2009 Genevieve D. Willis Senior Thesis Prize Winner

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Italian Major, Gender Studies Supplementary Major

“Out of the Closet and Into the Fire:
Gay Teen Identity in a Heterosexual Society”
Out of the Closet and Into the Fire:  
Gay Teen Identity in a Heterosexist Society
“We must declare ourselves, become known; allow the world to discover this subterranean life of ours which connects kings and farm boys, artists and clerks. *Let them see that the important thing is not the object of love, but the emotion itself.*”
~Gore Vidal
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Introduction

“We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!” It’s a phrase that’s common at protests, at gay pride rallies, and in the narratives of everyday gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender/transsexual (GLBT) men and women. It’s so familiar that it has largely escaped a critical analysis, specifically what exactly it is to be “queer” and how exactly anyone comes to the point in their lives that they can confidently proclaim their sexuality and tell others to “get used to it.” The implication is that, in contemporary society, someone who is not heterosexual must not only declare, but assert their sexuality. Modern American society is very heteronormative, which means that in addition to prizing heterosexuality (along with reproductions of stereotypical masculinity and femininity), homosexuality is explicitly deemed unnatural or abnormal. In fact, because the United States is heteronormative, “heterosexuality is not only expected and the dominant way of living, it has the status as the norm, and is often referred to as what is natural.”\(^1\) The centrality of heterosexuality in United States culture and history means that homosexuality has become nearly invisible, and because it is something with which few are familiar, people are typically nervous to discuss it. This discomfort leads “homosexuality to be thought of as a private sexuality, while heterosexuality is so public that is assumed to be the default sexuality.”\(^2\) The combination of cultural reluctance to discuss homosexuality, and the assumed dichotomy of heterosexuality as public and homosexuality as strictly private means that teens (and adults) struggling with accepting their sexuality hide their identities from those around them, commonly referred to living

\(^{1}\) Caudwell 2006 pg.51
\(^{2}\) Anderson 2005 pg.114
in “the closet.” Gay life in the United States has centered on the closet, whose “root…has been a culture that views gays as not only different in basic ways from heterosexuals but inferior and threatening.”

In sociology, there is a concept proposed by Charles Horton Cooley know as the “looking-glass self” in which “we develop a sense of self, as well as feelings about this self, by looking at ourselves through the eyes of others.” Essentially, what this means is that we construct our self-image based on how we believe others see us. In the case of members of the GLBT community then, the tendency would be to develop a rather negative view of themselves, considering that the majority of “others” devalue homosexuality. In addition to general ideas of how people see them, those struggling with their sexuality also shape their self-concept through interpersonal contact: “it is through interaction that individuals experience, sustain, and transform their sense of who they truly are.” Again, because America values heterosexuality and heteronormative behavior so much, the interactions and cultural stereotypes that GLBT people face are largely negative. One of the more troubling aspects of these negative stereotypes is that all people in society learn them and because GLBT people are undifferentiated from the rest of the general population (at least before they come out), they are in danger of internalizing these stereotypes as well. This “[creates] expectations that impose constraints on the actions and interactions of those targeted, making it difficult for them not to internalize and live up to those expectations.” In that respect, then, when GLBT people come out (that is, refuse to pass as heterosexual, and proudly declare their

1 Seidman 2004 pg.193-94
2 Sandstrom 2006 pg.101
3 Sandstrom 2006 pg.93
4 Sandstrom 2006 pg.163
sexuality), they must not only declare their sexuality, but turn their backs on the cultural beliefs that have been assigned to homosexuality, a task that can take a considerable toll on the person.

Despite these obstacles, there is an interesting trend emerging, “a positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity is being established earlier today than in the past.”¹ Although the ages vary from study to study, the consensus seems to be that self-labeling as gay (defining one’s feelings of difference and one’s sexuality as homosexual, at least internally) typically happens “between ages twelve and seventeen”² and that “the mean age for openly young adult males to self-identify is 16.2 years, although some self-labeling occurs as early at 14.”³ What is clear is that “today’s teens self-label on average several years before high school graduation.”⁴ This means that at the same time these teens are starting to mature emotionally and physically, and in the midst of their quest to navigate high school, their lives are complicated by the fact their emerging sexuality is not the same as all their friends, and is not what they’ve been told is normal and natural. Somehow, though, they tend to self-identify as gay by the time they get their driver’s license.

As gay teens realize their sexuality, it is something with which they are relatively unfamiliar. It is an identity, a sexuality, a topic that they’ve not experienced, which means that it feels like “they [have] emerged as something ‘alien’ from within the bottoms of their own homes and families.”⁵ Because their homosexuality is so foreign

¹ Owens 1998 pg.15
² Hunter 2007 pg.52
³ Owens 1998 pg.35
⁴ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.36
⁵ Bergling 2001, pg.111
and they are so unfamiliar with talking about it, “when many teens realize their sexual orientation, this self-discovery is accompanied by intense anxiety.”\(^1\) As difficult and stressful as this may be, the “conscious recognition of sexuality is the beginning of self-acceptance.”\(^2\) It is only after a gay teen has recognized their sexuality that they can begin to ignore what society has told them is true and redefine, at least to them, what it means to be gay.

From all around them, teens learn that being gay is not okay. To be exact, “religion, law, medicine, and societal expectations relay the message that gay…youths are sinful, criminal, mentally ill, and dysfunctional, effeminate males. At best, homosexuality is undesirable.”\(^3\) To put it in other terms, “everything in society—every movie, every billboard, everything…reminds the gay person that what he…is is unnatural, abnormal.”\(^4\) Gay teens are conflicted about their sexuality because their feelings clash with what American culture tells them about homosexuality. It is a very confusing process because “on the one hand, a teen is told by society that she or he is inherently bad or undesirable, and, on the other, that same teen has her or his own undeniable feelings and desires that contradict societal norms.”\(^5\) Gay teens are also faced with constant attacks on their developing sense of self-worth. While the teen is growing into his personality and trying to secure his identity, “the constant drumbeat of condemnation and ridicule regarding sexual orientation can have a very negative effect

\(^1\) Owens 1998 pg.155
\(^2\) Owens 1998 pg.36
\(^3\) Owens 1998 pg.114
\(^4\) Seidman 2004 pg.174
\(^5\) Owens 1998 pg.103
on one’s feelings of self-worth.”¹ In a heterosexist society, “it is difficult to learn to become a healthy sexual-minority adult when there are few supports for being a sexual-minority adolescents.”² A key component of learning to be both healthy and gay is learning how to deny the cultural messages that ignore gay teens or denigrate homosexuality.

There are many ways that gay male teens are taught that their sexuality is, at best, abnormal or, at worst, unacceptable. In separate sections, I will examine the five most prominent aspects of American socialization of boys/male teens in order of increasing inescapability. I will be detailing the different facets of American society, all of which drive the teen into the closet. In the first chapter, I will discuss the very narrow concepts of masculinity which unfortunately mean that the “American male” is necessarily heterosexual. Although these ideas can be relatively fluid and never concretely defined, there are certain behaviors that US society typically deems acceptable from their males, and teens (gay and straight alike) learn that homosexuality is definitely not one of them.

In the second chapter, I will discuss sports, one of the most concrete ways through which boys learn masculinity. The athlete is one of the most prized identities in American culture (as evidenced by the exorbitant salaries that so many professional athletes earn), but, again, that identity has been defined as mutually exclusive with homosexuality. Sports are especially confusing for gay teens because they present both positive and negative aspects. Success in sports can help a gay teen build up his masculine aura, and American culture deems devoting large amounts of energy and time to athletics a worthy enterprise, even to the point where sports get in the way of heterosexual display (in other

¹ Owens 1998 pg.187
² Owens 1998 pg.238
words, dating girls). At the same time, however, athletic culture is notorious for its use of homophobic language. Gay teens may have an especially difficult time learning to accept themselves when they are so immersed in a bigoted environment.

In the unlikely case that a boy avoids sports in his childhood/adolescence, he is almost guaranteed to receive his socialization in the school systems. Because schools are a place that gathers teens together in a very close environment, and because schools are an arena in which teens are learning about themselves and their relationship to society at large, schools essentially concentrate larger cultural values, with an oppressive emphasis on conformity, and that will be the subject of the third chapter. The structure of schools is important (from the roles of faculty to events like Prom and Homecoming), but their real importance is the teen culture climate they foster.

The fourth chapter will analyze an even more inevitable aspect of American society: the family. Despite progress in social expectations that has allowed alternative families (single-parent, remarried parents, etc), the family is still centered on heterosexuality. Even in the event that a boy’s parents are especially open and accepting, they can only set an example of male-female coupling. Through no intentional act by the parents, gay teens are left without a role model because their parents are, by definition, heterosexual. Additionally, when the son does come out, it’s a narrative that very few parents understand, so the child often feels alienated within his own home. In these ways, the American family, nearly without exception, fails to provide gay teens with narratives and role models with which they can identify.

More ubiquitous than expectations for masculinity, more than sports, more than schools, more than even family, one of the most powerful parts of American society,
especially in the transmission of cultural values, is the media, and that will be the subject of the fifth chapter. From advertising and print media, to commercials, to television, to movies, the majority of the messages tend to emphasize or naturalize heterosexuality, and either ignore homosexuality or present it in a less than favorable light. These conditions are changing, and the media have been more objective and honest about the portrayals of homosexuality, but gay characters still are seldom given top billing and tend to occupy the periphery of the story/plotline.

In this section, I will analyze specific shows and films and their effects on gay teens who watch them. Television may be easier with which to come into contact, but TV is also located in the home and the closeted teenager will be less likely to feel comfortable watching gay themed programs, especially with their parents nearby. Following the theme of increasing inescapability then, I will discuss television first. The discussion of television will include Ellen (originally titled These Friends of Mine), the Showtime series Queer as Folk (sometimes referred to as QAF), the teen oriented shows Dawson’s Creek and Buffy: The Vampire Slayer, and finally the multi-Emmy Award-winning series Will & Grace. These shows were selected for two main reasons: for having mainstream appeal and for having gay characters being central to the series (what QAF may lack in terms of mainstream appeal, it more than makes up for with gay characters’ centrality, and therefore still warrants attention).

Movies, on the other hand, hold several advantages in comparison to television when it comes to their ability to tackle controversial subjects like homosexuality. They don’t have to worry as much about offending backers because, unlike television sponsors (who endorse entire series or seasons and can withhold sponsorship from an
objectionable episode), sponsors for movies are well aware of the plot line before they buy in. Additionally, for the majority of movies, teens can escape the other constraints of their lives, especially their parents, and experience gay-themed storylines in the comfort of the dark anonymity of a movie theater. Still, though, Hollywood has had its fair share of problems when dealing with homosexuality, even when giving gay characters an authentic and unbiased voice. The movies I will be discussing are *X-Men: The Last Stand* (which may lack explicit references to sexuality but it, like its two prequels, has an intense subtext which is difficult to deny; alternatively know as simply X3), *As Good As It Gets*, *In and Out*, and *Brokeback Mountain*. These movies were selected because they were all widely popular at the box office while still relating to or presenting homosexuality to the general public. Unfortunately, there are very few movies with both gay characters central to the story and large success/appeal, and even they tend to leave gay teens wanting something more. Due to the extreme impact of the media on gay teens, the media chapter will occupy a significantly larger portion of this thesis.

In the last two chapters, I will address the concept of coming out, and how it relates to gay teens in light of everything that complicates this process. First, the leading literature and research regarding gay teens tends to focus on the coming out process, how the teen changes while coming out and how his relationships with others change as well. However, they all tend to make one large assumption: that gay teens should declare their sexuality and come out of the closet. As this study will demonstrate, gay teens are faced with a very hostile environment that is at all times pushing the closet door shut. This section will investigate what it means for a gay teen to live in the closet and whether or not it is worth it to acknowledge his sexuality in such an unfriendly atmosphere.
The final chapter will then discuss what exactly it means for gay teens who do decide to come out. Teens are coming out earlier (likely a result of the increased visibility and somewhat decreased stigma regarding homosexuality), and “When compared with previous generations of youths, the proportion who are out is clearly increasing.”\(^1\) The prevailing existing literature focuses on the mental problems that seem to ravage gay teens, from depression, to eating disorders, to suicidal ideation, to actual suicide attempts. However, it is important to recognize that gay teens who do fall victim to psychological distress and disorders are in the minority and that the vast majority of gay teens manage to come out and develop *positive feelings about themselves*. The literature is few and far between that focuses on the positive qualities of gay teens and the incredible strength they demonstrate, and that is the purpose of this project.

Before continuing, it is important to make a few notes about the selection of the scope of this analysis. I will only be discussing gay male teenagers for several reasons. First of all, gay male teens and lesbian teens have drastically different experiences. For instance, the role of same-sex relationships tends to play a more important role in the sexual identity recognition process of girls than for boys (for whom sexual activity/fantasy is the typical catalyst). Additionally, in American society, lesbian sexuality is usually less of a problem than gay male sexuality, due largely to both the unfortunate relative invisibility of lesbians (in relation to male homosexuality) and to the heightened status of heteronormative males in a sexist society. Furthermore, as a gay male myself, I cannot claim to understand the narratives of lesbians. In an attempt to avoid the biggest problems that plagued Second-Wave Feminists (who represented the

\(^1\) Savin-Williams 2005 pg. 201
narratives of white women as indicative of women of all other races), I will therefore only attempt to explore the lives of people with whom I can closely identify. So, to clear up any confusion, if I ever refer to “gay teens” or “sexual-minority teens,” I am referring to gay male teens, and neither lesbian nor bisexual teens (another topic that would be best served by its own analysis). In that vein, I will also not be differentiating between the experiences of white teens and ethnic-minority teens. Although their racial status means they become a double minority, an exploration of that topic is best left for different author. Another topic that will not appear is religion. Again, although it can have a major impact upon gay teens, the subject itself is so loaded with contradictions and controversy that it is also best left for its own analysis.

