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Body Dissatisfaction Among Gay Men: A Cultural Phenomenon

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Increasingly, gay men are walking through the doors of counseling centers across America with concerns of body image. They feel the pressure within the gay community to shape their body into an ideal representation of leanness and muscular definition. The pressure becomes so intense they begin to focus the majority of their energy on physical appearance. Physical and mental health risks become omnipotent as they succumb to the pressure.

Background

As a culture and as individuals, homosexuals have experienced oppression and discrimination for a number of years. In the 1950s, hidden alliances were formed with missions to improve life for gays in America. The societies had to be kept secret in order to protect the lives of its members due to the high risk in exposing one's sexual orientation. The societies began to gain attention—most often negative attention—because politicians used gay rights issues as part of their campaign (Marcus, 2002).

Throughout the 1960s, gays became more visible in America. In the January 21, 1966, issue of *Time*, an article appeared stating homosexuality was caused by a fear of the opposite sex. The article continued to degrade homosexuality persisting it was immoral. However, Marcus (2002) believed this was a step in the right direction because people were now talking about homosexuality, whereas in the past it was ignored.

On June 28, 1969, police raided New York City's Greenwich Village at Stonewall Inn, a known gay bar. For the first time in reported history, gay men and women fought back. The incident lasted only three days but gained national attention and became a turning point for gay rights. Homosexual and heterosexual supporters of gay rights became active in the pursuit of fair and equal treatment of gays (Marcus, 2002; McVannel Erwin, 2006).

Democratic presidential candidates began to speak favorably about homosexuals and civil rights in the 1972 campaigns. College students began demanding and receiving equal rights for their organizations within the institutions. A change began at the state and federal levels, decriminalizing homosexuality, and antigay regulations began to collapse (Marcus, 2002). McVannel Erwin (2006, p. 95) describes the “American Psychiatric Association’s... decision in 1973 to remove homosexuality as a form of psychopathology from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,” as perhaps the most powerful movement in gay and mental health history.

The 1980s were marked by the headlines of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Throughout this decade, AIDS claimed the lives of more than 100,000 Americans, most of whom were gay men. AIDS became known as the gay man’s disease. As AIDS continued to take lives, more people stepped forward and became activists for gays in the fight against AIDS. However, the publicity also further ostracized homosexuals, confirming, for anti-supporters, that homosexuality was wrong (Marcus, 2002).

Through the efforts of courageous men and women, gay rights have improved. Political figures supported AIDS funding, gays in the military, protection for gay employees, and civil union laws. Students formed Gay Straight Alliances, gay men and women served in public offices, religious leaders of almost all denominations addressed issues of sexuality, and homosexuality has been removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Yet, gay men continue to experience discrimination and separation from mainstream America.

Identity

Many theorists suggest people gain social-identity and sense of self through their role in society. Thus, gay men have had experiences that suggest they are bad, immoral, disgusting, and threatening to American society. Other messages from society dictate gay men must be attractive, slender, and muscular (Siever, 1994). The messages are not only in the larger American society, but also within the gay community.

For many people, sexual identity and sense of self begins to extend during adolescence. Data reviewed by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (2006) found gays commonly become aware of their sexuality between the ages of eight and eleven but on average do not identify as gay until the ages of 15 to 17. Adolescence is also a time marked by pressure to conform and a strong desire to fit in. Thus, gay adolescents feel very different from their peers, confused about their sexuality, and are constantly internalizing that they do not belong. Additionally, gay males are likely to be more effeminate than heterosexual males years prior to identifying as a gay male (Hospers & Jansen, 2005). Consequently, gay men experience oppression from an early age.

“Gender oppression is not merely reenacted but actively reconstructed, revitalized, and redeployed throughout the gay culture life,” (Wood, 2004, p. 57). Gay men are more likely than any other sexual orientation to experience distress and internalize pressure from peers. Among psychological stressors for gay males is the pressure to conform to the standard of physical attractiveness prescribed to gays within

the gay community (Hospers & Jansen, 2005). The pressure to live up to the gay community's standards of attractiveness have further oppressed gay men because the internal messages become ones of, "I do not fit into mainstream society and I am only accepted in the gay community when I meet the physical standards set before me."

