

Young Homosexual Adults:

What Keeps Some “Closeted” While Others are “Out?”

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the present reasons for some people choosing to come out as a homosexual, while others choose to remain “in the closet” and live a heteronormative lifestyle. Traditionally societal pressures, which discouraged non-conformity, inhibited people from “coming out”, but with the advancement of genetic science the societal views seem to be changing and the people who may have once feared expression of their sexual orientation can now openly express themselves. Individuals that are choosing to come out often have family, friends, and lovers that they are connected with through attachment, love, lust, or any combination of the three. If people did not come out as lesbians, bisexuals, gays, or any other form of non-heterosexual they would not be faced with the additional conflicts and issues that the non-conforming population has to face. So what are the underlying causes for them to do so? Is it exposure to the LGBT community, purely nature, or a combination of the two? My focus is young adults of both genders that identify as lesbian or gay in our Western society. One of the main issues that out individuals face is social conflict. They never know who will be accepting and who will shun them.

Introduction

Children are conceived by a man and a woman; it is therefore safe to say that most of us were brought up thinking that little boys ought to like little girls, and little girls ought to like little boys. Many of us are brought up with heterosexuality entwined in our daily life and we therefore have a heterosexual outlook on life from an early age, which may account for some people’s ignorance towards alternative sexual orientations. People are unaware of other ways of life because they have not been subject to them as they grow up. But if this is true, then why are there homosexuals among us and what drives them to “come out” and reveal themselves to the world around them? For years an ongoing debate has ensued between scientists as to whether nature or nurture is the primary cause of this alternative sexual orientation. It is now thought that perhaps a combination of the two is what causes people to choose to live outside the heterosexual norms. This brings us to my research question: What drives some modern youth to choose to “come out” while others deny their homosexual feelings and choose to lead a heteronormative life: Is it the force of nature, nurture, or a combination of the two? In other words why do some youth come out as homosexuals and openly admit their sexuality to the world while others choose to stay “closeted” and follow the heterosexual norms despite this going against their own feelings of attraction?

Theoretical Framework

Many of the choices we make are linked to our bodies; feelings, cravings, and wants all of which loosely translate to hormones. When people choose to “come out” as homosexual they must take into account their relationships with their close family and friends as well as lovers. These relationships are based on feelings of love, lust, and attachment which are produced by different amounts of hormones that are made and secreted throughout our bodies. The neurochemical levels that control our basic human feelings of love, lust, and attachment are continuously molded by outside factors within our environment, which can be altered during the “coming out” process. These changes in our neurochemical levels link to Dr. Helen Fisher’s article. Helen Fisher, a professor at Rutgers University, states in her article “Web of Love: Lust, Romance, and Attachment” that neurochemicals are responsible for people’s feelings of love, lust, and attachment towards others. She says we can develop these different feelings over time in any order. If we were to check the hormone levels of a person lusting over someone we would find higher testosterone levels compared to the individual in an attachment based relationship that is less sexual and has higher dopamine and oxytocin levels.

Knowing the relationship neurochemicals have with feelings of lust, love, and attachment helps me view the relationships between the homosexual individuals and their loved ones in a more objective way as well as to understand what goes on in the different relationships that homosexuals have formed and may break during the coming out process. In addition it will help me understand the different types of family’s homosexual individuals describe themselves in, families of origin, families of choice, and partnerships and how the neurochemicals change when for example the biological family rejects them, which leaves them to find a new family consisting of close friends and lovers.

In addition to Helen Fisher, Professor Gill Valentine, University of Leeds, United Kingdom, *et al.* also serves as a theoretical framework as she explores in her article “Coming Out and Outcomes: Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Identities with, and in, the Family”, changes in family life during and after the process of coming out. She also talks about the negative consequences as well as the reasons why some individuals choose to stay “closeted”. Professor Valentine’s insight represents an objective view on what the possible positive and negative outcomes can be in a young homosexual’s life whether they do or do not choose a lifestyle that is not socially viewed as normal.