With that in mind, let’s begin an exploration of gay teens coming out of the closet and stepping right into the fire with the ideals that define the contemporary American Man.
Making The Modern Man

“Our society at the moment is rolling the dice, instigated by gays, to reconsider what masculinity is and what makes a straight man or a gay man, and if these definitions are real or if a middle ground can be found.”

~Brad Gooch

Few academics or theorists, or anyone living in the country, would dispute the claim that the United States is sexist place, one in which there is great inequality between men and women. Starting in the early 1900s, feminism as a movement grew about to combat the privilege given to men and the oppression of women. The very base of that fight was an effort to call attention to the invisible advantages men have for no other reason than they were born male. Essentially, men and masculinity are placed much higher in the social hierarchy than are woman and femininity and this translates into increased rights and respect for men. There have been many movements within feminism that each take a different approach (from first wave political rights to second wave social rights), but the conclusion that males in our culture are unfairly advantaged has remained stable.

Although informative and, indeed, effective, the underlying assumptions of feminist thought are not without their flaws; the biggest problem with their ideas is that it assumes that all men receive privilege in the same way. In fact, the definition of masculinity that is at the top of the social hierarchy includes only males who are heterosexual, white, upper-middle class (or better), who are married and are heteronormative in behavior (and, on occasion, this has been discussed in some feminist writings). Clearly, this disqualifies the majority of men from receiving full benefits and, most notably for this discussion, gay men are absolutely not included. Furthermore the
hegemonic definitions of masculinity complicate the gay teenager’s process of identity formation. The gay teen must then somehow find a way to reconcile what they have been taught is masculine with their emerging sexual identity.

_The Meaning of “Man”_

Both heterosexuality and heteronormativity (men acting as men “should”) occupy positions of hegemonic dominance in American society, and therefore the indoctrination of how a male is supposed to act begins at a very early stage. From the moment a male baby is brought home from the hospital, the parents, along with friends, relatives, neighbors, and anyone who meets the baby teach that boy how to behave acceptably. Whether it’s blue as walls in his room or as color of his shirt, or only buying the child certain toys (i.e. action figures and not dolls), or telling a boy who has fallen and is crying that he should not so easily show emotion, masculinity is constructed and taught at every opportunity. As one author put it, “young boys come into a blue-colored, ball-playing, sports-minded environment even before that can tell the difference between male and female.”

1 Typically, people tend to judge a boy/teen’s masculinity by their “appearance, behavior, voice and muscularity,”
2 and the more closely a male conforms to societal expectations about masculinity, the more accepted and admired he is.

Conversely, however, if a male exhibits classically feminine traits, he is often despised or, at the very least, not openly accepted by mainstream America. Although masculine/feminine definitions change not only through time but also across contemporaneous cultures, there is still a strict belief that they are objective fact in current society. This can be especially confusing since there is no obvious or intrinsic

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1 Alvarez 2008 pg.123
2 Alvarez 2008 pg.123
delineation between what is masculine and what is feminine. It is clear, nevertheless, that departure from that constructed system of masculinity is seen as deviant and unpleasant. One of the respondents in Tim Bergling’s Sissyphobia phrased it well: “We have an elaborate sexual mythology that assigns specific traits to masculinity and to femininity,” elaborating the feeling of ambiguity in the definition process. This same respondent goes on to say, “Anger and disgust directed at effeminate men is based upon horror at the idea that someone is challenging the rules.”

This lack of clarity as to what is “man” contributes to the fact that contemporary American masculinity has a negative definitive process: “masculinity is defined by what it is not, namely ‘feminine’, and all its associated traits—hard not soft, strong not weak, reserved not emotional, active not passive” (emphasis in original). As confusing as this may be, what it means is that men are men because they are not women. Evidently, then, one of the primary ways to affirm one’s masculinity is by denying all things feminine and, “accordingly, boys and men traditionally position themselves away from feminized terrains to show they are not feminine.”

One of the more concrete key components of the hazy American definition of masculinity is that men are necessarily heterosexual, and men must be straight in order to be granted access to heteronormative privilege. Often, heterosexual men are seen as “more trustworthy with children, more valuable as an employee, even more likely to be more rational” when compared to gay men. Openly gay men, then, do not benefit from the advantages of simply being men. In fact, in coming out, they actively eschew their

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1 Bergling 2001 pg.59
2 Padva 2005 pg.592
3 Anderson 2007 pg.105
4 Morland 2005 pg.183
benefits: “Denying ‘straightness’ is a disavowal of such privilege.”\textsuperscript{1} However, gay men’s downward movement in the masculine hierarchy isn’t exactly voluntary because, when they come out, society as a whole no longer views them as proper men. In essence, the American culture actively devalues men who do not correspond to prevailing definitions of masculinity. Put more bluntly, but no less effectively, “We dislike effeminate men first and foremost because they are behaving like women. In a male-dominated society that places men way up \textit{here}, and women way down \textit{there}, any man who would surrender his God-given place of superiority in our social hierarchy just isn’t worth a damn”\textsuperscript{2} (emphasis in original).

As discussed above, modern masculinity is defined by what it is not, and since masculine men are neither homosexual nor feminine, “male homosexuality is also disparaged because it is culturally conflated with femininity.”\textsuperscript{3} So, by being gay, gay males are equated with women, which is what leads to some of the clearest and most long lasting stereotypes of gay men. These stereotypes say that gay males are effeminate, weak, and emotional, all of which are typically associated with women. Therefore, gay men and teens are left attempting to form some sort of identity that includes both the qualifiers “gay” and “man/masculine,” despite the fact that society has defined the two terms as mutually exclusive. This typically leads to an attempt to regain at least some amount of masculinity, while not foreclosing on sexuality. Luckily, for these aims at

\textsuperscript{1} Morland 2005 pg.183  
\textsuperscript{2} Bergling 2001 pg.58  
\textsuperscript{3} Anderson 2007 pg.105
least, increasingly “in contemporary Western society, men are being told that their bodies define them.” Image, then, often becomes a major concern for gay males.

*The Importance of Image*

The most obvious way that gay males attempt to define themselves as masculine is through their muscularity. In the recent past, there has been a shift, or at the very least an expansion, in the stereotypical image of the gay man; although there is still the idea of the effeminate and flamboyant gay, another image has emerged: that of the physically fit and body conscious gay male. Even before the term homosexual was invented, “the effeminate homosexual represented all homosexuals for centuries in Western culture.” Although stereotypes have changed for straight men as well, gay men and teens are still able to capitalize on the “made-up masculine-muscular-heterosexual-male construction” in an effort to normalize their appearance. To many gay men, though, the drive for increasing muscularity is more than just looking good to pass as heterosexual, it is also about “reclaiming those things that society had denied homosexual men for centuries: their body, their masculinity, and, ultimately, their manhood.” It became an attempt to redefine what it meant to be gay. This new image of being muscular, strong and gay challenges the static depiction of the homosexual as inherently effeminate and inherently un-masculine; in other words, “homosexual males are desirous of a muscular body because it ‘proves’ to themselves and to others that they are, indeed, real men.”

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1. Duggan, McCreary 2004 pg.47
2. Alvarez 2008 pg.95
3. Alvarez 2008 pg.44
4. Alvarez 2008 pg.100
5. Duggan, McCreary 2004 pg.47
In Chasing Adonis, Tim Bergling offers this idea, from one of his interview participants: “Gay men seem especially stuck on physical image because it is an area of our lives we can control.”¹ This speaks to the idea that in American society, not only are gay males seen as lesser and as damaged in some way, but that gay males are without control in a culture that prizes heterosexuality and heteronormative behavior. Gay men cannot change their sexual orientation, but they do have the power to change how they appear to other people. In that respect, gay males can still be seen as men without having to change the greater societal proscriptions of what it means to be properly masculine; by exaggerating one aspect of hegemonic masculinity, gay males can obscure another aspect they appear to “lack”.

Despite all of this, it is important to note that the drive for masculine appearance and for musculature is not just for some sense of self-fulfillment, but to change the way others view and treat gay men. And, regardless of whether or not it’s a healthy way of thinking, “Muscular size, for the most part, commands attention, admiration and respect—in and outside of gay culture.”² This seems to be true especially effective when applied to the reactions of heterosexual men; as one of Bergling’s responds says in Sissyphobia, “I guess it’s just easier for a straight guy to deal with a guy who seems straight even if he’s gay.”³ Another of his respondents put it a bit more frankly: “Society is willing to accept gay people only to a certain extent, and the openly femme type need not apply.”⁴ What this all boils down to is no less than homophobia, but dressed up so that it’s not obvious discrimination. The message that is then conveyed to gay teens

¹ Bergling 2007pg.56
² Alvarez 2008 pg.192
³ Bergling 2001 pg.63
⁴ Bergling 2001 pg.112
appears to be that “homosexuality is acceptable but the expression of femininity is not.”

On the surface, this appears to be a very progressive stance and one that is definitely welcome. However, as discussed above, there are some very important contradictions made in that idea. Earlier in that same article, the author, Eric Anderson, wrote that male homosexuality is “conflated” with femininity and traditional men and boys position themselves away from feminine domains. This means society seems to be moving toward accepting homosexuality, but, since allowing that status to be known is stepping into a feminine domain, they must keep that status a secret at all costs. Of course, this is only true if the teen is heteronormative and plays the part of masculine well, with no feminine characteristics. Only then is the teen (or any man) deemed worthy of acceptance into hegemonic masculinity.

All of this reclamation of a masculine identity comes back to one pointed desire: to fit in. The assumptions underlying that desire are pernicious, even if they don’t appear evident; those assumptions are that gay men are not real men nor are they to be accepted for who they are. Many gay men and teens try to approximate and emulate heteronormative masculinity in an attempt to “pass” in society. In practice, it is an attempt to emphasize that gay men are not really fundamentally different from straight men, which is important in a society that perceives “different” and “equal” as contradictory terms. The problem, however, is that gay men and teens are different from heterosexuals, and the attempt to pass is an attempt to erase that difference, and erase the equality of gay males.

\[1\] Anderson 2008 pg.111
Another way of looking at this concept is that gay males often subconsciously take advantage the “halo effect,” where a person’s negative qualities are overlooked when they possess considerable and noticeable positive qualities. In this case, gay males attempt to make up for their failure to live up to hegemonic masculine expectations by at least looking the part of the ideal man. One of the important parts of the halo effects is that conflation of attractiveness and other positive aspects. What that mean is, essentially, when a person looks good, others attribute other good qualities to that person and are more likely to ignore negatives qualities. This is one of the possible explanations for the fixation with fashion, image, and body that many gay men have. Especially with the relatively new stereotype of the body-obsessed gay man, this seems to fit perfectly into the idea of musculature defining masculinity. In this new masculine stereotype, gay men attempt to perfect their bodies to try and prove that they are more than gay, but gay men. Whether intentional or not, when a gay man has perfected the “look” of a man, it often means that his homosexuality can be overlooked, or at least can be less of an issue.

Conclusion

In the face of social pressures to be masculine, gay teens must navigate their identity, which includes both being gay and becoming a man. This task is not easy, and gay teens are far more likely to fall victim to things like body dysphoria and eating disorders. However, despite the severity of those problems, those that do develop them are still a minority, with most estimates being between 10-20 percent of gay men and teens (even though it may be several times higher than heterosexual males).¹ What does become clear is that in contemporary American society, there are very basic

¹ Bergling 2007pg.96
contradictions in the term “gay man” and male teens that come out face a difficult and sometimes dangerous path through that cultural terrain. The easy way through it is to deny or suppress one’s homosexuality and to pass as heterosexual. Despite how damaging that can be, it’s also the reality for a number of young gay teens. However, more and more, gay male teens are not only able to assert their sexuality and identity despite what they’ve been taught to believe, but they are also doing so earlier and earlier than their predecessors. Somehow, gay teens are finding a way to trust themselves and their instincts above what they’ve been told about what makes a man. Regardless, there is no doubt that the American definitions of what it means to be a man make it especially difficult for gay teens to both grow into their identities as men and as gay.
Sports: The School of Masculinity

“Professional sports is fueled by masculinity. The old stereotypes will linger until new images of gay men prove them wrong.”

~Tyler Hoffman

One major aspect of American masculinity that was conspicuously absent from the previous section was sports. Whether competitive or recreational, sports are almost unavoidable in contemporary culture, especially for males, and they can be both very beneficial and very harmful to gay teens. American society values sports and physical dominance so much that it is nearly impossible for boys to avoid this aspect of masculine education, and because of sport’s centrality to American boyhood, “Nearly all boys (regardless of sexual orientation) are socialized into sport (whether through networks of friends or compulsory participation in physical education) in early childhood.”\(^1\) Often, boys are involved with sports outside of school, and often following in their parents’ footsteps. Whether it is because of some unfulfilled dream or a chance to relive their glory days or a genuine belief that their child may enjoy and excel at the activity, parents typically “want their son to participate in competitive team sports, and when he does not, they are disappointed.”\(^2\) The fact is that sports serve as the ideal proving and training grounds for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, and it is an activity with which nearly every American boy has experience; “the strength of association between sports and orthodox masculinity is so strong in North American culture that sporting participation has been nearly made a requisite for boyhood.”\(^3\) As we will soon see,

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1 Anderson 2005 pg.42
2 Savin-Williams 2001 pg.176
3 Anderson 2005 pg.52
however, the idea of a gay athlete is filled with contradictions and leaves a gay teen involved in sports confused as to how to reconcile his identity.

