity or sorority members may choose to forego developing as an ally and reject the gay or lesbian member entirely. For those brothers and sisters that are much more aware of gay and lesbian issues, the process of acquiring an ally identity will be quicker; but for those who have no knowledge about these issues and are deeply rooted in their prejudices, the process will be slower and may be more painful.

The “Chosen” Family Healing Process

Like the families of gay or lesbian people, members of fraternities and sororities go through much of the same development when they learn that a brother or sister is gay or lesbian. In *Out on Fraternity Row* and *Secret Sisters*, fraternity and sorority members recall their thoughts and actions upon learning that another member was gay or lesbian (Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998, 2000). For both Thom Chesney and Selene Jones, the news that a brother or sister identified as gay or lesbian was given to them in person. Although the news was delivered in the same way, the responses were very different.

For Thom Chesney, his fraternity brother, Trevor, seemed like the “All-American Boy.” Trevor was good-looking and attracted women easily. In fact, Trevor used some of the most common methods for gay fraternity men to hide their sexuality; he immersed himself in alcohol and women (Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998, p. 238). One night, after socializing with a group of sorority women, the two fraternity men walked back to their apartment. During this walk, Trevor decided to come out to his fraternity brother, Thom, who shared the following:

“Thom, I’m gay. I thought I should tell you, thought I could tell you, am telling you.” I squinted at him and shook my head. “...Get some rest, man. You’re a mess. You’ll sleep this off in no time.”

He stared back at me without flinching—seeing into me—and still no drama. I broke his gaze, slung my shoulder around him, and walked the final block to his place. My feet were cold again. I was cold. Trev spoke only once more, in the entryway to his building.

“There’s more to this, you know. You need to understand that and understand me. I need to know nothing has changed between us.”

“Sure,” I said. “Nothing has changed. You’re gay, I’m not, we’re both drunk, and by tomorrow I won’t remember being Mr. Pi Phi, and you won’t even re-

member being gay for a night.” (Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998, pp. 229 - 230)

Thom’s behavior is like most family members when they learn that their child is gay or lesbian. He chose to completely dismiss his fraternity brother’s disclosure, and began the stage of denial. The time Thom spent in the denial stage proved to be too long to save his relationship with Trevor. This, too, sometimes happens with families. If the family takes too long to move toward accepting their gay or lesbian child, a rift or break in the relationship will occur. Thom held too many prejudices against gay men to give Trevor the support he needed at the time. As a result, Trevor decided to not fully come out while he was active in the fraternity.

Another important aspect to note about the dialogue between Trevor and Thom is the need for Trevor to hear that Thom still sees him as the same Trevor he knew before the disclosure. As discussed earlier, the moment of disclosure can change a relationship. The relationship can either be broken or strengthened. At the moment of disclosure, it is virtually impossible for a close family member or friend to tell the gay or lesbian individual that their relationship has not changed. Some sort of grieving process has to take place. Eventually, Thom did find a way to work out his prejudices towards gay men and lesbians. The time that he took to go through the healing process cost him a dear friend, but will eventually benefit him in the future. Trevor’s disclosure to Thom allowed Thom to rethink what society has told him about gay men and lesbians. Perhaps this experience will allow Thom to accept another gay friend or brother more quickly and keep that relationship intact.

As for Selene Jones, she had suspected that her sorority sister was a lesbian, but she actively ignored all the clues Amber gave her. When Amber did come out to her, she found herself taken by surprise. Like some family members who speculate about a child’s sexuality, they report still feeling unprepared for the news (Saltzburg, 2004). After years of suspicion Selene’s sorority sister finally did come out to her:

We went to the living room of my mother’s house to talk. As we sat across from each other, I felt the tension emanate from her, and I grew more anxious... I heard the clock ticking as I waited patiently. She began slowly and shakily, “Well...Selene... I don’t like men in that way...” That was it. As the words poured out slowly, time seemed to slow down. In mid sentence, I knew things between us would always be slightly different... Even though I was in shock, I was ecstatic that Amber came out to me. (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2000, pp. 235-236)

Selene’s story is another perfect example of the process that one goes through when a family member comes out of the closet. Selene describes the moment after disclosure when she is left alone to think about Amber’s words as “mourning the loss of plain, straight Amber” (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2000, p. 236). Selene began to rethink their relationship. Was everything that she and Amber had experienced

before this disclosure a lie? She started to question her own sexuality. More importantly, if people knew that Amber was a lesbian, would they think that Selene was a lesbian, too (p. 237)? These questions are all a part of the process that one takes to learn to accept a gay brother or lesbian sister. Unlike Thom's experience, Selene's previous experience with gay men or lesbians allowed her to go through the healing process faster and inevitably led her to accept her lesbian sister, Amber.

Common in fraternities and sororities, but not told in the two stories above, is the bargaining method that occurs between the fraternity and sorority and the gay or lesbian member. Similar to how a family bargains with the gay or lesbian child to not tell other family members or to hide his or her sexual orientation, fraternities and sororities do the same with their gay or lesbian member. Fraternities and sororities are afraid of what other Greek organizations or college students will think when they hear that one of the fraternity and sorority members is gay or lesbian. Sororities, much more than fraternities, "control the discovery of any information that their leaders fear may damage their desired image" (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2000, p. 243). Fraternities and sororities may go so far as to prohibit same sex dates to formals, or ask a gay or lesbian member to leave the organization.