Gay men report feeling concerned about their appearance because they believe, within the gay community, it is the most important factor for attracting a partner. Gay males worry about finding a man to share a romantic relationship and believe when they reach the ideal physique they will *magically* find a worthwhile relationship (Shernoff, 2002; Siever, 1994). Furthermore, Shernoff (2002) found gay men seldom feel they will ever meet the gay community's demanding expectations.

Oppression and discrimination are a reality for gay men. Throughout history gays have been treated as second class citizens; their sexual orientation, which is a defining part of their existence, had been declared a mental illness; they have been blamed for the AIDS epidemic; and they continue to be oppressed through religious organizations and societal standards of *normal*. Even within the gay community, gay men experience discrimination; they have to live up to the expectations within a community of peers; and have had a lifetime of experiences internalized as, "I don't belong." In effort to ward off loneliness and claim a position of personal power, gay men use their bodies to attract partners and prove their adequacy. Thus, body dissatisfaction and potentially unhealthy exercise and diet habits are a risk for gay men.

Brief Research Design

A qualitative research design, using hermeneutics philosophy, was used to illuminate the experiences of gay men with body dissatisfaction. Hermeneutics aims to explore and understand, not to find an explanation. Generally in hermeneutic philosophy, it is acknowledged that the researcher comes into the study with his or her own biases and prejudices (Schwandt, 2000).

Network sampling was used to gather participants who fit the prerequisites of the study. Three participants were selected for participation based on interest, consent, and meeting the requirements of the study. Participants had to be between the ages of 20 and 60 years old, male, self-identify as gay at the time of the study, and admit to body dissatisfaction and/or disordered eating patterns. Participants took part in individual, face-to-face, e-mail, and phone interviews.

The three participants were self-identified gay, male, and confirmed to body dissatisfaction or disordered eating patterns. Aaron (all names have been changed to protect confidentiality) was 5'10", weighed 180 pounds (goal weight 175), 24 years old, and Caucasian. Aaron identified as atheist and was a college senior at a state university. He was working part-time on college campus and lived in the dorms. Nick was 5'7", weighed 132 pounds (goal weight 125), 26 years old, Catholic, and Caucasian. He graduated from a cosmetology college in 2004 and owned his cosmetology business. Nick lived with his parents in a small, Midwest town. Kyle was 5'11", 152 pounds (goal weight 165), 26 years old, and identified as Christian and Black. Kyle worked two part-

time jobs; he was a waiter and a female impersonator. He lived alone in an urban, Midwest town.

Narrative analysis, an oral story of the participants, was used throughout the interview and analysis process of this study. Narrative analysis allows participants to explore their life and how their thoughts and actions bring meaning to their lives (Sands, 2004). With respect to the intricate facets of the men's lives, it was necessary to allow them to narrate their lives through their own words. Themes, which will be explored in the following section, were drawn from their stories.

Participant's Stories

Differences between the participants included: race, religion, and experiences with friends and family. The education level, type of employment, and living arrangements were also different between the participants. Similarities among the participants included: noticing there was something different about themselves before acknowledging they were gay; attempting to, or feeling as if they had to hide their sexual orientation from others in order to be accepted; and all described feeling as though they belonged when their body met a specific standard.

Regardless of the differences between participants, each man expressed an intense fear of being lonely. They could each recall direct or indirect experiences in which they felt isolated and detached from others. They shared examples of current events such as the media's portrayal of gay men, the marriage laws in America, and slang language such as "gay" or "fag" that negatively impacted their self-esteem and sense of belonging. The men internalized these messages as confirmation to their belief that they do not belong.

The three men have all been searching for acceptance and used their physical body as a vehicle for acceptance and belonging. They each shared experiences in which they met or came close to the physical standards of the gay community and remembered feeling hopeful about the possibilities of forming relationships. One participant shared that he noticed being approached by more gay men as he lost weight. He adamantly believed that he would be destined for loneliness should he remain overweight.

The overarching similarity between the three participants is that they had experienced discrimination because of others' intolerance to homosexuality demonstrated through social norms, laws, and history. They genuinely feared being rejected by others in and out of the gay community. These men perceived the only way to guarantee acceptance was to meet the physical expectations of being thin, muscular, and toned.