*The Importance of Sport*

One of the reasons that sports, especially team sports, are so crucial to American society is their ubiquity; at nearly every turn, in magazines, in newspapers, on TV, and in the assorted stadiums and arenas across the nation, sports are almost everywhere a young male turns. To understand sports’ importance, one must “understand the complex role that sport plays in society, particularly in the production of a violent, homophobic form of masculinity.”¹ By constantly supplying depictions of dominant masculinity, sports do not help create just any form of masculinity, nor do they create a particularly flexible form of masculinity; in fact, “sports provide an image and forum of idealized or culturally exalted masculinity, which tends to be the most dominant or powerful image in sport cultures.”² Even if major sports could provide other images of masculinity (either emotive or sensitive or even gay), the hegemonic masculinity (of which mainstream sports has a nearly endless supply) is the image that is most circulated and idolized, and thus sports becomes extremely effective in “defining and reinforcing traditional conceptions of masculinity” and “reinforcing heterosexuality.”³

Sports serve an especially important role in high school and in teen culture, and the effects of sports’ reproduction of traditional masculinity are especially evident among adolescents. Just as in society at large, in high schools, the boys that emulate the masculine ideals the most closely tend to have the highest position in their social

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¹ Anderson 2005 pg.4  
² Caudwell 2006 pg.63  
³ Caudwell 2006 pg.63
hierarchy, and competitive sports provides the easiest way to prove their masculine worth. It is then no wonder why “The jock in high school is the ideal male teenager, the alpha male” (emphasis in original).¹ The “jock” is the male student that is not just properly masculine, is not just involved in sports, but excels at them. Specific to the high school environment, the exploits of athletes are broadcast to the general student population, so that without having to discuss his conquest, the jock is truly able to just “leave it all on the field” and trust that everyone will find out and his “masculine capital” will thus be raised.

Unfortunately for gay teens, there are certain qualities that tend to dominate the stereotypes of all athletes, and these stereotypes can be especially damaging to young gay males in high school. In fact, “The lack of gay role models and (out) gay ideals (movie stars, actors, professional athletes), and the in-your-face heterosexuality of pop male icons give young gay men the impression that they are made of a different cloth.”² The images and stories gay teens hear and read do not just affirm that athletes are heterosexual, but they also have a tendency to (often explicitly) deny homosexuality as a possibility, and thanks to the fundamental position sport holds in teen culture, these beliefs “are not just in your gay history books—they are drilled into the psyches of high school students every day.”³

This presents quite a problem for both the gay teen that wishes to get involved in sports and to the athlete who is discovering his homosexuality. For the gay teen interested in sports, he may be turned away by the prospect of entering an intensely heterosexist

¹ Alvarez 2008 pg.166
² Alvarez 2008 pg.166
³ Alvarez 2008 pg.165
environment. What is worse, though, is the athlete who discovers his sexuality and must then decide whether or not he can be honest with himself and his teammates. It can be particularly complicated if that gay athlete otherwise fits the masculine athlete profile “because there is a strong message attached to the stereotype that homosexuality does not fit the jock image. Fear of ridicule, among other potential dangers, drives even those who recognize their homosexuality to conceal it at all costs.”¹ The inclusion of an openly gay athlete goes against several very prevalent social beliefs: “A gay male athlete violates the image that male athletes are strong, virile, tough and competitive” because gay men are not supposed to be any of those things, but “it also calls into question the image that gay men are effeminate.”² In sports, a hypermasculine arena, the expression of femininity is unacceptable. The idea of a gay male athlete goes against two of the most widely believed stereotypes at the same time, which makes sports a very conflicting place for a young gay teen to find himself.

*From the Top Down*

Many authors have suggested that once the images of professional athletes change, then that change will filter down through the hierarchy of competition and will allow for the inclusion of gay athletes at all levels of sports. Although the list is short, there are a number of professional, and very visible, athletes that have come out and declared their sexuality, the first of whom is David Kopay, a football player, who did so in 1975. Shortly thereafter, Glenn Burke, a baseball player, came out in 1982. Another football player, Roy Simmons, came out in 1992, followed by baseball player Billy Bean, who came out in 1999. More recently, in 2002, football player Esera Tuaolo came out as

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¹ Alvarez 2008 pg.165  
² Caudwell 2006 pg.63
gay, and he was followed in 2007 by John Amaechi, the first basketball player to do so. Outside of team sports, there have been others to come out, most notably former Mr. Universe Bob Paris (in 1989) and 4-Time Olympic Gold Medalist Greg Louganis (in 1994), but since individual sports receive much less attention than team sports, so did their coming out narratives (Louganis’ was especially overshadowed by the fact that he also came out as HIV positive).

There are several problems with that list that have a direct impact on gay teens. First of all, although it is nice to be able to compile a list, to get those six names, you have to go back more than thirty years. This means that it’s significantly more difficult for a gay teen to recognize that player and see him as not just another gay man, but specifically as a gay athlete because it is unlikely he’ll recognize any of those names as athletes to begin with. Furthermore, and far more unsettling is the fact that, with the exception of Burke, each of those professional athletes came out after retiring from their sport reinforcing the separation of sports and homosexuality. Even Burke, though, was only out to his teammates and coaches (which led to a very contentious personal career). He didn’t come out publicly until 1982, three years after professionally retiring. Some came out as few as three to four years after retiring, but they were all still safely removed from their days as a professional athlete. Despite the benefit of having at least some visible gay athletes, they do little to change the belief regarding gay men in sports. The fact that they could declare their sexuality only after retirement just confirms that idea that competitive sports is not the place for an out gay man.

Another thing that contributes to the strictly masculine environment of sports is the effect of coaches. When discussing the nature of sports and sports teams, one cannot
forget that “those who run the institution (coaches, managers, and administrators) were at once athletes themselves, schooled in the language of violent homophobic masculinity, and they tend to reproduce it themselves.”

Their involvement in and socialization through sports means coaches tend to praise and acknowledge the behaviors they were taught to enact when they were athletes. This means that despite the progress in society at large, the culture of athletics remains relatively unchanged. Boys (referring both to current athletes and coaches) who make it through the ranks of athletics and typically on to coaching “do so because of their outstanding athletic ability and willingness to conform to orthodox masculinity.” Essentially, this means that traditional definitions of masculinity are not challenged by athletics, because their reproduction is prized and enforced by both other athletes and coaches. And because most coaching positions don’t require any degrees or formal training, “coaches largely learn their trade by modeling what their coaches did. In other words, coaches tend to reproduce themselves because they…value the system they have progressed through.”

Again, what this means is that regardless of the growth that American culture as a whole makes, sports continues to praise the behaviors that were praised decades before, only reinforcing conventional masculine definitions.

***Pros and Cons of Sport for Gay Teens***

Although American society does privilege sports participation, and to some extent even requires it in public schools, boys do have some autonomy in their lives. Given the advantages of properly performing sports, many do choose to participate in athletics. One

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1. Anderson 2005 pg.8
2. Anderson 2005 pg.72
3. Anderson 2005 pg.74
of the reasons for doing so is that it provides a safe space for boys, regardless of sexual orientation, to experience homosocial bonding in a context where intimacy is not only allowed, but encouraged. In fact “the homocentric nature of sports offers young men, gay or straight, a level of intimacy that is hard to find in other social arenas for men.”¹ Teams must know each other well, must get along well, and must feel comfortable being in close contact with each other on a daily basis, and, therefore, the teammates must have intimate bonds. One of Erick Alvarez’s research participants summed it best: “You get a group of straight boys together and there’s a lot of socializing that happens in the locker room because they feel safe, they’re away from girls, they’re in a peer situation.”² Although this environment can also be fairly homoerotic, sport operates under the assumption that athletes are necessarily heterosexual, as I’ve already shown. That assumption means “mainstream sport culture seems to exist through an understanding of homosexual love/desire as taboo, and/or a naïve blindness for the potential presence of homoeroticism and homosexual/lesbian desire.”³

A perfect example of that idea is the locker room: “locker room culture is based on the view that homosocial spaces are nonsexual.”⁴ By being sex-segregated, the locker room is designed to eliminate any sort of sexual conduct (from simple attraction to actual sex acts) between those who use it, and this purpose necessarily assumes that athletes of the same-sex inherently cannot be attracted to each other. Furthermore, because athletes are in such close contact and are such good friends, homosocial touch (for instance, a pat on the butt after a good play) is something that is completely accepted. Again, though,

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¹ Alvarez 2008 pg.167
² Alvarez 2008 pg.166
³ Caudwell 2006 pg.59
⁴ Caudwell 2006 pg.52-53
this is only possible because homosexuality and athletics are defined as mutually exclusive. Homosexual potential is never considered because homosexuality and athletics have been culturally defined as paradoxical. These ideas (locker rooms and homosocial touch) are “striking example[s] of what is called heteronormative thinking, where homosexuality does not come to mind.”¹

One cannot deny the implicit homoeroticism in a sex-segregated environment in which athletes are placed together wearing either tight or very little clothing, but mainstream male sport has developed a rather troubling defense against the possibility of homosexuality: homophobia. Homophobic speech serves several functions and is therefore prevalent and widely used in the world of sports. As with general society at large, “an accusation of homosexuality is the primary manner in which to verbally marginalize another male.”² Using gay epithets serves to both denigrate opponents and motivate athletes (if someone’s performance is lacking, they are called “gay” or “fag” by their teammates and, often, coaches, at which point they try harder to improve and therefore escape that designation). By doing so, athletes are doing more than affirming their heterosexuality, they are also denying homosexuality: “demonstrating one’s heterosexuality is not sufficient enough to maintain an unambiguous heterosexual masculinity. In these locations, such as within football culture, it is also important to show opposition and intolerance toward homosexuality.”³ This fits perfectly into the construction of masculinity that I outlined in the previous chapter. Since masculinity is

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¹ Caudwell 2006 pg.53
² Anderson 2005 pg.27
³ Anderson 2005 pg.28
defined by what it is not, it then makes sense that athletes would affirm their heterosexuality by explicitly denying any homosexual potential.

Again, the close contact and intimacy with other men can be a rare outlet for young men, but, consequently, it means that there is often a certain amount of unspoken homosexual danger. Sadly for all athletes, and especially for the closeted gay teen athlete, “it is often not enough to simply say that they are not gay; they must also behave in vehemently homophobic ways if they desire to cast off homosexual suspicion.”

Specifically in the context of high school sports and during adolescence, “it is at the high school level where most males are defining their sexuality, and part of the rite of passage has been hostility toward gays.” Males, in the context of sports, become very close, both physically and mentally, but they have also been taught by society that that type of bonding is at best dangerous and at worst “gay” (in every sense of the word). Heterosexual male athletes must then not only exclude gay athletes, but even the idea of homosexuality; “The exclusion of gay men from sport is in part driven by the need to expel sexuality from a homosocial space which allows men opportunities for physical contact and emotional bonding.”

All this terribly hateful language is used specifically to alleviate any anxiety that heterosexual athletes have about bonding so intensely with another male. Often, however, that’s the only motivation behind the homophobic discourse; “much of the homophobia athletes express is not because they truly hate gays, rather they think that if they do not act in homophobic ways, they will not be acting within the boundaries of normative

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1 Anderson 2005 pg.44
2 Anderson 2005 pg.52
3 Caudwell 2006 pg.132
masculinity.” Unfortunately, though, gay teens do not have the luxury of assuming that their teammates are “just saying it”. Whether intentional or not, the homophobic language and discourse creates an environment that is both hazardous and frightening for gay teens, which keeps them from coming out. As one gay athlete put it, “It’s not easy to be the thing that all the boys use as a put-down. It’s what you call someone when you’re trying to dis them, and I certainly did not want to be that.” Spending a great deal of time in such a hostile and hateful atmosphere can lead gay teen athletes to hate themselves, once they’ve discovered their sexuality; “the homonegative discourse changes the perceptual frameworks of gay identities, so that the gay identity itself includes the notions of deviance.” Even in cases where the gay teen doesn’t incorporate the hateful language into his self-identity, the homophobic language usually makes him fearful; “It was scary…very scary, because I was always afraid of being outed if I looked in the wrong direction or I gave some inclination that I was checking somebody out.” Here, the teen was sure about his identity, but he was still frightened to be honest with any of his teammates, lest his disclosure incite some form of retaliation. The use of homophobia to relieve anxiety regarding homosocial bonding amounts to violence; in other words, “It is the unbridled use of homophobic discourse that leads [gay athletes] to fear violence should their sexuality be revealed. In this respect, homophobic discourse is symbolic violence” (emphasis in original).

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1 Anderson 2005 pg.167
2 Anderson 2005 pg.78
3 Anderson 2005 pg.93
4 Alvarez 2008 pg.166
5 Anderson 2005 pg.82
Even in the face of all the negative aspects of sports presented to gay male teens, many are still attracted to athletics for a number of reasons. First, as I already discussed, it gives them the opportunity to bond with other male teens. Especially considering the fear most gay male teens experience when looking to befriend other males without being seen as making a sexual advance, sport offers them a no-questions-asked opportunity to grow close to other males. In that respect, sport can do for gay teens what they could never get on their own; it gives them the chance to share at least some of their concerns about masculine expectations with other guys their age and connect with other adolescent males their age over the shared struggle to live up to the impossible standards of masculinity. Another reason to be attracted to sports, and a slightly more destructive motive, is that success in sports helps the gay teen fit in to hegemonic definitions of masculinity. By overcompensating for a lack of heterosexuality with sufficient athletic prowess, he could still be considered acceptable to traditional definitions of masculinity: “the stigma of being gay would be reduced if the athlete subscribed to all the other traits of orthodox masculinity with the sole exception of his homosexuality.”

