

JoAnna Hensel

Professor Rossman

Senior Capstone

30 April 2020

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are five times more likely than straight individuals to attempt suicide (Facts). Oftentimes, social stigma and negative perceptions from peers, loved ones, and societal institutions, influence the way a young queer person comes to terms with their identity. This kind of intense judgement can lead to internalized homophobia and self-loathing. Internalized homophobia can manifest as anxiety, depression, shame, or hatred. If you continuously hear from those around you that your sexuality is inherently wrong or bad, a person may start to believe that. This paper will examine the relationship between stereotypes and internalized homophobia in the LGBTQ community, and how these things can cause negative mental health effects.

Religious environments tend to cause the most cases of internalized homophobia, because most “do not affirm homosexuality”(Barnes). Many, if not most, religions have anti-LGBT views. Christianity, for example, puts a lot of emphasis on heaven-- seemingly the main goal of life itself. Fear surrounding afterlife can be the leading factor of unacceptance within a queer person who was raised religious. It is difficult enough to be out and proud when everyone you love is against you. When one believes that God himself does not approve of their sexual inclinations, the added pressure is astronomical. Interpretations of religious text have also been used to reinforce homophobic ideologies. Within Catholicism, Leviticus 18:22 is often quoted in

defense of homophobia. “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” There is speculation that this famous line is in fact a mistranslation resulting from condemnation of pedophilia, whereas ‘male’ was actually meant to mean young boy. Nevertheless, this is how it is understood amongst Christians today, and this understanding is used to defend anti-gay beliefs. Other religious texts, such as the Quran, are also used to denounce homosexuality. In reference to Sodom, the Islamic text states that the people of this city are ‘wrong-doers,’ who are meant to be ‘destroyed.’

The correlation between internalized homophobia and organized religion has been scientifically proven. In a study comparing survey data, where queer individuals answered questions about their religious backgrounds and self-image, “...those affiliated with non affirming religious settings had higher levels of internalized homophobia than those affiliated with affirming settings and those who never attended at all” (Barnes). The teaching of these homophobic values, disguised as religion, can impact queer people for the rest of their lives. Even youths who turn away from religion as they become adults can carry that guilt and hatred within themselves forever. “Because most antigay attitudes are learned through normal socialization in our society, internalized homophobia can be a particularly insidious stressor. It originates in the socialization process, but once it is internalized, it can be enacted even in contexts where immediate social opprobrium is not explicit” (Barnes). This quote is wordy, but in simple terms, feelings of guilt and shame associated with internalized homophobia can be felt without activation from an unaccepting person’s criticism or judgment. The shame begins to live within, no longer a direct product of the religion that instilled it.

The 2007 film, *For The Bible Tells Me So*, explores the important role one's family plays in their experience as a queer person. Religion does not only cause adverse effects due to a queer person's personal beliefs in that religion. Often times, religion can have more of an indirect effect, whereas it influences the beliefs of friends, family, or peers surrounding the queer person. For example, this film looks into how Conservative Christians view the bible, and how these views can have accompanying negative side effects on the LGBTQ individuals in these people's lives. One woman, the daughter of a Missouri politician, recounts her closeted experience in a conservative family. "I said, 'I'm just going to make this go away.' I came up with all these different excuses. It got to the point where I was so unhappy. I had a moment where I was like, 'if i want to be happy, its gonna mean losing my family'" (For). The highest percentage of LGBTQ suicides happen because an LGBTQ individual lacks support, or faces harsh backlash from family. "Children who were rejected by their parents for being gay or lesbian, were 8 times more likely to attempt suicide, and 3 times more likely to try illegal substances" (Lead). Statistics are important because they offer perspective, but it is hard to empathize with a number. Firsthand accounts from queer individuals, though heartbreaking, offer the most insight into the weight family approval can carry. "All you need is your parents to love you, and if that's not there, because of you being honest about who you are, then you're lost. You either have to lie about who you are or you have to lose everything that's meant the most to you your entire life. Sometimes it's a choice not worth making. Sometimes suicide seems like an option" (Lead). During the major formative years of early life, family is the primary system that makes us who we are and supports our growth. When that system abandons or rejects you, the negative mental health effects can be enormous.