Terms and Definitions

Important Terms and Definitions

Lesbians and gay men are referred to as part of the LGBT community in all of the articles I am using and it stands for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals. “Coming out” is when a homosexual individual chooses to admit to themselves and let friends and family know their alternative sexual orientation. A “closeted” individual is someone who is aware of their own sexual orientation, but has not let others know of it. They may also be in denial to themselves for religious reasons or some other thing that does not accept homosexuality. Dopamine is important to know as it is the neurochemical that is linked to romantic love as are norepinephrine and serotonin all of which are found in the human brain and influence the feeling of romantic love. These neurochemicals can help explain what happens between individuals who fall in love with another whether it be the opposite or the same gender. Oxytocin and vasopressin are produced primarily for female-male attachment. This attachment can be expanded to female-male, male-male, and female-female attachment and can be applied to, not only a sexual relationship, but also to friendship and family ties. The concepts of family is brought up in many of texts that I am employing, especially in Professor Gill Valentine’s article about the outcomes of coming out to one’s family. Family can be defined in many ways. I am using it as an umbrella term which encompasses, families of origin, families of choice, cohabiting partners (with or without children) who are not legally married, single parents, same-sex partnerships as well as part-time relationships; relationships that are maintained between different homes, sometimes over large geographical distances. All these forms of families are common in our post-modern world. Socio-familial relationships are discussed in many of the texts and it refers to the social aspect of family ties rather than the biological factor. The social aspect can change over time and as family ties change during and after the coming out of a homosexual individual. Self-efficacy is a term used in psychology. It can roughly be translated to a person’s belief in their own competence and is discussed alongside mental schema, which is some form of mental structure of the world around you.

Thesis

Nature and nurture combined together enable young homosexual individuals to “come out” or stay “closeted”. Environment and societal influences as well as the

acceptance and visibility of the LGBT community play a role in the nurture aspect of “coming out” as a young homosexual. In addition, our neurochemicals play a role in nature as they are what give an individual the feelings of love, lust, and attachment to the same-sex as well as the feelings between family and friends and the homosexual individual. Environmental factors, however, can also be the cause of “closeting” as there is still a fear of rejection by family and friends, and the loss of financial support especially for dependent individuals. With this awareness we can move forward in the acceptance and understanding of young homosexuals and enable them to “come out” and be proud of whom they are.

Body of Research Paper

Sexual Orientation and Genetics

Many researchers focus on the genetic and biological reasons of how homosexuals form within our heteronormative world, choosing to live in a different way than the majority of the world’s population. Researchers want to find the gene or the brain function that causes same-sex desire, perhaps to be able to rid it from our society completely or just to understand the world around us a little better. Coming out, however, has not been discussed within the scientific community linking it to nature and nurture and how they together influence the individual. An ongoing nature vs. nurture debate exists concerning homosexuality. Many people believe it is a matter of choice while others believe it to be linked to genetics and that the trait cannot be altered by therapy, which has ultimately been found to be harmful to the individual in question by the American Psychological Association (APA). Previously, sexual orientation was thought of as unnatural and was not widely accepted. As the medical field, however, has grown concerning sexual orientation we find that more people are becoming more accepting. Unfortunately, we know very little about the human brain, its different workings and the effect they have on sexual orientation. The question is if homosexuality is not a matter of choice then do we still need to be exposed to the possibility of a homosexual lifestyle in order to choose it despite its presence in our genetic make-up? Or is it just controlled by genetics and the ones with the genetic wiring will no matter what express homosexual tendencies? There have been discussions of a “feminized” brain in gay men. The presumed homosexual men were believed to have a similar sized anterior hypothalamus

(INAH 3) as women, but this belief was refuted by Dr. Dick Swaab, director of the Netherlands Institute for Brain Research at Amsterdam University:

[He] investigated a section of the hypothalamus that helps regulate the daily rhythms of the body, he found that this area was larger and contained more cells in the brains of homosexual males than in either females or other males who were presumably heterosexual. Unlike LeVay's work, Swaab's studies suggest that while the brains of homosexual men may indeed differ structurally from those of heterosexual men, homosexuals' brains are not uniformly "feminized". (Small 74)

A gay man is not just a female brain in a man's body. Thus, we can conceive that sexual orientation is much deeper than one specific gene in the human genome. In fact, despite the debate on nature vs. nurture, many believe that the cause of homosexuality is a mixture of these two natural forces working together to bring forth an alternate way of life. This view is taken up by Phillip L. Hammack, a professor at UC Santa Cruz who states "biology creates the emotional foundation within individuals to experience sexual pleasure and intimacy in response to members of the same sex. Society offers the social identity category – the categorical marker of self we call 'sexual orientation'" (282). This means that biology and society work in unison to form a person's individual identity, whether it is a heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or any other form of sexual orientation. By biology he means nature, our genes and hormones that make us who we are. Society in this quote represents nurture, which helps bring forth the feelings one may have due to their nature and which can then be expressed through the presence of nurture.