A third reason why gay male teens would be attracted to sports, which is, again, not exactly the healthiest motivation, is that sport provides them a way to hide their sexuality, from others and, sometimes, from themselves. For these teens, “the camaraderie of sports offered an outlet for same-sex attraction as well as a time-consuming distraction from dealing with such.” This means that in addition to giving gay teens the opportunity to be around other guys, it also gives them a distraction from having to deal with their sexuality. As that quote suggests, most competitive sports

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1 Anderson 2005 pg.104
2 Alvarez 2008 pg.167
require a significant time dedication, which necessarily detracts from the time a teen can spend elsewhere. One of the many areas that the teen must sacrifice is dating, and in a society that presumes his dating would be heterosexual, this is an area most gay teens are most definitely willing to sacrifice. As discussed above, heterosexuality is absolutely central to masculinity, but “athletics are deemed a worthy masculine enterprise, so men are given permission to avoid heterosexual coupling as a matter of conserving time or energy.”¹ Now, obviously, no person is literally going around and giving athletes actual permission to not date, but “the incredible consumption of time that an athlete invests into sport enables him to avoid having a heterosexual dating life without arising homosexual suspicion.”² At least with sports, the gay athlete has an answer for why he hasn’t been dating girls; for him, athletics is the perfect alibi for his inability to properly display heterosexuality. These last two reasons (the chance to connect to other male teens and the ability to avoid suspicion regarding the teens use of time) amount to, among other things, the idea that “many gay men [are] attracted to sport because being an athlete helps hide their sexuality from the public.”³

Though sport may be beneficial to some gay teens because it helps them to hide their sexuality, the fact still remains that these benefits are grounded in the idea that the terms “gay male” and “athlete” are mutually exclusive. Therefore, by cultural definition, gay males who are athletes are being given the message that they are a contradiction because they do not neatly fit into the categories of either man or athlete. Again, these

¹ Anderson 2005 pg.69
² Anderson 2005 pg.69
³ Anderson 2005 pg.161
beliefs can be changed, but only when gay teens and men declare their sexuality while still participating (and, unfortunately, necessarily excelling) in athletics.

*Conclusion*

Changes to the traditional stereotype of the heterosexual athlete will most easily come from those gay athletes who’ve excelled in their sports, but they are also often those with the most to lose: “kids who develop their identity and bolster their self-esteem around athleticism might be reluctant to give up sports and therefore less likely to come to emotional terms with their homosexuality.”¹ Unfortunately, “the conventional athletic world is still extremely homophobic.”² Clearly, though, coming out while still actively competing is a very risky endeavor. When combined with the fact that competitive sports are nearly essential to the development of an appropriately masculine boy in American culture, this environment compels gay teens, regardless of their self-identification, to participate in an environment that at its very foundations assumes that they do not exist. That invisibility is yet another way in which American society is specifically constructed to marginalize gay teens, further complicating the quest for a positive identity by gay male teens.

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¹ Anderson 2005 pg.54
² Caudwell 2006 pg.100
Teen Culture Laws
Defining “Permissible”

“It’s hard to believe that anyone could read this report and continue to turn the other way as our nation’s LGBT students are bullied and harassed at alarming rates. The good news is there’s hope. The 2007 National School Climate Survey also shows that when schools and educators take action, they can make a drastic difference.”

Kevin Jennings, GLSEN Executive Director

In the rare case that an American boy does somehow manage to escape learning social expectations about masculinity through sports, then he is almost certainly going to get that information through the school systems. Considering that only about 2% of school-aged children in the United States are home schooled, schools are an integral part of life for the vast majority of American males. However, much like the construction of masculinity or the social expectations of athletes, schools and teen culture are not exactly a welcoming environment for gay teens. From the implicit rules of “fitting in” to the explicit structuring of school activities, gay teens are facing an uphill battle when it comes to accepting their sexuality. Due to how important and ubiquitous schools are to American society and the teaching of American social norms, “schools are a microcosm of the larger society,” and, unfortunately, “institutionalized homophobia is very alive and very well.”¹ What’s even more important than the school itself is the atmosphere that is cultivated within them. The fact that (heterosexist) American culture is concentrated means all of the societal messages that are transmitted are that much stronger in schools. Especially considering that “school remains the place that homophobic verbal and

¹ Owens 1998 pg.85
physical abuse is most likely to occur,”¹ high school and teen culture seem to be some of
the biggest obstacles for gay teens in their search for a positive identity.

High school can be a trying time for any teenager. It is a time when they start to
think for themselves, form their own beliefs and opinions, separate themselves from their
parents and begin to develop their sense of an autonomous self. In this respect, gay teens
and straight teens are relatively similar. Gay teens go through the same general problems
that straight teens do; both groups struggle to fit in with their peers, both groups struggle
to get along with their parents, and both groups begin to develop self-images. This last
point, however, is where gay teens begin to differ significantly from straight teens. Both
sets of teens are “in the midst of developing an understanding of identity, social skills and
self esteem,” and, at the same time, “a growing awareness of one’s internal sense of
sexuality emerges during this developmental period.”² Essentially, what that means is
that while forming an identity, “for some adolescents, same-sex orientation is a part of
their self-identity, complicating development and adjustment”³ because they’re sexuality
contradicts the developmental path they were expecting, one which all of their friends
seem to be following. Indeed, their developmental trajectory is something entirely
unfamiliar.

In other words, while gay teens “are learning about civic life and their role in it as
adolescents, they are simultaneously identifying and exploring a culturally stigmatized
identity.”⁴ Not only are gay teens facing different developmental tasks, but they are
somehow trying to come to terms with the fact that their emerging sexual feelings place

¹ Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg 85
² Nesmith, Burton, Cosgrove 1999 pg.96
³ Owens 1998 pg.101
⁴ Russell 2002 pg.259
them under a category that they have been taught is unnatural or abnormal. Gay teens are processing the changes in their minds and their bodies in “an atmosphere of adolescent conformity and burgeoning independence. The adolescent question ‘Who am I?’ becomes entangled with a second question ‘What does it mean to be gay?’”

Unfortunately, this is especially difficult for gay teens because they do not receive the same familial or social support that other teens get while struggling with their identity. They are often isolated because “in a society that expects and assumes everyone to be heterosexual, [gay] youths are not prepared for their emerging sexual identities and have no context for understanding and acceptance.”

The narratives of both gay and straight teens may include the theme of isolation, but they tend to feel alone in very different ways. Most gay males, as boys during their development “recognized that they were not typical of other boys.” What’s worse though is that “they discovered that they should not talk openly about their attractions. They heard from their parents, friends, religious leaders, and teachers that their attractions were sick, wrong, evil, or sinful.”

Even if these teens don’t internalize the messages they’re hearing, at the very least they become separated from their peers simply because of their sexuality. This means that they have to deal with their sexuality by themselves. When straight teens incorporate emerging sexuality into their identity, they have the support and camaraderie of their cohorts, but gay teens rarely feel comfortable discussing the fact that they feel different. Gay teens seldom have friends who are openly gay because “even if adolescents have acknowledged their same-sex sexual interests, it is

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1 Owens 1998 pg.37
2 Owens 1998 pg.54
3 Hunter 2007 pg.70
4 Hunter 2007 pg.70
difficult to find others who are not only out to themselves, but who are also willing to admit their orientation or interests to others.”

Almost as a rule, gay teens even lack role models as examples of how to be a gay and a teenager. In fact, “most gay men grow up in isolation from other gay men until they reach young adulthood, and by then, many of their core behaviors are well-established.”

Sadly, this separation is not just a perception. For gay teens, “their same-sex romantic attraction sets them apart from their peers both theoretically, and…through their different experiences at school.”

Gay teens often recognize their difference, but they also recognize the need to obscure their difference in order to fit in. They fully understand the messages they’ve received: that teens are meant to be heterosexual and that being gay is not something that is acceptable in American culture. In order to do so “adolescents often create ‘false selves’ in order to avoid criticism from parents, siblings, friends, and so on.”

In other words, gay teens retreat into the “closet” by hiding their true identity for those around them.

Gay teens are often faced with the choice of pretending to be heterosexual (staying in the closet) or declaring one’s sexuality (coming out of the closet). Although it might seem like the better choice to be honest and open with himself and his friends, high school culture (much like American society as a whole) does not readily accept difference. Acceptance and belonging are not easily granted, and “contemporary citizenship for [gay teens] is based on principles of…assimilation; that is, citizenship is based on maintaining one’s [homosexual] identity in private.”

And despite progress

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1 D’Augelli 2001 pg.17  
2 Downs 2005 pg.167  
3 Russell, Seif, Truong 2001 pg.112  
4 D’Augelli 2001 pg.102  
5 Russell 2002 pg.259
toward greater societal acceptance, “for most young people who are experiencing same-
sex attraction…the closet is still a reality.”¹ The closet becomes an essential tool for most
gay teens because it helps them to pass as straight, and therefore the same as their
heterosexual classmates. Sameness is not just important, but nearly required for teens
because “schools are social molds where rigid expectations of conduct and behavior are
reinforced. Conformity is tyrannical.”²

There are many things about high schools that specifically construct this air of
necessary heterosexuality. One of the more visible ways that shape the views of students
is the teaching staff of their school. For gay teens, “relationships with teachers play a
leading role in explaining the school troubles experienced by sexual minority
adolescents.”³ These are people they see everyday, people in positions of authority, and
people who often can have tremendous influence over the behaviors and beliefs of their
students. Very few teachers are allowed to openly and explicitly discuss their political
views, but there are many subtle ways in which teachers can send the message that
homosexuality is unacceptable. The most obvious way is the manner in which they
address, or fail to address, homophobic language. Any other hate speech, like sexism or
racism, is likely to elicit strong reprimands and punishment, but homophobic language
rarely yields a reaction from the teacher. Either the sheer prevalence of the words “gay”
and “fag” or the opinions of the teacher are the cause, but, regardless, “teachers
commonly [turn] a deaf ear to boys’ homophobic…comments.”⁴ Teachers who are
supportive, or at the very least open/accepting, can drastically change the experience of

¹ Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg.85
² Owens 1998 pg.95
³ Russell, Seif, Truong 2001 pg.124
⁴ Pascoe 2007 pg.36
gay teens. However, “teachers need the awareness and training to help them be supportive of their sexuality minority students.”¹ Often, though, teachers simply aren’t aware of the implicit messages they send their students.

Another way in which schools are structured toward the affirmation of heterosexuality (at the expense of homosexuality) is with school events/functions, such as Homecoming dances or Prom. Both tend to be very relevant to the social lives of high schoolers, but they too are constructed based on the assumption that all teens are straight. They tend to be the two largest social events of the year that schools organize and they often rise to an almost ceremonial importance. They function as such strong teaching tools because “school rituals are symbolic, bodily performances that affirm in- and out-groups, the normal and the abnormal, reproducing dominant understandings of…gender”² and sexuality, in that there is often great importance placed on getting a date for the two dances. Beyond the requisite opposite-sex dates that the majority of students feel obligated to arrange, there are also the ceremonies of Homecoming King and Queen and Prom King and Queen. In both cases, they are manifestations of societal expectations about the union of man and woman. More importantly though, these “rituals don’t just reflect heteronormative gender difference; they actually affirm its value and centrality to social life.”³

Another way that schools fail to support their gay students is in the unequal access to information. In contemporary American society, “Rarely do young people have the

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¹ Russell, Seif, Truong 2001 pg.124
² Pascoe 2007 pg.40
³ Pascoe 2007 pg.40
opportunities to discuss controversial public issues at home or at school.”¹ Heterosexual teens receive information and education about sexuality in most required sexual education lessons, but the topic of homosexuality is rarely discussed. When it does come up, it’s usually in a negative tone, and usually in discussions of HIV/AIDS. Beyond issues regarding just sexual activity, gay teens “have few opportunities to learn about and live ‘the lifestyle’, including experiencing being part of the gay community.”² Gay teens lack positive images of homosexuality, they lack objective discussions of being gay, and they lack role models, and because of those conditions, “many young people turn to the internet to look for role models and information about gay culture and to try out their same-sex attractions among similar others in an internet-based community.”³

*The Internet*

One the main reasons why the modern gay teenager is so different from his predecessors is the internet. Whereas previous generations were in complete and utter isolation until they came out, the gay teenagers of today have an opportunity to anonymously explore their feelings before they’re ready to declare their sexuality. In fact, “for a growing number of sexual minority youth, these virtual communities provide spaces to test out identities, find a voice, and develop a sense of solidarity with others who are also excluded from the mainstream.”⁴ Especially considering how reticent most adults are to discuss homosexuality with adolescents, the internet is important because “cyber-space gives young people access to important and useful information.”⁵ The

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¹ Russell 2002 pg 258
² Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg.94
³ Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg.94
⁴ Russell 2002 pg.261
⁵ Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg.84
internet has come to serve this generation in the same manner that face-to-face support groups served previous generations; “It is no longer necessary to attend a youth support group…in order to realize social support from others…The internet has enabled a proliferation of discourse communities for youth with same-sex desire.”

In their 2007 study, Lynne Hillier and Lyn Harrison examined the effects of the internet on same-sex attracted youth, and included many of the young people’s own statements in their report. The overwhelming feeling that one gets from the quotes is that these youth greatly benefited from their use of the internet. One said “The internet has allowed me to find other people like me. Not necessarily meeting them but knowing they exist is a major bonus.” For that teen, the simple fact that there were other gay teens out there was an important way to alleviate perceived abnormality or loneliness. Another teen said “the net has allowed me to realize that my sexuality is OK and there is nothing wrong with it.” Again, the simple fact that he was able to find other teens like him who shared his experiences and who had something in common with his struggles helped him to accept his sexuality. Teens can use the internet to deconstruct the stereotypes and misinformation that society at large transmits. The internet is an especially important tool for teens because they have so few other opportunities to connect to homosexual peers. For many teens, the internet “allows them to gain confidence online in a space which they argue is easier to negotiate when they are exploring their sexual feeling.”

The internet, however, is not without its drawbacks and definitely cannot be seen as the only solution to the problems that gay teens face in a necessarily heterosexual

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1 Cohler, Hammack 2006 pg.56
2 Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg.90
3 Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg.94
4 Hillier, Harrison 2007 pg.95
school environment. For one, gay teens are able to practice their sexuality, but they are necessarily fracturing their identity into their online persona, who is open about their sexuality but is not an embodied person, and their real-world persona, who has physical being, but is still not able to be honest about his sexuality. Even though gay teens gain confidence in their identity, it is a confidence that doesn’t necessarily extend beyond the internet. Additionally, it does not change the fact that gay teens are still not able to incorporate their sexuality openly in schools. They may be experimenting with living their sexuality on-line, but the anonymity means they do not have to risk being open about their sexuality in person. The internet is an escape and a tool that helps them eventually build confidence, but the fact still remains that their high school is a homophobic place where gay teens often do not feel comfortable expressing their sexuality.