While the correlation between poor mental health and unaccepting environments has been proven, it is also important to examine the opposite. This perspective is vital to my research, because if internalized homophobia stems from unaccepting environments, the opposite would have to be true for affirming environments-- that they contribute to better mental health among queer people. One study explored how childhood affirmations, such as warmth, safety, and compassion, impact the overall happiness of LGBTQ adults. "As such, these studies are consistent with the minority stress model, wherein emotional support may ameliorate the minority stress associated with a hostile heterosexist, homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic culture" (Greene). This means that queer adults who have experienced support and positive feedback early in life, became better equipped to cope with homophobia that might exist in the culture they are apart of. This implies that homophobia within one's household is more harmful than that which exists outside. Exposure to familial stressors or stigmatization, makes an individual more susceptible to internalize that stigma. "These stressors may manifest in shame or beliefs associated with negative cultural internalizations about one's minority identity" (Greene).

The existence of negative stereotypes surrounding the LGBTQ community can also contribute to internalized homophobia, especially when they are reinforced in a person's home. Stereotypes about queer people can be hyper-critical, focusing on the way a person walks, talks, and dresses. A person's entire expression of self becomes analyzed and dissected. *Do I Sound Gay?*, a first person documentary that follows one gay man's journey of trying to make his speaking voice sound 'less gay,' highlights the detrimental effects of stereotypes on a person's psyche. The offensive stereotypes associated with a high pitched voice, causes filmmaker David Thorpe to resent his own voice. He goes as far as taking voice lessons, trying to condition his

voice to become lower. Interviews with other gay men throughout the film, reveal that David is not alone in his insecurity. Other gay men, actor Tim Gunn and comedian David Sedaris, were quoted to say, “I’m used to hearing my voice now, when I would first hear it, I would be appalled,” and, “Somebody will say, ‘I didn’t know you were gay.’ It’s like, ‘why does that make me feel good?’ I hate myself for thinking that”(Do).

Not surprisingly, queer individuals need to have a high level of “hardiness” to cope with social stigma. Another study describes the process of “identifying personal hardiness,” the quality of resilience within LGBTQ people. Positive self image leads to increased resilience, whereas negative self image, associated with internalized homophobia, causes fragility. Prejudice alone is harmful to those who are targeted, but that harm can be magnified when prejudice begins affecting other systems within a person’s life. “While the direct impact of these deeply rooted social prejudices on the health and well-being of members of these distinct populations is well documented, the effects of these prejudices on the broader array of social processes is less evident. For example, primary relationships can become stressed, access to support networks may be limited, inclusion in community life circumscribed, and basic civil rights denied” (Smith). So LGBTQ persons not only need to be resilient enough to deal with personal judgment, but also be able to withstand the isolation that may result within their families, workplaces, and communities. “Learning to manage the prejudice and discrimination and general social stigma related to heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia becomes a powerful influence on ways LGBT persons develop personal coping styles” (Smith). So, the absence of internalized homophobia makes it easier to manage external homophobia, which leads to better overall wellness.

Clearly, internalized homophobia and other contributing factors, such as familial, religious, and societal pressures, can have damaging effects on LGBTQ people's mental health. When certain ideologies are reinforced enough, people can become brainwashed into accepting them and projecting them onto themselves. These ideologies then make it more difficult to cope with external prejudice, because the person believes them to be valid.

Works Cited

Barnes, David M., and Ilan H. Meyer. "Religious Affiliation, Internalized Homophobia, and Mental Health in Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2012, pp. 505–515., doi:10.1111/j.1939-0025.2012.01185.x.

Do I Sound Gay? Dir. David Thorpe. IFC Films, 2014. Film.

"Facts About Suicide." The Trevor Project, 20 Sept. 2017,
www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/preventing-suicide/facts-about-suicide/.

For The Bible Tells Me So. Dir. Daniel Karlake. First Run Features, 2007. Film.

Greene, Darrell C., and Paula J. Britton. "Predicting Adult LGBTQ Happiness: Impact of Childhood Affirmation, Self-Compassion, and Personal Mastery." *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, vol. 9, no. 3, Mar. 2015, pp. 158–179., doi:10.1080/15538605.2015.1068143.

Lead With Love. Dir. Jenny Mackenzie. 2010. Film.

Smith, Mark S., and Susan W. Gray. "The Courage to Challenge: A New Measure of Hardiness in LGBT Adults." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009, pp. 73–89., doi:10.1080/10538720802494776.