Unfortunately neither nature nor nurture can be proven to be working as a single force towards homosexuality so for now we must take them both as a possibility. Helen Fisher may say that since love, lust, and attachment are all linked to the brain, homosexuality is a greater part of nature rather than nurture as the neurochemicals, because neurochemicals such as dopamine and serotonin are enabling people to fall in love and possibly influencing some to fall in love with the same sex. . Dr. Fisher, however, also suggests within the context of her article that the neurochemical levels can be influenced by the environment thus linking to the individuals closeting or coming out to one's family and friends. During the coming out process the stressful or not so stressful environment that the individual and their family are in can be the cause of changes in the neurochemical levels in our bodies that control our feelings of love, lust, and attachment.

Fisher demonstrates that a person's environment and their actions can change their feelings for another person by telling us of her friend who had been having sex with "just a friend" on several occasions. She says, "[O]ne summer evening, about five minutes after coupling with him, she fell profoundly in love with him" (85). We see here that although this friend was just a friend at first over time the woman's feelings changed to accommodate her environment. Similar reactions can happen when an individual represses their feelings towards another person they ultimately change their own neurochemical levels of testosterone and dopamine and do not necessarily feel anything for the other anymore over a long period of time. This is also demonstrated when a person comes out to their loved ones. When people are put into a stressful situation their bodies react and if they are repulsed by someone being homosexual it is very likely that their neurochemical levels react and decrease as the people fall out of love or experience loss of attachment to the now "out" individual.

Nature and nurture therefore work together as the enablers of young homosexuals to both realize their own sexuality and to come out to their loved ones. Together nature and nurture point to an alternate solution, one where the two forces are combined to enable a homosexual individual to be in a world of heterosexual majority. I have found that, although neurochemicals and other genetic factors do in fact have some form of control on who an individual finds attractive, there is also an environmental aspect which enables homosexuals to embrace their sexuality and may even introduce them to a community that has people of the same mind set, further aiding them in the coming out process. When an individual makes the choice of coming out they have to reveal their non-heterosexual feelings to their loved ones who may or may not accept them and when they have some form of support on the outside it can help them to accept their own feelings and show them to others. Dr. Fisher, Dr. Swaab, and Dr. Byrne all have different ideas on how homosexuality comes to be a part of an individual's life and whether it is influenced purely by nature or nurture, but when their thoughts are combined a strong argument towards a combination of the two forces is formed. Together they can account for why an individual may have feelings for the same-sex as well as how they are able to come out and admit that they do within their community.

Choice of Expression

What makes individuals “come out” in the first place when they know that if they do so their lives may be much more challenging than if they were to conform to a more accepted heterosexual lifestyle? Also, what makes others decide not to express their sexual orientation? Is it a matter of family and social stigma or do they just not want to make their lives more challenging by going against the grain? It is probable that there may be a link between the homosexual individuals social network, and its support, and the choice of “coming out” as a lesbian or gay person or staying “in the closet”. How many people choose to ignore their feelings for the same sex, because it is easier to hide their preferences than to disregard the norms and go against the grain? Because of the social stigma that we are all brought up with about the norms of heterosexual lifestyles many may fear to stray from this. This leads Dr. June Reinich, director emerita and senior research fellow at The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender & Reproduction in Indiana University, as well as other researchers, to believe that “many women with homosexual tendencies choose not to act on them in response to stronger societal pressure to fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother” (Small 73). Young individuals may also have the fear of losing precious family ties as well as financial security as they “come out” to their loved ones who may or may not accept them for their sexual orientation. Young individuals must take this into consideration as they may end up on the streets if their family chooses to kick them out. An increasing amount of “out” individuals have emerged over the years, however, which can mean one of two things: Either an increase of people “coming out” rather than staying “closeted” or more homosexuals thanks to natural selection. People may be choosing to “come out” because there has been more understanding and acceptance during the past years, especially with the gay pride parades and other events that are now public to the majority of people. This is reflected in a study conducted on Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay men (ATLG), which included heterosexual participants with different religious backgrounds, ethnicities, and living circumstances *etc.* It was found that “individuals who did not have a gay friend of either sex showed statistically more prejudice than individuals who had gay friends of both sexes (Stoever & Morera 203). This shows that ignorance and misconception may be the reason why many still do not accept homosexuality as a natural phenomenon, while others do so with open arms. But unfortunately Professor