*Rhetoric and Politics of the Playground*

One of the biggest reasons why schools are feel like such a homophobic place is because of the near omnipresence of homophobic language, and most children learn those scripts long before they get to high school. Beginning as early as “elementary school, students participate in a ‘heterosexualizing process’ in which children present themselves as ‘normal’...through discourses of heterosexuality.”¹ Unfortunately, because “homophobia is indeed a central mechanism in the making of contemporary American adolescent masculinity,”² this means that boys learn from an early age that they must, at all times, detest the homosexual. In fact, “children on grade-school playgrounds have

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¹ Pascoe 2007 pg.26
² Pascoe 2007 pg.53
learned to call the sissy boy ‘fag’.”

Boys get this message from their cohorts, but more importantly, they get the message from their elders, the older boys they look up to. Sadly, the “older boys repeatedly [impress] upon younger ones through these types of homophobic rituals that whatever they did, whatever they became, however they talk, they had to avoid becoming a faggot.”

One idea that is very important to note here is that, at this point, these boys are not using the terms “gay” or “faggot” with any specific reference to sexuality. As one interview respondent put it in Kevin Alderson’s Beyond Coming Out, “as kids, people call you a sissy or a faggot or cocksucker or whatever they say, but it meant nothing to me. It was no different from calling someone any derogatory name.” In other words, “when a boy calls another boy a fag, it means he is not a man but not necessarily that he is a homosexual.” This reflects the idea that masculinity is generally defined as what it is not, so, for adolescent males, it becomes imperative to deny homosexuality. This quote also reflects that idea that the identities of “gay” and “man” are inherently contradictory.

For male teens (and, unfortunately for males of almost any age in American culture), “fag may be used as a weapon with which to temporarily assert one’s masculinity by denying it to others.” This means that because the use of these terms starts so early, they become ingrained in the minds of young boys. Even once they begin to learn what the terms mean (i.e. a homosexual male), they have already formed the habit of using them. Although these teens may not use the terms with sexuality in mind, there is a great difference in the intention of the word and its reception. Gay teens, whether closeted or not, hear these

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1 Savin-Williams 2001 pg.97
2 Pascoe 2007 pg.53
3 Alderson 2000 pg.89
4 Pascoe 2007 pg.82
5 Pascoe 2007 pg.82
epithets being carelessly tossed around and interpret that as near universal homophobia. Thus the casual inclusion of homophobic hate speech is yet another obstacle which gay teens must learn to disregard before they can construct their own positive identity.

The Danger and Power of the “Fag”

As a result of the ever-present danger of being labeled a “fag,” boys are forced to monitor and restrict their behavior. The concept of the fag becomes a dangerous and constant hazard of which adolescent males need to be aware. Again, “the constant threat of becoming the fag [regulates] boys’ attitudes toward their bodies in terms of clothing, dancing, and touching,”¹ in addition to speech and relationships. For teenage boys, then “processes of repudiation [of homosexuality] are central to a masculine sense of self;”² again, reflecting the construction of masculinity by the denial of the “other” (in this case, that “other” is homosexuality). The words “fag” and “gay” are used to emasculate other males, to call them weak, and to take away their power.

Homosexuality then comes to represent a symbolic menace, an ever-present threat to adolescent boys’ masculinity. It can have such a damaging effect on a boy’s social standing that they “fear homosexuality ‘like the plague’ not understanding its origin, but fully aware of its negative perception among society.”³ “Fag” is one of the worst things that one boy can call another boy, regardless of sexual orientation; “Fag is not only an identity linked to homosexual boys but an identity that can temporarily adhere to heterosexual boys as well.”⁴ The use of the word has a great deal of flexibility because it can apply to just about anyone at just about anytime, and that lack of static definition is

1 Pascoe 2007 pg.65
2 Pascoe 2007 pg.157
3 Bergling 2001 pg.66
4 Pascoe 2007 pg.53
one of the things that makes “fag” so dangerous. The words “fag” and “gay” then are “fluid enough that boys police their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it.” Adolescent boys may not be able to define what specifically would warrant being called a fag if prompted to make a list, but they sure know the behaviors when they see them.

In this way, then, the words “fag” and “gay” become not just a defense mechanism, but a penalizing measure as well. The idea and danger of homosexuality means that boys “invoke the faggot as a disciplinary mechanism.” Young men have to constantly police their behavior to make sure that they are not called a “fag” because another boy, at any time, can label an adolescent male a “fag,” thereby removing his masculinity. In a very real way, this is why homophobia is so deeply ingrained in American definitions of masculinity. Since, from a young age, boys learn to use homophobic language “as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other,” it becomes a key way that boys learn to define masculinity and permissible behavior for males. One of the best ways to ensure the maintenance of one’s masculinity is by calling other boys gay (thus removing suspicion from him), so “masculinity, in part, becomes the daily interactional work of repudiating the threatening specter of the fag.”

The constant use of homophobic language among teens has a rather paradoxical effect though because “fags, for all that boys defined them as powerless, weak, unmanly, seemed to wield an immense amount of power. A fag is profoundly unmasculine, yet

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1 Pascoe 2007 pg.54
2 Pascoe 2007 pg.53
3 Pascoe 2007 pg.54
4 Pascoe 2007 pg.81
possesses the ability to...render any boy unmasculine.”¹ For all the talk about the “fag” or calling someone “gay” to mark them as a weakling, the words themselves hold immense power, even among straight teens! There is nothing more hated and nothing more terrifying than being labeled a “fag.” In fact, “more than femininity, more than powerlessness, more than childhood, the abject nature of the specter of the fag required constant, vigilant, earnest repudiation.”² It is a power that is based in misunderstanding, ignorance, and hate, but it is power nonetheless. There are very few, if any, words in teen culture that match the gravity, the potential, or the influence of “fag”. If the words “gay” and “fag” are so damaging and so hurtful and so prevalent among general teen culture, it is almost unimaginable that a teen would ever choose to come out and self-label as these most hated identities.

Conclusion

So then, what exactly does it mean for a gay teen to come out in such a volatile and heated homophobic environment? First and foremost, the gay teen must take into account everything he’s heard and everything he’s seen and reject these messages, trusting his instincts above all else. He has received the same socialization and has been taught to hate the same things that other boys have been taught to hate, and yet, at the same time he is dealing with more ordinary adolescent concerns, he’s also rejecting common social stereotypes. However, in terms of fitting into adolescent culture, the gay teen who comes out has another effect entirely; he necessarily changes the dynamics of the group of teenagers with whom he’s identified while passing as heterosexual. His friends are accustomed to using homosexuality to cut down others and shore up their own

¹ Pascoe 2007 pg.157
² Pascoe 2007 pg.157
“masculine capital,” but all that time, they have been using the concept, the idea of the “fag.” By coming out to his friends, that notion of the “fag” is no longer just a word, but a person standing directly in front of them. In this case, “boys [face] a terrifying, embodied abject, not just some specter of a fag.”¹ These adolescent males can no longer pretend that their words are just a harmless joke, because now they are facing someone, their friend, who personifies the worst of adolescent maleness. For both the gay teen and the friends to whom he comes out, there is a collision between the identity of this real person and the abject concept of the “fag.” This results in confusion and uncertainty for both the gay teen and his friends who must find a way to reconcile the identity of the gay teen and the concept of homosexuality they’ve constructed. It is in this atmosphere and against this setting that gay teens must define for themselves what it means to be gay, and, somehow, form a positive self-image.

¹ Pascoe 2007 pg.69
All in the Family?
Gay Teens and their Parents

“Try to not take it personally—people don’t know how to deal with what they don’t understand. Just hold on to the belief that one day you’ll be on your own and be able to make a life for yourself.”

~ E. Lynn Harris, on how young GLBT people can deal with their homophobic parents.

Obviously, parents and family occupy a very important role in the lives of all teens, so any discussion of the climate in which a gay teen comes out would be inadequate without a discussion of the impact of family. Parents are especially important to this analysis because not only are they the primary model from which a child learns appropriate behavior, but they are also, often, the primary means of support, both economically and psychologically. In both functions, the relationship between parent and teen is significantly complicated when that teen happens to be gay. When a teen is gay, he usually discloses to his parents early in his identity declaration, though he rarely tells them first. ¹ In the vast majority of cases, this changes the relationship in a very fundamental way. However, long before this disclosure occurs, starting almost from birth, all children receive an important socialization on how to behave from their parents. Intentional or not, these messages tend to conflict with the emerging sexual identity of the gay teen.

Even though American society is changing, and alternative families, such as single-parent families and remarried parents, have increasingly gained acceptance, there is still an underlying social understanding that men are to couple with women. Outside the home, teens and children get this message from the media (the effect of which will be

¹ Savin-Williams 2001
discussed later), from teachers and schools, and from friends. However, in the vast majority of cases, they also get this message in the home, in the form of a mother and father (whether or not they are married).

*Don’t Forget About Daddy*

In most the majority of narratives and research regarding a gay teen coming out to his parents, the mother-son relationship gets the majority of the attention. Although the relationships between gay male teens and mothers are typically strong, both in popular discourse and in reality, the relationship with the father warrants significant discussion too.¹ Again, outside of the home, boys are being taught how to be masculine and how to be a man, but the power a father has to teach his son is unparalleled. From the moment the baby gets home, the man with whom a son interacts most and the man he sees the most is his father. Cutting directly to the point, the biggest problem with the father as a role model for a gay teen is that, with very rare exceptions, he is straight. In this way, the problems with the messages about masculinity outside of the home (namely, that to be a man, you must be straight) are manifested in the fact that, typically, the biggest male role model gay teens have is their heterosexual father.

As much as writers and theorists, myself included, have discussed the change in American culture that allows men a bit more flexibility in masculinity, the fathers of modern gay teens did not grow up in that environment. In fact “many of [gay men’s] fathers grew up in a culture that offered them power in exchange for stoicism and buried emotion.”² Gay teens (as well as straight teens) receive much of their socialization from arenas other than the home, and they may even be able to reject some of those external

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¹ Savin-Williams 2001
² Downs 2005 pg.14
teachings, “but [gay males] first learned [their] behavior patterns—primarily those relating to emotions—like all men, from [their] fathers.” ¹ Especially before a teen has a chance to name his sexuality as different from his father’s, boys tend to idolize and emulate their father, and, whether consciously or not, boys absorb a lot of their fathers’ actions as rules for how to deal with the world. The issue here is that most current teen’s fathers grew up in a time when emotional indifference was not only prized among men, but required.

Another issue for the relationship of gay teens to their parents is that parents are often very reluctant to discuss sexuality, and in this case, that means any sexuality. Both the parent and adolescent typically feel very uncomfortable in these conversations, but at least for heterosexual teens, the discussion is geared toward information and issues that explicitly affect or could affect them. With gay teens, on the other hand, “few parents discuss sexual orientation, assuming that their adolescent is heterosexual.” ² Well in line with the ideas of masculinity, father’s tend to be even more reluctant to discuss homosexuality with their sons because being gay, as I showed in the first chapter, is not compatible with being a man (at least by American definitions). The invisibility of gay teens leads to a complete lack of discussion regarding problems facing them, especially because those gay teens, who are either hiding or struggling with their sexuality, are highly unlikely to bring up the topic of homosexuality to their parents.

The conflicting sexualities between the gay son and straight father contribute to one of the greatest difficulties in that father-son relationship. Fathers usually do the best they can to set an example for behavior for their sons, in both everyday comportment and

¹ Downs 2005 pg.123
² D’Augelli 2001 pg.12
life choices, and they are often “frustrated if their sons did not follow in their footsteps.”¹ In a very essential way, the gay son cannot follow in his father’s footsteps; he will not fall in love with a woman and start a family with her. No matter how hard a gay son tries, it is one very intrinsic way in which he cannot emulate his father. At the same time, it is one very important way in which a father fails to set an example for his son, but through no fault of his own. Simply put, the structure of American society, that prizes the coupling of heterosexual male and heterosexual female necessarily means that gay sons will almost always have to be without a complete role model in their family.

Another way that the father (and here, at least, the mother too) typically cannot serve as an example for the gay son is with the coming out process. One of the most important roles of the parent is to help their child navigate the more difficult (as well as the not so difficult) situations in their life. However, the coming out process, arguably the most difficult thing that a gay teen will have to face in their young life, is something with which the parent has no familiarity. The child thinks that he is alone in his development, feeling shame and insecurity regarding his sexuality. He also typically lacks confidence in his identity development, especially considering his parents can only very rarely provide him guidance with his coming out. For support, the son may turn to his parents but, “his father had no knowledge of this journey, nor did any of his likely role models. How would he know that so many gay men have been this way before?”² Gay teens, through the course of their adolescence have to learn how to live as a gay man, which is “an experience most of our parents didn’t have.”³ Through no fault of their own, and

¹ Hunter 2007 pg.105
² Downs 2005 pg.110
³ Downs 2005 pg.167
without the ability to change the situation, the parents of gay teens, at least in some way, fall short as socializers of their sons. Heterosexual fathers “[can’t] teach [gay teens] how to be an authentic gay man”¹ because they never had to learn how to be a gay male in such a heterosexist society.

