

Zach Fox

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Senior Capstone

Final Paper

As my last semester of college comes to a close, I can't help but notice that four years ago I was still in constant battle with my sexuality. As years have passed, I have had time to grow and be more comfortable with my sexuality, I have realized this time debating who I am took place in my hometown. I didn't fully come to terms with who I am until I moved away from my family and my hometown. I fell into college life—filled with all different kinds of people who were not afraid to express themselves. I am going to reflect on these four years, I have been to three colleges with totally different environments and befriended people of all natures that I now call some of my best friends. I've decided to create a podcast I feel as though I can connect with friends and family who were a crucial aspect to my life at that particular time. Individuals who have been with me through this struggle of finding myself but also helped and seen me develop into the different person as I am today.

The purpose of this project is to research how hometown environment has an effect on a person's ability to evolve into their sexuality. I want to ask the question, does moving away from your hometown environment help a person develop more into their sexuality? What steps does it take for a person who is struggling with their sexuality to be accepting of themselves fully? The research of environment having an effect on a person's ability to come to terms with their sexuality is often unnoticed.

Often people within the LGBTQ+ community don't have the comforting option to come out and explore their sexuality at the same time as their friends. This is for many reasons, such as religion, conservative environments, different family/friend beliefs, and overall fear of what may come (Murphy, Ryan. "Pose"). Often, people within the community have to follow social stereotypes of going to school dances with the opposite gender, have to display gender stereotypes just in hopes of not getting made fun of, and not being able to express who they truly are. These reasons drive people within the LGBTQ+ community away from the environment they are familiar with and find an environment that is most accepting of them. Audre Lorde mentions, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood." As people within the community start to come to terms with themselves, often start to surround themselves with people who share similar beliefs and values, often in college communities, they will create the environment they have been longing for since childhood.

The process of coming to terms with your sexuality can be extremely long and feel much overdue once the time comes. The truth about being gay doesn't just happen overnight; it often takes years to fully come to terms with who you are without saying a word to anyone. The article "*Outing Yourself*," written by Michelangelo Signorile, talks about the steps that two people (Jonathan and Shelley) took within the LGBTQ+ community to come to terms with their sexuality. The article mentions, "During college, after briefly wondering if he [Jonathan] might be gay, he recoiled from the notion because homosexuality didn't fit in with the man he thought he wanted to be... there was a tremendous amount of grief at the time". We are raised to follow

gender stereotypes. Still, when coming to terms with your sexuality, we aren't always in agreement with gender stereotypes causing internal conflict with ourselves (ohchr.org). Some express attraction to the same gender from an early age, but often don't act upon this attraction until much later on in life, due to the majority of what some may say or think about you (Paris is Burning). The stress of disappointing family and friends for being who you are shapes when the best time might be for a person to come out, often proving the point of there is never a perfect time to come out. Mentioned in "*Outing Yourself*," "Shelley (while at college) ... has come out as a lesbian to herself, has made some gay friends, and is dating a woman, but hasn't told her family or any of her straight friends. She constantly feels a sense of shame that she is doing something behind their backs." When moving away from your hometown environment, this allows you to explore your freedoms as most people do when they move to a college environment. Given the newfound freedom, as stated in the previous quote, shows Shelley was more comfortable after developing within her new environment after moving away from home. The challenges people face is the shame and pressure most feel within the LGBTQ+ community when coming back to their familiar environment that once was their everyday lives. This drives what future relationships with those particular family and friends may look like. Once the time is right for a person within the community to come out, "... many people use the imagery of a great burden being lifted from them, that they feel like the free souls they were meant to be." (*Outing Yourself*). As stated before, it is not easy coming to terms with your sexuality and does not happen overnight.

Religion within the LGBTQ+ community is another challenge folks face when coming out. The article "*I Couldn't Do Both at the Same Time*" written by Lynne Hillier researches the

difficulties of gay youth within the church. The article brought to light homophobia within religion and what it takes for people from the LGBTQ+ community to walk away from faith as there is the conflict of same-sex attraction in church communities. This often creates conflict within religious households caused by different opinions, “sermons preached on how homosexuality is an “abomination” ...As beliefs often lead a household in these communities, some parents would rather kick out their children than work with them and see their side of things.” (Hillier, Lynne. *“I Couldn’t Do Both at the Same Time”*). This often leads to situations where gay youth are forced out of their non-accepting environment and force them to find an environment that they aren’t viewed any differently. *“I Couldn’t Do Both at the Same Time”* mentions, “Their [gay youth] positioning as “evil” and “hell-bound” is strongly reinforced in the world around them...” Which when in terms of the LGBTQ+ community in religious communities, this is often perceived as accurate. People within the LGBTQ+ community may be thought of as atheists, the article mentions, “However, that we should not assume that homosexuals who leave the church become atheists. Rather, he [sermon] argues that many of this group shift spiritual authority from the church to themselves and retain a relationship with God”. In a way from experiences within religious church communities, it can influence people within the LGBTQ+ community to lean on each other for support creating an overall better environment than what was presented to them before. Stated in the article, *“The Cultural Politics of Coming Out in College,”* it mentions “... instead of merely supporting other advocates, I have become one myself. I have become more of a fighter for my own rights as opposed to a supporter of others fighting for my rights...”. The previous quotes bring to light how people within the LGBTQ+ community and the steps necessary to take when fighting a battle with religion or other berries that may be presented.

Environment overall determines a person's way of life, influencing behavior, happiness, hobbies or interests, and people you surround yourself with (takingchange.edu). Overall determining decisions in which you make, such as coming out or keeping to yourself. When talking about the topic of sexuality, this will make you think about when and how you may come out to your friends and family, and this will either make you want to move away to a more accepting environment or not. When moving out of your hometown environment, this allows you to develop even more into the person you were meant to be without the eyes of everyone you grew up around, watching you. The ability to express who you are in an environment that is brand new and filled with people that are trying to do the same as you only can make everything more comfortable in the end. As mentioned before, when surrounding yourself with people who share the same values and interests as you, this promotes growth. Often people say, "you are only as big as your environment," (Van, Thomas), proving the point of when you experience other environments, especially within the LGBTQ+ community, it gives a higher perspective. The personal documentary "*Don't Bring Scott*," follows the life of David, a gay male whose family won't touch on the fact that he has a boyfriend, Scott. The documentary consists of interviews of his family members, as David's mother mentions, "It's farming country, and also the small-minded country is the way I like to look at it." This simply explains how the environment makes an impact on how even the way people look at things. Also mentioned within the personal documentary "*Don't Bring Scott*," "learning the difference between tolerance and acceptance," said David talking about his closed minded family.

The research on the environment having an effect on a person's ability to come to terms with their sexuality is often unnoticed. As mentioned throughout my research, it is shown that moving away from your home environment often brings a freedom that is needed to be more comfortable with yourself. When this freedom is brought to a person within the LGBTQ+ community, this brings opportunities for self-acceptance and confidence. ?". As mentioned in the film about the ball culture in New York City in the mid-to-late 1980's "*Paris is Burning*," "You don't have to bend the whole world. I think it's better to just enjoy it. Pay your dues, and enjoy it. If you shoot an arrow and it goes real high, hooray for you" – Dorian Corey. The struggles people within the LGBTQ+ face daily often make the community stronger, pushing those individuals to grow out of their hometown environment and flourish within their newfound environment.

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