Valentine at the University of Sheffield in England reminds us that “despite these positive changes, homophobia and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation persist. The decision to ‘come out’ is still therefore both difficult and risky for many young people” (480). And this is most likely the major reason for why people still choose to deny their sexual feelings towards their own gender altogether or wait until late adulthood to recognize the feeling because they no longer have the same peer pressure that they could not escape during adolescence in high school and college. Repressing one’s feelings though may lead to neurochemical level changes, which Dr. Fisher discusses. It may influence the person’s feelings and behavior causing them emotional pain as they struggle through life repressing their own feelings to conform to the norms. But what makes individuals “come out” in the first place when they know that if they do so their lives may be much more challenging than if they were to conform to a more accepted heterosexual lifestyle.

Change in Our Society

Unfortunately not all societies offer homosexuality as a social identity and they do not accept people who try to do so. It may be because of the lack of knowledge about this matter, as it was with left handedness in the middle ages when people were thought to be evil because of their favoring of the left hand, or it may just be disapproval of something that is not natural for them so it should not be natural for anyone else either. Despite the many reasons people choose not to “come out”, whether it be a strong sense of obligation to their parents and the fear of hurting them or family status, themselves from discrimination or just the fear of being different from the heteronoms, there are still people “coming out” (Valentine 484). This notion of fear is supported by Professor Steven Seidman:

Researchers have documented that many youth who came of age in the late 1980s and 1990s felt compelled to conceal their homosexuality as a condition of integrating into family, peer, and school communities. Indeed, given their social, economic, and legal dependence on the family and school, their need to manage their identity is potentially fateful in a way recalling closeted homosexuals. Yet, while an easy accommodation to being gay is often blocked by dependence on the family and schools which are among the least tolerant institutions, self-acceptance often occurs anyway. (223)

But although he accommodates Valentines thought on fear of loss of family and financial security, he still believes that even with the difficulties of being gay individuals still manage to gain self-acceptance in most accounts. Of course some cannot, and I will touch upon them later in this paper. Over the years though, an increasing number of “out” individuals, most of them young adults, emerged. The reason for this is our society is releasing the constraints and social norms of tradition leaving individuals freer to choose between an array of sexual orientations and lifestyles in pursuit of their own happiness (479-480). This leaves youth to explore their options and learn more of their sexuality. Our post-modern culture revolves around independency and individuality, which has led to what Dr. Valentine *et al.* see as a “do-it-yourself” lifestyle. They claim: “The freedom that young people are assumed to have to create ‘do-it-yourself biographies’ has notably been understood to provide more opportunities for lesbians and gay men to live the lifestyle of their choice” (Valentine 480). This means youth no longer clings to the traditions past generations followed, but rather have their own views on how their lives should be led. This change is apparent in other aspects of human life, not just sexual orientation. We can see it for example in marriage, sex, and childbearing and -raising. People no longer stick to marriage before sex and children after marriage. The traditional values have lost some of their power over the course of the past ten years or more with the visibility of homosexuality in the media as well as in peoples everyday lives through homosexual groups, which make themselves known to the public. The combination of all these sources has made it a possibility for alternative sexual orientations to rise to norms in a sense that they never have been before. The youth now are being brought up in a more open society. This is perhaps because their parents generations growing up between the 1970’s and 1990’s may have felt the need for a new freedom that they did not have the luxury of having when they were growing up and worked for to create a better environment for their children. They formed a world where everything sexual is no longer hidden away behind locked doors and we can see as Dr. Hammack notes:

“Adolescence is often a defining moment in identity formation, as subjectivity, culture, and childhood experiences collide with biological ‘predispositions’ to begin this process of self-understanding. As one engages with the sexual stories and sexual ‘scripts’ available in culture, the construction of one’s own sexual life story begins.” (281)

Here he speaks of “sexual ‘scripts’”, by which he means the different lifestyles available within our society; heterosexual and homosexual, as well as any other form of lifestyle. He informs us that now that these lifestyle options are available, the youth of today has the opportunity and the knowledge to embrace the one they feel most comfortable with whether it be homosexual or heteronormative.