*In The Closet At Home*

Gay teens are usually very afraid to disclose their sexuality to their parents, either because they are afraid of a violent reaction, or because they worry about their parents removing both financial and emotional support, or simply because they don’t want to disappoint their parents. Regardless, once a gay teen has labeled his sexuality to himself, he often attempts to hide his sexuality from his parents. One of the most common ways to do so “is to reduce contact with the parents to a minimum through emotional and physical distance.”² In this pattern, the child attempts to isolate himself from his parents so that the subject of sexuality doesn’t come up. By either staying in their room, or staying away from the home, or keeping busy through academics and/or athletics/extracurricular activities, the child decreases the time he spends around his parents, thus decreasing both the amount of interaction and the potential for having his secret exposed. Even when the closeted teen does have to interact with his parent, he can still separate himself emotionally. By saying very little, refusing to include any details, or downright lying, the teen is able to keep the parent from discovering the secret of his homosexuality. However, this strategy “can result in feelings of estrangement from the parents.”³ Despite attempting to preserve familial harmony by keeping their sexuality hidden, “this very

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¹ Downs 2005 pg.167  
² Hunter 2007 pg.97  
³ Hunter 2007 pg.97
secretiveness amplifies their sense of unacceptability and further erects barriers between themselves and their family, resulting in alienation and loneliness."¹ The son then becomes a stranger to his parents and a guest in his own home. By remaining distant, physically and mentally, the son and his parents grow apart, without either side really knowing how to bridge the distance. In the end, “regardless of motivation, lying and misrepresenting the truth as defensive avoidance is seldom a healthy alternative to open and honest communication within a family.”²

Having to change the way the son and the parents relate to each other is probably one of the reasons that coming out to parents is often such a difficult thing to do. First, the child must relearn how to act around his parents. Even if it has only been a year or two that the child has been hiding his sexuality, it was a “year or two” of daily practice in lying. It becomes second nature to the teen to necessarily withhold information from his parents, so the act of coming out to them feels like it fundamentally goes against such an intensely formed defense mechanism. Additionally, the gay son, by coming out, is making himself vulnerable to his parents, whom he has come to see as strangers, as people that he cannot trust. It is to these people that he is divulging a secret he has learned to share with only his very closest friends, if he has shared it with anyone at all. The gay teen must also admit to his parents that he has lied, and must also tell them that there is a part of himself that society say is wrong or unnatural. Although these conditions are somewhat broad, and cannot be said to account for all parent-gay son relations, they, as general thoughts, are applicable to the majority of cases.

¹ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.210
² Savin-Williams 2001 pg.210
Adolescence is a time when teens must somehow integrate their sexuality into their identity, and then reestablish their relationship with parents, a task that is often difficult; “ Regardless of sexual orientation, many adolescents struggle to renegotiate their childhood relations with their parents.”\(^1\) The difference between heterosexual and homosexual teens, however, cannot be ignored: “While for many heterosexuals, emerging romantic and sexual feelings are exciting and positive, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths may fear romantic feelings because they link the youth with a stigmatized group.”\(^2\) For gay teens, dealing with their emerging sexuality and developing their relationship with their parents involves the additional step of affirming the fact that they are gay, the process typically referred to as coming out. With both parents, the act of coming out is often a shock and can cause significant discord in the relationship, if only temporarily, and each parent’s reaction is slightly different. First, I’ll discuss the gay son coming out to his mother.

**Coming Out to Mom and Dad**

The prevalent cultural stereotype of gay sons being closer to their mothers is not without support, and if the gay teen “is out only to one parent, it is nearly certain that the parent is a mother.”\(^3\) In the majority of cases as well, the mother typically has some suspicions of her son’s sexuality, whether it be through his sex-atypical behavior, or through the ever-ephemeral “mother’s intuition.” This helps because “having prior suspicions…often ameliorates the shock value of the disclosure.”\(^4\) Regardless though, “to

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1. Savin-Williams 2001 pg.199
2. D’Augelli 2001 pg.105
3. Savin-Williams 2001 pg.138
4. Savin-Williams 2001 pg.35
suspect is one thing but to know is quite another.”¹ When a gay son come out to his mother, he typically tells her directly. This means that instead of letting her find out through other sources (a friend telling her, letting her discover it), he tells her, either verbally or in a letter. This reflects both the teen’s greater willingness to discuss personal and private emotions with his mother, along with implying less fear for his mother’s reaction than for their father’s reaction.² Contrary to popular assumption, however, “the most common reactions are ‘slightly negative’—constituting denial, negative comments, and discouragement.”³ It is important to note, however, that these are only their initial reactions; the majority of mother-son relationships improve over time.⁴ In fact, “for most sons, maternal tolerance, if not acceptance, emerges either immediately after they come out to their mother or soon thereafter.”⁵

Fathers, on the other hand can have a very different experience than the mother. For instance, “fathers are more frequently indirectly than directly informed, perhaps because many fathers and sons rarely discuss personal issues of any nature.”⁶ Here, indirectly means that the teen either lets the father find out on his own, or someone else will tell him, but the gay teen himself does not disclose. Again, this is a reflection of the culture in which most contemporary fathers were raised. Because they were neither expected nor encouraged to discuss their feelings, fathers often have the same emotional distance from their children that they experienced with their own parents. What is unexpected to discover, based on most of the current literature and data, is that “much to

¹ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.35
² Savin-Williams 2001 pg.152
³ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.158
⁴ Hunter 2007 pg.101-102
⁵ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.166
⁶ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.185
the surprise of many sexual minority youths, fathers react in a less negative manner than do mothers,” even though the most fathers’ reactions are still considered to be “in the ‘supportive’ to ‘slightly negative’ range.”\(^1\) The stoicism of their generation is usually the biggest detractor for the relationship of father with gay son. Typically, they have not established an emotionally close relationship with their son, which means that, even though most fathers respond relatively well after their son discloses, gay sons are left guessing when they try to anticipate how their father will react once told. This means that gay sons are more afraid to disclose to the father than to their mother, not just because of that fear, but also because of “the more intimate, caring relationship youths generally have with their mother.”\(^2\)

Despite the differences between mothers and fathers, the reactions are largely similar. In the most general of terms, after coming out “a period of strain estrangement is often followed by some type of reconciliation.”\(^3\) Although this is by no means a static rule, in general it usually proves to be relatively true. At least at first, “parent-adolescent and family relationships, as a whole, are frequently characterized by negative reactions, intolerance, and rejection.”\(^4\) There are two main ways to explain the fact that most parents initially have, at least, a slightly negative reaction to their son disclosing his homosexuality. First of which is the idea that they have learned socialized homophobia, and are therefore disappointed in the fact that their son’s sexuality. That is to say that they allow heterosexist ideology to shape their thoughts. I believe that view is a little

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1 Savin-Williams 2001 pg.190
2 Savin-Williams 2001 pg.202
3 Seidman 2004 pg.120
4 D’Augelli 2001 pg.13
overly-simplistic, in both its view of parents’ relationship with their children and in their initial reaction.

Another possible explanation for the initial negative reaction of most parents, and, I believe a far more plausible one, is that “when youths come out to their parents, a parallel parent ‘coming-out’ process is initiated,”¹ in which they must let go of their image of their son and accept him for who he has revealed himself to be. In his book, My Child is Gay, Bryce McDougall collected letters from parents discussing their experiences with their child’s disclosure, and those letters prove invaluable for getting a more in-depth understanding of what a parent goes through. For instance, one mother said that, even though she considered herself open, she was still upset when her son came out to her, saying “it’s something that doesn’t happen to your family, only to other people.”² However, she continued to say that “after the initial shock we realized he hadn’t changed. He was still our son…and we still loved him.”³ Another mother wrote that after her son told her that he was gay, “the panic, confusion, imposed guilt and questions crowded in” but she continues to say that their relationship began to drastically improve, ending her letter by saying “It is hard to look back and recall our earlier, misguided confusion and fears.”⁴

A third mother wrote that she did not initially take the news well: “My first reaction was shock. I was numb and had an overwhelming feeling of sadness and loss. I…wanted to know if he was sure, or perhaps going through a phase…I couldn’t stop

¹ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.33
² McDougall 2006 pg.48
³ McDougall 2006 pg.48
⁴ McDougall 2006 pg.90
crying…I was inconsolable.”¹ However, her reaction wasn’t simply because her son was gay: “I had this terrible feeling of loss and sadness and the realization that I had never really known my son”, but, like the other mother, she says that even though she still struggles with the news (her son had only come out 2 years prior to writing her letter), “I love my son dearly.”² Her words are especially important for understanding why mothers often act with such distress. She, like many mothers, believed they had a close relationship with their son and thought she knew him well. When he comes out to her, the mother must confront the fact that if she never knew such an important part of her son’s identity, how well could she have ever known him at all? This helps to explain their negative reaction; it’s not because her son is gay, but because she was never close enough to him to know his sexuality.

What those three mothers demonstrate, along with the other letters in the book, is that parents, upon discovering their child’s sexuality enter a mental development that is strikingly similar to their son’s own coming out process. There is the initial fear and confusion, but they eventually subside to the more lasting feelings of love, acceptance and embracing their son for who he really is. Gay teens typically report negative coming out experiences because they expect their parents to be at the developmental level they are, beyond shame and confusion, without giving their parents the chance to grow into that mindset, and the teen tends to characterize the relationship based upon the initial reaction of shock. Essentially, “Youths have had years coming to terms with their

¹ McDougall 2006 pg.99
² McDougall 2006 pg.100-101
sexuality and thus should not necessarily expect parents to accept them within minutes after learning about their sexuality.”¹

Teens don’t realize that their parents need time to adjust to their child’s new identity. Parental despair is rarely tied to disappointment in their child’s sexuality, but rather to the fact that they did not know their child as well as they believed. However, since the teen has anticipated a negative reaction based on their parents’ assumed disapproval of their sexuality, the initial reaction only fulfills this expectation. And although, as I’ve show, the relationship improves over time, those initial weeks or months of strained rapport put significant stress on the gay teen, and only complicate his process of forming a positive self-identity.

Conclusion

Many writers have been rather optimistic in their analysis of the gay teen, comparing them to any other minority and equating their problems as similar to the problems of other minority teens. To some extent, these writers aren’t necessarily wrong. Gay and lesbian teens do share many of the same obstacles as other minority teens, such as a drive to develop a healthy self-image and identity, and a desire to navigate a culture that disadvantages them. However, as I’ve shown in this section, gay teens differ drastically in one very crucial way: they do not share their minority status with their family. For example, racial or ethnic minority teens, even when they live in a culture that is especially bigoted and they are ostracized from any sort of peer support system, they still have their family. They can go to their parents or siblings or other relatives when they don’t know how to deal with a situation, knowing full well that it is highly likely

¹ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.218
that their family members went through a similar situation at some point and therefore can share how they got through it.

Except in especially unusual situations, gay teens do not have this familial support system; in fact, gay teens may be more afraid to disclose their problems to their family than to their friends because, whereas one can find new friends, one cannot find a new family. In this way, gay teens are separate from any other minority group in that they must look outside the home or figure out for themselves how to deal with their minority status as homosexual in such a heterosexist society. The media are one of the few places that gay teens can look for representations of homosexuality and the narratives of gay men. As we will see in the next chapter though, the media fail to live up to their potential to serve gay teens.
More than anything else I’ve explored to this point, the American media is a seemingly inescapable juggernaut of socialization. If a gay teen can manage to escape the messages about acceptable behavior conveyed through sports, if he can resist the nearly oppressive need to assimilate in schools, even if he can receive positive and gay-friendly (or at least neutral) messages from his family, there is little he can do to avoid the messages that are transmitted by the American media. In every television show and in every movie, there are representations of sexuality, typically as part of the plotline. Even though the portrayal in recent years of gay characters in television and film has become increasingly common and increasingly earnest, the media still fail to serve gay teens in the same ways that they serve straight teens (providing role models, creating recognizable narratives, etc).

Even though this chapter focuses entirely on TV and movies, it’s important to note that the messages that serve to naturalize heterosexuality (at the expense of homosexuality) extend beyond entertainment. Although they may not receive as much attention, everything from advertising to news broadcasts sends the signal that heterosexuality is the normal and natural way to live. In both commercials and in print advertising, displays of sexuality are almost always heterosexual, with the lone exceptions appearing during gay oriented programs or in gay themed magazines. With news broadcasts, the heterosexism is a bit more subtle. There are often stories about the latest research into the “cause” of homosexuality. The problem is that the idea that there
is a cause to homosexuality only affirms the naturalness of heterosexuality; in order for there to be a “cause,” homosexuality must be a deviation from the norm. The idea is further supported by the fact that there is never research into what is the “cause” of heterosexuality. Once again, this is a way that gay teens get the message that their sexual identity is not normal. And even though I don’t go into these other aspects of the media more than this reminder, it is no less a part of the way in which the media show gay teens that they are not the norm.

One of the many reasons that the media are so important is because it is a major vehicle for conveying what society believes to be proper behavior, or how to be a “good citizen”: “In movies, television, newspapers, literature, art and academia…images of the good citizen are created,”¹ as well as images of the bad citizen. The media’s coverage of AIDS is an example of this because it helped define the homosexual, who was very strongly linked to the new disease, as a bad citizen. As doctors and researchers were first discovering the disease in 1981, they initially named it GRID (Gay Related Immune Disorder). The first article regarding this new illness was run in the July 3, 1981 New York Times, and it specifically discussed a new form of cancer that was spreading among gay men in New York and San Francisco. Although GRID became AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) in 1982, due to the media’s presentation of this new disease as something that only afflicted gay men, “homosexuality” and “AIDS” became synonymous (AIDS was, and often still is, nicknamed “Gay Cancer”). This is just one

¹ Seidman 2004 pg.203
example of how the media have the ability to create meanings and shape the views of society.¹

_The Media in the Lives of Gay Teens_

As I’ve demonstrated, gay teens lack examples of how to live their lives openly as gay men, and “without having positive gay role models, we watched, we read, and we listened”² to everything we could, especially the media, that had anything to do with homosexuality. This is why the media have become so crucial to the lives of gay teens and men: they became one of the only ways gay teens could come into contact with representations of gay life. Role models are important to adolescent development because “as people grow up…they look for inspiring or comforting figures who offer positive-looking examples of how life can be lived.”³ In other words, having role models is a way that teens, gay and straight, can feel that they resemble other people and that their struggle to develop into a strong and mature person is not strange. Role models show teens that they and their struggles are normal. At the very least, role models give teens someone they can look up to, someone they wish to be like. Growing up in America, a heterosexist society, means that while “straight boys have Arnold Schwarzenegger, Wayne Gretsky, Magic Johnson…[all gay teens have] are negative, horrible stereotypes.”⁴

Gay teens lack role models in their life, either because people are generally uncomfortable discussing homosexuality or because they don’t want to “expose” teens to

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¹ Tropiano 2002 pg.32
² Alderson 2000 pg.115
³ Gauntlett 2008 pg.231
⁴ Alderson 2000 pg.125
such a topic. Left without real-life representations of the struggle to grow up and come out at the same time, the media is of special import to gay teens: “Many homosexual adolescents do not have homosexual role models in their immediate environment with whom to identify and to develop a healthy sexual identity…Therefore, the media may have an important function to serve, i.e., exposing them to kindred individuals with whom they may otherwise never or seldom have contact.”¹

Unfortunately, though, the representation of gay characters is still relatively rare. In their 2000 study of 22 sitcoms broadcast from October 2-13, 2000, Gregory Fouts and Rebecca Inch identified 125 characters central to their program, and only 3 of them were gay (Will and Jack from Will and Grace and Carter from Spin City). Because a mere 2% percent of the characters were gay, “for homosexual viewers, this under-representation results in disproportionately fewer opportunities for observing role models that are important in their identity developments.”² Even more troubling, especially for the gay teen, is that of those three gay characters, none of them were teenagers. And although during the same time frame Jack McPhee of Dawson’s Creek had already come out of the closet, he was just one representation of a gay teen amidst countless heterosexual characters. Mirroring the feeling of many gay teens, Jack was all by himself. So, when gay teens feel alone in their schools and in their family and they turn to television or other media outlets, their feelings of isolation and solitude are only reinforced.