Each of the participants acknowledged the gay community's standards of attractiveness and reaffirmed that the standards are extremely important. None of the participants disagreed with the expectations nor did they voice an opinion wishing it were different. They each seemed to accept the cultural standards for what they were. Moreover, the men acknowledged they went to extreme measures at times in effort to meet the standards but were not willing to alter their dedication to their body goals. For these men, meeting the standards of physical appearance and guaranteeing acceptance was far more important than physical health.

Discussion

Like many other cultural differences, homosexuality is defined through social construction. The behaviors and cultural norms are defined by the meaning and importance the participants give them. The American gay culture is a body-focused subculture which values physical appearance, slimness, and muscularity (Wood, 2004). The men of this study each acknowledge the importance of appearance and physical attractiveness and work at attaining or maintaining the set forth expectations. By doing this, they are fitting into the culture and defining themselves as individuals within the cultural context.

In addition to homosexuality, the body has its place in social constructionism. Through history the body has been viewed as something *apart* from the self. The body has been a separate entity that helps to define self. “That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization” (Bordo, 1993, p. 5). The social construct of the body implies one who can achieve the *ideal* body is one who is closest to perfection. This belief exists throughout Western cultures regardless of sexual orientation. The men of this study, as well as other research (Hospers & Jansen, 2005; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Yelland & Tiggermann, 2003), imply pressures to have the perfect body are stronger within the gay community than in other communities.

Counseling Implications

Counselors must be sensitive to the needs and struggles of gay men, and can become more aware of this population by reading professional articles, books, popular magazine articles, and literature which focus on issues concerning gay men. Counselors can be sensitive to the experiences of gay men by viewing media through a multicultural, empathetic lens. By looking at popular media through the perspective of a gay man, counselors can become more aware of the pressures gay men face in society. Counselors can also attend gay events such as marches, parades, and rallies.

According to the American Counseling Association’s *Code of Ethics* (2005), counselors must be multiculturally competent to work with a variety of diverse clients. Counselors own the responsibility to become competent in populations in which they lack knowledge and have self-awareness of biases. Counselors have the responsibility to seek consultation, supervision, or education as deemed necessary to gain multicultural competence.

Counselors need to be aware of the pressures on gay men in Western cultures, including gay communities. Not only do counselors need to be aware of the pressures but they should seek insight from their clients about the pressures through discussion with their clients (Shernoff, 2002). Counselors should not assume all pressures are the same for each gay client. However, the three participants of this study agreed the most powerful force driving their desire for a particular physical appearance is their need for acceptance and fear of loneliness. The best way to fully grasp the intensity and breadth of

the pressures is to allow for an open dialog. Counselors can, and should learn from their clients.

Specific to gay men with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating or exercise patterns, it is necessary to decipher to what extent the problem is causing in the client's life. As counselors, we may find his efforts cumbersome to his potential in finding a meaningful existence. However, the client may view his efforts as a way of belonging and finding meaning, rather than a source of problem.

Conclusion

The homosexual males interviewed in this study described their experiences with body dissatisfaction and disordered diet or exercise as a reaction to social and personal pressures associated with their life experiences. The men shared their experience with Western culture and within the gay community. They described similar expectations for being a member of the gay community: thinness, muscularity, and attractiveness. Each participant also expressed his concern for companionship, acceptance, and the fear of eternal loneliness. The common fear of being lonely clearly drove their need for meeting the expectation set forth by the gay community. Each believed he would be accepted and have a much more likely chance of companionship and happiness when he met the ideal physical appearance.

Ultimately, this study provides the view of three homosexual males' experience with body dissatisfaction as it relates to his belonging in the greater world. It seemed the participants were not concerned with low body weight or definition of muscle for the sake of self-gratification. Rather it appeared the participants used their bodies as a resource to gain acceptance. Counselors and homosexual male clients could benefit from counselors who understand the need for homosexual male clients to be accepted for who they are. By using the information acquired through this study, counselors will be able to improve counseling services for gay men, and create services that are more sensitive to the needs of their gay clients.

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