What we see when we take Dr. Hammack’s observations of more varied sexual scripts and Dr. Valentines “do-it-yourself” attitude we get many individuals who now know what they want as well as know how to get what they want. This enables LGB youth to “come out” since they have that option as well as the freedom to choose it. They are allowed to venture out and make their own life story rather than follow a pre-written one left by their fathers and mothers. As our society becomes more accepting each generation has an easier time making their own pathways through life. This is a positive thing for the gay community where many still fear coming out to the public for fear of rejection. Now that our society has broadened its horizons from a heterosexual mindset to one full of lifestyle choices there is a chance that one day we will no longer think of people being afraid of coming out as a real problem. We may even get to that point in our society where sexuality is fluid and it is no longer critiqued if you’re with a man or a woman.

Deadly Consequences

Despite changes for the better in our society concerning people’s beliefs on homosexuality and their acceptance of it, there are still many unfortunate individuals who feel that there is something wrong with them or are afraid to reveal their feelings for fear of losing the people they hold most dear. Micah Lebson says:

Troiden (1979, in Kourany, 1987, and Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991), proposed a multi-stage model for the development of homosexual identity: first, feelings of homosexuality start to emerge in the early adolescent years; then the budding homosexual, in a “dissociation” stage, experiences doubt, questioning and denial, subconsciously tweaking perceptions of self and the legitimacy of societal beliefs about homosexuality while struggling to integrate new feelings into a mental schema; and finally, the individual accepts and discloses the alternative sexual orientation, harmoniously merging emotions and sexuality. (110)

These stages are fragile and with a small push in either direction something can go wrong. Lebson demonstrates how one may come about realizing their sexuality and possibly develop a negative view of themselves. If the young individual develops a negative mental schema of their own life there is a high risk of them manifesting suicidal thoughts or perhaps even attempting suicide in order to escape or find a meaning in life and what to live for. Lebson later mentions: Troiden believes that the likelihood of suicide increases every time one of the stages gets harder to reach. This in turn can develop into self-loathing and sexual confusion. The homosexual individual will then attempt to cope with this and will most likely fall into a depression where the only out that they can see is suicide (Lebson 111). This makes sense as any individual that is confused and misplaced will try to find meaning in their own lives, which for some can only be found at the verge of death. Unfortunately self-loathing and confusion are not the only factors that may be playing against the homosexual individual. Their family and friends may also be a contributing factor, as they may have rejected the individual or expressed their disgust for the homosexual's choice of lifestyle. The confusion young homosexual's may experience may be due to the beliefs they were brought up with. "Traditionally adulthood has been understood to be defined by four markers, two of which are based on a heterosexual imperative: exiting the education system, securing paid employment, marriage, and parenthood" (Valentine 484). This indicates that traditional values may in fact be a key component in keeping these individuals in check and in turn making them feel that who they are is not correct. "Closeted" individuals have to deal with not being out to their family and friends and at times this can put a stain on their mental health. They may have suicidal ideation or they may even attempt or succeed in suicide. Many are still not able to talk to someone they trust and therefore are torn apart from within in self-loathing turmoil.

Conclusion

Nature and nurture were believed to play equal parts in the lives of homosexual youth and since no strong evidence refuting this exists there is still a chance that it is so. Young homosexuals have chosen to "come out" for reasons that only they themselves know of. I have found, however, that since our society has become more aware of alternate lifestyles through the aid of media and gay groups in the public that people may be less afraid to show others who they really are. Also, as people are becoming more

aware they are becoming more accepting and in turn are being more positive towards individuals who are out or coming out. This affects the neurochemicals that Fisher discusses and keeps them at their original level rather than lowering them as the negative feelings of homosexuality are being removed from our society. Unfortunately some still choose to stay “closeted”. Some possibly for financial reasons, as they may fear that by “coming out” they will lose their family and friends and will no longer have a financial security that they would have if their family did not ostracize them. Others simply do not come out to others for fear of rejection and may become suicidal as they are torn from within with self-loathing and depression. There are many types of people and they live in different social groups, with different statuses, education levels, and life situations. All of these factors along with genetics and neurochemicals transmit to a homosexual identity and whether a young individual chooses to come out or not.

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