There are other reasons why the media are especially important for gay teens; for instance, they “[show] us situations and relationships from other people’s points of

¹ Fouts, Inch 2005 pg.37
² Fouts, Inch 2005 pg.40
view.”\textsuperscript{1} Considering that, from the point of view of the closeted gay teen, being openly gay is a terrifying prospect, the media have the chance to demonstrate that being gay is a normal and natural way of life. Depictions of gay life are not particularly common in mainstream media (especially in comparison to heterosexual representations), as demonstrated by the Fouts-Inch study. When there are gay stories or characters, they have that much more impact because they stand out in the minds of the public and are interpreted as indicative of all members of the gay and lesbian community. Homosexuality also stands out because heterosexuality is unmarked (much like whiteness as a race), so when someone is not this norm, they seem especially different. In the vein of gay teen’s isolation, the fact that people are so unwilling to discuss homosexuality with teens (at least in an honest or positive way) “forces teens to rely on the mass media as sources of information.”\textsuperscript{2}

In these respects, the media have the potential to be a strong vehicle for breaking stereotypes and myths regarding homosexuality, not just for gay teens, but for heterosexuals as well. For instance, studies have shown that “recalling a positive portrayal of a homosexual character from the media can contribute to a positive change in the attitudes toward real gay men.”\textsuperscript{3} In a case of fiction affecting reality, positive media representations have the ability to introduce people to homosexuality. This way when they encounter it in their everyday life, it’s not a shock. It is something they’ve seen before. And gay teens now have a reason to disbelieve the messages that homosexuality

\textsuperscript{1} Gauntlett 2008 pg.2
\textsuperscript{2} Owens 1998 pg.58
\textsuperscript{3} Bonds-Raacke pg.29
is not a normal way of life. So, “within limits, the mass media can be a force for change”\(^1\) (emphasis in original). Especially with television and movies, the media serve to broadcast new narratives of gay and lesbian lives to a mainstream audience that might not otherwise have the opportunity to see or learn more about gay and lesbian people, and “by bringing into people’s homes images of sexual identities which they might not be familiar with, the media can play a role in making the population more...comfortable with these ways of living.”\(^2\) So, the media have the potential to change the minds of gay and heterosexual viewers alike. The inclusion of homosexual characters does a lot to educate viewers, but it is not enough to just have a gay character. Instead, they must be a complete character, portrayed realistically. However, with the rarest of exceptions, even the best television and film representations have still left gay teens wanting something more.

**Gay Characters On TV: Stepping into the Spotlight**

*Ellen: A Primetime Sitcom Comes Out*

A discussion of gay characters on TV in the recent past would be incomplete without including the Ellen DeGeneres sitcom, *Ellen* (originally titled *These Friends of Mine*). In fact, it serves as the prefect starting point because it was the first time that a gay character was no longer just a supporting character, occupying the margins of their series. More importantly, though, the relatively popular series received massive and unprecedented media attention because not only was the lead character, Ellen Morgan, coming out, but the lead actress, Ellen DeGeneres, was coming out as well. The attention aimed at the series in the weeks leading up to “The Puppy Episode” (in which Ellen’s

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1 Gauntlett 2008 pg.279
2 Gauntlett 2008 pg.286
character came out) made this coming out process one of the most important storylines in television in a long time for American media, and especially for gay and lesbian viewers. Fortunately, the episode was finely crafted, with Ellen as one of the head writers, and it was critically praised and lauded, receiving four Emmy nominations, walking away with two wins.

*Ellen* was a show about Ellen Morgan (DeGeneres), a bookstore owner in her thirties, and her friends. In the early seasons (neither of the Ellens came out until the 4th season), Ellen was your typical quirky character that had hard-luck when it came to love, but plenty of friends to share her misery. *Ellen* was different from many ensemble sitcoms because instead of each of the characters having their own plotlines, the episodes tended to revolve around Ellen, with each of “the supporting characters [being] defined strictly in terms of their relationship to Ellen.”¹ This meant that when Ellen decided to come out, there was no way she could be written out of the show. For the first time, there was a GLBT character in a primetime sitcom that was crucial to the show and presented in an honest and realistic manner, especially considering that DeGeneres herself was the executive consultant for 12 episodes and a writer for the 2-part coming out show. With Ellen as a writer and consultant, she could assure that the storyline of that episode was realistic and accurately represented a coming out narrative.

The portrayal of coming out given in *Ellen* was wrought with fear, anxiety, and with shame about being gay, which is part of the reason that it was so powerful; It’s a narrative with which scores of gay men and women can identify. In the coming out scene, Ellen is very hesitant and nervous to actual say the words:

¹ Tropiano 2002 pg.246
This is so hard. I think I’ve realized that I am… I’m… I can’t even say the word. Why can’t I say the word? I mean, why can’t I just say… I mean, what is wrong… Why do I have to be so ashamed? I mean why can’t I just say the truth, I mean be who I am. I’m thirty-five years old. I’m so afraid to tell people I mean I just… Susan, I’m gay.

Her reticence reflects a real world fear about declaring one’s sexuality. And, just as Ellen said (or, more appropriately, didn’t say), this fear is often an irrational one, a fear not based in logical facts, but in raw emotion. Furthermore, Ellen’s declaration served as a method of liberation for her. Once she has declared her sexuality, she felt a sense of an empowerment and a direction for leaving behind her feelings of shame and guilt (a powerful message indeed for GLBT viewers who had been waiting for a mainstream gay character). The authenticity of Ellen Morgan’s feelings and speech make it all the more effective in connecting to an audience of lesbians and gay men who had otherwise had to survive on scraps.

The aftermath of the episode was no less than a giant shockwave that shook the face of gay culture, and the responses from both sides of the issue (both in support of Ellen and in condemnation) were outspoken in their beliefs. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) sponsored benefits for the episode across the nation and rewarded the show with three consecutive nominations for their annual GLAAD Media Awards. Additionally, the Human Rights Campaign threw their support behind the episode and the series, distributing Ellen party kits and trivia games for their episode parties. However, conservative right-wing groups more than matched Ellen’s supporters in terms of fervor, but lambasted the show for pushing the “radical homosexual agenda.” The Media Research Center bought a full page in Variety, titled

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1 Tropiano 2002 pg.246
“America’s Family Deserves Better”, and went on to attack ABC and Disney for allowing the episode to run. The ad included:

Could it be Disney and ABC just don’t care what American families think?
Could it be that ABC didn’t mean it when it told many of our nation’s leaders it would air more family-friendly programming? What else could account for this insult, this slap in the face to America’s families?\(^1\)

Regardless of the reaction from both supporters and naysayers, the series received a huge boost in ratings from the episode and receive considerable critical acclaim.

Unfortunately, not everything was a success in the Ellen’s world. First of all, after Ellen came out and the show began to explore her character’s sexuality by introducing dating stories, ABC decided to include a parental advisory warning with the show’s opening, an “advisory similar to the one that appears in the opening of *N.Y.P.D. Blue*”\(^2\), a show that is hardly in the same league as *Ellen* when it comes to objectionable material. Despite the fact that the series tried to present Ellen’s sexuality as something normal and natural, the parental advisory label demonstrated that society at large still was not willing to view homosexuality in the same way. Additionally, the show was not given the chance to really flesh out Ellen’s character because the series was cancelled after the 5\(^{th}\) season (just one full season with Ellen out).

Also, within the scope of this book, it’s important to recognize the fact that Ellen, obviously, is a woman. For gay *male* viewers, of any age, they would have connecting with Ellen because, as I stated in my introduction, the experiences of gay men and lesbians are drastically different. Ellen’s coming out is motivated, in part, by her relationship with Susan, which reflects the real world experiences of many lesbians. The

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1. Tropiano 2002 pg.247
2. Tropiano 2002 pg.248
realism of her experience makes Ellen an even more powerful tool for lesbian viewers, but gay males still may not recognize their experience in her. The series may be a step in the right direction by making sure Ellen’s coming out is realistic, but from the perspectives of gay males, she still falls short as a role model.

Another major problem, especially relating to gay teens, is the fact that Ellen was, by her own admission, thirty-five by the time she came out, so the message here is that coming out and discussing sexuality is something that is best left for adults. It was clearly not an intentional message, or even one the writers and producers could have avoided, and the modern gay teen may have even been too young to have watched the episode (this author was just old enough to remember watching the groundbreaking episode, and can’t recall thinking, “Well, that’s fine for her, but I’m not thirty-five, now am I?”). Still, though, as the first mainstream series that has a gay main character, the character of Ellen Morgan only reinforces gay teens’ fear that homosexuality is a subject that is saved for adulthood.

Even if the show never got to explore Ellen as a lesbian, and even if the effects of her coming out were limited by her age, Ellen is still an essential starting point for any analysis of homosexuality in mainstream media. It’s true that there were other gay characters on other shows well before her, but Ellen’s impact on popular culture is undeniable. She may not have been the first gay character, or even the first openly gay actress, but both Ellen Morgan’s and Ellen DeGeneres’ coming out garnered tremendous attention. This is why Ellen (the character, the actress, and the show) had such an influence: the sheer visibility meant that a massive mainstream audience (of both heterosexual and homosexual viewers), was finally able to witness a gay person’s
struggle to accept their sexuality, from the initial recognition of same-sex attraction to the experience of a positive self-image. Despite the fact that *Ellen* fails, in numerous ways, to serve gay male teens the way most media serve straight teens, the fact still remains that *Ellen* paved the way for gay characters to make their way into the spotlight of mainstream television.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: In Every Generation, There Is A Chosen One*

Another popular show that included a gay character in its central cast is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The show is about a young girl, Buffy Summers (Sarah Michele Gellar), who after being plagued by strange occurrences her entire adolescence, finds out that she is the Vampire Slayer, the one person in the world mystically chosen and empowered to defend the world against demons. Once she settles into her new school in Sunnydale (your generic Southern California town) at the start of her sophomore year of high school, she befriends Xander Harris (Nicholas Brendan), the awkward outcast who is the product of a dysfunctional family, and his best friend Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), the bookish super-nerd who was just as much a social pariah as Xander. Together with Buffy’s watcher (a person devoted to training and preparing the Slayer), the school librarian Rupert Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), the four are nicknamed “The Scooby Gang” for their tendency to team up to fight the forces of evil together.

One of the main reasons this show was so important to American culture was that it managed to break into the very masculine world of sci-fi television with not just a female as the star, but a girl in high school (and a cheerleader, no less) as the world’s last defense against the apocalypse (an event that Buffy and the Scoobies have to stop roughly thirteen times throughout the show’s seven seasons). Buffy is superhuman in
strength, has incredible healing powers in addition to prophetic visions, and she is one of the most heroic and powerful characters in modern television, even in the sci-fi genre. Not even death can put an end to Buffy (she first dies, albeit briefly, during the season one finale, and then again, far more dramatically, to close the 5th season). So, Buffy had already established itself as a groundbreaking series with self-described feminist Joss Whedon as creator, writer, and director.

_Buffy_ is included in this analysis because in the fourth season, Willow, who had become increasingly essential to the series as Buffy’s best friend, began to dabble in witchcraft, and while doing so, she meets Tara Maclay (Amber Benson). As the bond between Willow and Tara grows, it begins to develop into a romantic relationship (following both _Ellen_ and the real life narratives of most lesbians, it is a relationship that starts her self-identification process). Although Willow is definitely confused by the feelings she has, she does not reject them. Willow is an incredibly progressive character because we don’t see the same sense of confusion and shame as she realizes she’s a lesbian, even though she’d had a serious boyfriend in the past, teen-werewolf Oz (played by Seth Green). However, the exact nature of her sexuality is always pretty ambiguous because “when Willow comes out, there’s no ‘very special’ episode or long speech.”¹ In fact, the first time she actually declares her sexuality is when a spell gone awry erases everyone’s memory, and she, along with the other Scoobies, are hiding from a vampire.

Dawn (Buffy’s sister): How are you?
Willow: A little confused. I mean, I’m…all sweaty…and trapped, no memory, hiding in a pipe from a vampire…and I think I’m kinda gay. (Tabula Rasa, Season 6, Episode 8)

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¹ Tropiano 2002 pg.184
This is as close as the series comes to having a coming out episode (and this is two full seasons after Willow’s relationship with Tara starts). In this respect, Willow’s sexuality is a complete non-issue in the Buffy-universe. The relationship between Willow and Tara is presented as just another relationship between two people. Although initially “their on-screen physical connection was never more than quick kisses on the cheek” it never seemed like much of an issue at all.