Even though these negative events may occur throughout fraternities and sororities, some organizations do successfully navigate the healing process. These are the fraternities and sororities with a strong bond of brotherhood and sisterhood that were able to accept and continue to actively support a member who identifies as gay or lesbian.

Coming to Terms with Homophobia and Heterosexism

Before being able to accept a gay brother or lesbian sister, one must go through an intense introspective stage where one questions what one has learned from society's teachings about gay and lesbian individuals. For the most part, society holds very strong homophobic and heterosexist beliefs. Homophobia is the irrational fear of gay or lesbian individuals. "Heterosexism is the belief that 'normal' development is heterosexual and that deviations from this identity are 'unnatural,' 'disordered,' or 'dysfunctional'" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 314). It is important for members of fraternities and sororities to be honest with their feelings towards gay men and lesbians. The only way prejudices can change is "if they are brought out into the surface" (Clark, 2005, p. 223). Discussing these prejudices and actively getting to know a gay brother or lesbian sister will allow the member to work towards more positive feelings about gay men or lesbians. While doing so, the fraternity or sorority member will move more fluidly to an acceptance of his gay brother or her lesbian sister.

It is extremely important for a fraternity or sorority member to educate himself or herself. "Much oppression is perpetuated by otherwise decent people who do it, not out of malice, but from ignorance and insensitive unconscious

habit” (Clark, 2005, p. 45). If the member had no reason to educate himself or herself about gay and lesbian issues before, he or she certainly has a reason to do so now. For the preservation of a close brotherhood or sisterhood, one cannot allow for prejudicial harm to invade the fraternity or sorority.

Conclusion

The process of accepting a close fraternity or sorority member as gay or lesbian can be long and painful for everyone involved. It is necessary to bring long held prejudices to the surface. For fraternities and sororities, these prejudices may be harder to break due to the ever present homophobic and heterosexist environment. Yet without changing this environment, fraternity and sorority members risk superficially accepting their gay brother or lesbian sister. Still residing in fraternity and sorority members’ minds, the prejudices they hold may come out, usually to the harm of the gay or lesbian member.

In order to heal relationships that appear to be in crisis, fraternity and sorority members go through the same healing process as families of gay or lesbian individuals. During this process, members follow several stages of grieving the “loss” of the brother or sister they once thought to be heterosexual. Upon disclosure, some fraternity and sorority members find themselves finally able to accept a gay brother or lesbian sister. For other fraternity and sorority members who begin the process, they may stay in one stage for a much longer period of time. By doing so, they may not be able to support their gay brother or lesbian sister; eventually, they end up losing or severely damaging their relationship.

Fraternities and sororities need to be educated about gay and lesbian issues in order to change the heterosexist and homophobic environment of those organizations. Greek-letter organizations can look to various campus resources to help in this effort. Offices that support the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students on campus offer a wealth of information and training for all students. In addition, Greek advisors can support this process by engaging fraternity and sorority members in conversations centered on diversity. Also, Greek advisors should be conscientious and supportive of the struggle that fraternity brothers and sorority sisters go through in order to accept a gay or lesbian member. By taking these simple steps to educate members, prejudices against gay and lesbian people can be changed and relationships between heterosexual and gay and lesbian members maintained.

References

- Case, D. N., Hesp, G. A., & Eberly, C. G. (2005). An exploratory study of the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual fraternity and sorority members revisited. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, 1(1), 15- 31.
- Cass, V. C. (1984). Homosexual identity formation: Testing a theoretical model. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 20(2), 143- 167.
- Chesney, T. D. (1998). Being straight did not help. In S. L. Windmeyer & P. W. Freeman (Eds.), *Out on Fraternity Row* (pp. 225- 230). Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Clark, D. (2005). *Loving someone gay* (Fourth Ed.). Berkeley: Celestial Arts.
- D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development. In E.J. Trickett, R.J. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context* (pp.312- 333). San Francisco: Jossey- Bass Publishers.
- Griffin, C. W., Wirth, M. J., & Wirth, A. G. (1986). *Beyond acceptance: Parents of lesbians and gays talk about their experiences*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Jones, S. (2000). Unnaturally close. In S. L. Windmeyer & P. W. Freeman (Eds.), *Secret Sisters* (pp. 233- 239). Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Saltsburg, S. (2004). Learning that an adolescent child is gay or lesbian: The parent experience. *Social Work*, 49(1), 109- 118.
- Savin-Williams, R. C., & Dube, E. M. (1998). Parental reactions to their child's disclosure of a gay/ lesbian identity. *Family Relations*, 47(1), 7- 13.
- Windmeyer, S. L. & Freeman, P. W. (1998). A closer look out on fraternity row. In S. L. Windmeyer & P. W. Freeman (Eds.), *Out on Fraternity Row* (pp. 237- 242). Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Windmeyer, S. L. & Freeman, P. W. (2000). Conclusion. In S. L. Windmeyer & P. W. Freeman (Eds.), *Secret Sisters* (pp. 242- 252). Los Angeles: Alyson Books.