As the series, and their relationship, develops, however, the depiction of physical intimacy between the two increases, but, again, it’s never presented as some groundbreaking episode, but just two lovers being together. In fact, in the final episode of Tara Maclay’s arc (“Seeing Red”, the episode in which she’s killed), their relationship has been so normalized that Whedon sees nothing wrong with showing the two of them post-coital, “slick with sweat and out of breath,” discussing how they’ve completely lost track of time, while doing things the audience is left to imagine. At the end of the episode, again, they are shown getting out of bed and finally putting clothes on. Once more, their dialogue is of a loving couple with no issue being made out of the fact that they are both women.

Willow: Hey. Clothes
Tara: Don’t get too used to them.
Willow: Yes ma’am.

At this, they pull in close and kiss, one of numerous amorous kisses between the two that are found in this episode alone. Unfortunately, it is shortly after this exchange when a stray bullet, fired by someone trying to kill Buffy, strikes Tara in the back and kills her.

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The point, however buried it may seem, is that the fact that there is no “coming out” episode and the fact that Whedon makes sure to include scenes of tender love between Willow and Tara sends the message that their sexuality is not an issue at all. American television, then, sure has come a long way from *Ellen*, who’s coming out episode was one of the most discussed and controversial TV episodes of the 90s, to *Buffy*, who’s presentation of a lesbian couple is no different than the presentation of the heterosexual couples in the series. Whedon also made sure that viewers could not see Willow’s homosexuality as a phase, something that lives and dies with Tara. In the seventh and final season, well after Tara’s death, Willow begins a relationship with Kennedy (Iyari Limon).

Willow’s sexuality and relationships are all the much more powerful thanks to the sheer popularity of the series. Through the series 7-season run, *Buffy* was nominated for 7 Emmy Awards, and it was named to TV Guide’s 50 Best Shows of All-Time (#41, ahead of shows like Bewitched and Bonanza)\(^1\) and it also appeared on TV Guide’s Top 25 Cult Shows Ever (#3, behind only *Star-Trek* and *The X-Files*).\(^2\) Willow’s sheer visibility (she was named #2 on AOL Television’s list of Top 20 TV Witches, behind only *Bewitched*’s Samantha),\(^3\) was a huge asset in the character’s ability to convey the message that her sexuality (or homosexuality in general) should be a non-issue in contemporary American society.

Even though Willow and *Buffy* are incredibly progressive and enlightened in their depiction of homosexuality, there are still problems, especially in how it relates to the gay

\(^1\) CBSNews.com
\(^2\) TVGuide.com
\(^3\) http://television.aol.com
teen. First and foremost is that fact that for the entirety of Willow’s high school life, she is presented as staunchly heterosexual with no doubts about it. She has an enduring puppy-love crush on Xander through the first couple seasons, and she begins dating Oz in the second season (junior year of high school). The relationship between Willow and Oz continues through season four (freshman year of college). She only discovers her sexuality once she is away at college, so the gay teen gets the idea that sexuality should be a complete non-issue, so long as it’s not discussed in high school. Furthermore, the fact that Willow is a woman puts a bit of a barrier between her and the gay male teen (the subject of this project), and, to some extent, impairs her ability to change the minds of the gay male teen viewer. Overall, even though *Buffy’s* Willow Rosenberg is a character whose sexuality is never an issue and whose relationship is depicted in the same manner as the series’ heterosexual pairings, the gay male teen viewer is still not getting a role model for how to live as a gay male teenager, let alone how to come to terms with his sexuality in the face of societal expectations for masculinity.

*Dawson’s Creek: Jack in a Closet*

*Dawson’s Creek* premiered in early 1998, and focused on a group of friends in their freshman year of high school: Dawson Leary (James Van Der Beek), Joey Potter (Katie Holmes), Jen Lindley (Michelle Williams), Pacey Witter (Joshua Jackson), and Jack McPhee (Kerr Smith) formed the core of this group (Jack was introduced at the beginning of the second season and quickly became a central character through his relationship with Joey). The series follows them, and their varied plotlines, through their years at Capeside High School and onto Worthington University in the later seasons. Like many of the shows under discussion, *Dawson’s Creek* won a GLAAD Award (and
garnered an additional nomination) for its brutally honest portrayal of Jack McPhee’s
difficult and painful coming out story, which begins while he is still dating Joey.

In a two part episode titled “To Be or Not to Be…” and “…That is the Question”,
after rumors about Jack’s sexuality begin spreading around Capeside High, his
relationship with Joey becomes strained. The tension and conflict come to a head when
an abusive English teacher, Mr. Peterson (Edward J. Kearney), forced Jack to read aloud
his poem for class, which included very personal details:

Today. Today was a day.  
The World got smaller, darker.  
I grew more afraid.  
Not of what I am, but of what I could be.  
I loosen my collar to take a breath.  
My eyes fade.  
And I see…Him.  
The image of perfection.  
His frame strong, his lips smooth.  
And I keep thinking, What am I so afraid of?  
I wish I could escape the pain,  
but these thoughts invade my head.  
Bound to my memory, they’re like shackles of guilt.  
Oh, God, please set me free.  
Free from the pain and this guilt  
So that I may face  
Tomorrow.

This scene and this poem is so powerful because it accurately reflects the confusion, the
pain, the anxiety, and the sheer terror that most gay teens feel when they are faced with
the prospect of coming out in high school. For Jack, all those emotions are amplified by
the fact that he is forced to come out in such a public way. The presentation of Jack is not
only realistic, but powerful because the show then goes on to show Jack struggle to come
out of the closet to the rest of his friends and to his family. For the first time, gay teen
viewers can see someone with whom they can very closely identify and watch to see how
he manages to navigate his coming out. One of the most important aspects of the series in relation to Jack is that he “is never treated like the token gay character and his homosexuality never limits his involvements in storylines.”

*Dawson’s Creek* did such a good job with their construction of the character of Jack because they didn’t relegate him to some tired stereotype. He may have been introduced to the series as an art-loving social awkward new guy (it his shared love of art with Joey that first brings them together), but at the beginning of the third season, after he comes out, Jack joins the school’s football team and becomes their starting quarterback. This is a particularly remarkable turn of events, especially considering team sports in high school are not exactly the friendliest environment for gay teens, as I demonstrated in the Sports chapter. Even more remarkable, though, is the fact that his teammates do not ostracize him for his sexuality; instead they are just as hard on him as they are on each other, no more and no less.

Another reason why this show is so extraordinary is the fact that, on May 24, 2000, it was the first program to feature a primetime gay male kiss (even though *Will & Grace*, a show with two single gay men as central characters, had been on for two years). It was a kiss that was several episodes in the making, and much like most gay teens before their first kiss, Jack was extremely nervous. The other teen Jack kisses, Ethan, has been out for a longer time, but refuses to initiate the kiss because he doesn’t think Jack is ready for it. He even challenges Jack to kiss him to prove that he’s ready, but Jack is still so conflicted inside that he can’t do it, at least not until the next episode. Jack finds Ethan and kisses him, in a groundbreaking, yet rather short, moment. Unfortunately, though,

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1 Tropiano 2002 pg.180
Ethan had already got back together with his ex-boyfriend, and they never had the chance to fully explore their potential relationship. Despite the failure of that relationship to develop, *Dawson’s Creek* did not shy away from giving Jack a normal love life, as he is seen dating numerous other men throughout the course of the show. Even more important, especially for the gay male teen, is that Jack returns with his life partner Doug in the series finale. For the first time in any mainstream media, the gay teen viewer can see Jack’s fear and struggle with accepting his sexuality, but they also see his character grow more comfortable with his identity, and develop into a happy and healthy gay man. For the first time, gay teens have a role model with whom they can identify.

However, as phenomenal a character as Jack is, there are problems with where he fits in the overall schema of *Dawson’s Creek*. First and foremost, although Jack is a main character, he is not necessary to the series. Clearly, the majority of the action in the show centers on Dawson and his relationships, mainly the on-going romantic tension with his best friend Joey (complicated by the fact that Pacey also develops romantic feelings for her), and his relationship with Jen (both friendly and romantic). Jack, then, is only connected to Dawson through Joey, so he’s still, more or less, only a periphery character. His storylines are included, and they are created in an honest and a sincere way, but they are never crucial to the overall direction of the series. What’s more, then, is that he is completely surrounded by heterosexual couplings, whether it is Dawson-Joey, Dawson-Jen, Pacey-Joey, or any of the number of other heterosexual characters. While Jack is given a real life and romantic relationships, he is definitely on the periphery. So, even though the gay teen finally gets a character that he can relate to and a coming out
narrative to give him hope, Jack’s isolation within the show reinforces the feeling of solitude and loneliness the gay teen is already feeling in his real life.

Queer as Folk: Not Just A Series Title

In 2000, The Showtime Network premiered a remake of a recent British television program, both called Queer as Folk (QAF). Both series followed the lives of a group of gay men and lesbians, with the US version being set on the extremely gay-friendly Liberty Avenue of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (think The Castro District of San Francisco, but even more flamboyant). Although the British version only made 10 episodes, the US version was wildly successful on Showtime and ran 83 episodes over the course of 5 seasons. During those five seasons, the large ensemble cast went through just about everything a television series can throw at an audience, from messy break-ups to weddings to births to deaths to hate crimes to fabulous parties to living with HIV and AIDS. Despite US networks’ habit for failing to convert an incredibly popular British series into a viable US series, QAF’s “premiere scored Showtime’s best rating in three years”\(^1\) and the series garnered a GLAAD Media Award nomination for each of the five seasons it was on the air.

Showtime’s support of the series was significant and likely helped the show get off the ground. To help advertise QAF, “Showtime reportedly spent $10 million promoting the weekly series.”\(^2\) For the channel, it was a relatively dangerous move to invest so much money in the series even though it would almost certainly only appeal to very small portion of the viewing audience. However, the risk definitely paid off, “because QAF became Showtime’s highest-rated dramatic series. By the end of its first

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\(^1\) Gauntlett 2008 pg.91  
\(^2\) Tropiano 2002 pg.151
season in June of 2001, the average rating was double Showtime’s overall primetime average."1 Clearly then, the makers of the show had struck a chord with the viewing audience, but what was it about this show that made it so wildly popular?

Part of the reason that QAF was such a success is that it took an extremely uncensored look at gay life in America. Gay men and lesbians (and, presumably, a significant number of heterosexual viewers) tuned in to the show in massive numbers because they were finally presented with a life with which they could identify (the frequent nudity, both male and female, and graphic sex scenes probably didn’t exactly hurt the show’s popularity either). For starters, the representation of gay men ran the gambit from the embodiment of the stereotype that was Emmett Honeycutt (Peter Paige), to the insecure and awkward Ted Schmidt (Scott Lowell), to the nerdy and neurotic Michael Novotny (Hal Sparks), to the teenage Justin Taylor (Randy Harrison), who falls head over heels for and doggedly pursues Brian Kinney (Gale Harold), the furthest extreme of the drug using, promiscuous sex-having, hetero-hating gay man. The show is realistic because, even though it depicts the stereotypes of drug use, frequent nights out, and rampant promiscuity, it also shows them falling in love, starting long-term relationships, getting married (Michael marries Ben Bruckner, played by Robert Gant in the 4th season), and having children. All the while, the aforementioned graphic depictions of sexual behavior means that these characters are not homosexual in title only, but are shown to be actively gay, and with no shame.

The show was also so popular and effective because it did not shy away from some of the more touchy subjects. The resident lesbian couple, Lindsay Peterson and

1 Tropiano 2002 pg.151
Melanie Marcus (Thea Gill and Michelle Clunie, respectively), is shown going through a very nasty break-up after being together for 10 years and having a child (mothered by Lindsay) while Melanie is pregnant with their second. The show also depicts living with HIV/AIDS as there are three main characters that all have to deal with it: Vic Grassi (Michael’s uncle, played by Jack Wetherall) who has AIDS and dies in the 4th season, and both Ben and Hunter Thompson (Harris Allan) live with HIV. The wedding of Michael and Ben, which occurs in Canada, is also a way QAF directly confronted American homophobia as the border patrol guards would not let the two register as a married couple when trying to re-enter the country.

QAF also explores family relationships by including both Michael’s over-the-top PFLAG mom Debbie (Sharon Gless) and Justin’s less “out there” mother Jennifer (Sherry Miller). Michael’s relationship with his mother is already established as a strong and stable one (despite frequent bickering) by the time the show has started. A far more interesting case, especially from the perspective of the gay teen, is the relationship between Justin and his mom. In the first season, Jennifer discovers her son is gay and, after seeing Justin and Brian kissing, tells her husband. This rings true to the real-life narratives of gay teens coming out to their parents because Justin’s father finds out indirectly, when Jennifer tells him. Throughout the course of the first season, Justin’s relationship with his father continues to deteriorate, but his relationship with his mother continues to get better and better. By the end of the first season, their relationship is better than ever (and she’s divorced her homophobic husband Craig). Justin’s estrangement from his father is presented as not representative of most father-son relationships because Craig is depicted as a particularly bigoted man. He even has Justin arrested for protesting
Craig’s company’s anti-gay policies on the company’s grounds in the 5th season. Through QAF, the gay teen viewer has the chance to see that, yes, sometimes coming out to your parents can be a difficult and traumatic experience, but, ultimately, the relationship you can develop will be more authentic and better than anything you had previously. Their relationship serves to give the gay teen hope, that even though things might not go well at first, they will get better.

The inclusion of Justin in the show is especially interesting for this analysis because, when the show starts, he is both still a teenager and living at home. QAF depicts his entire coming out process and, for once, the gay teen watching this show can see a narrative that parallels their life at the moment. He starts the show in the closet, and by the end of the 5th season he’s confidently out, self-assured, happy, and in love (even though his relationship with Brian is a very unique one). Justin’s transformation is good for the gay teen because he has a role model with whom he can identify. Furthermore, gay teens get to see not only how he deals with good times, but with the worst of times too (from being thrown out of his home to being gay-bashed to near death). With Justin’s character, gay teens are given hope that even with the worst of occurrences and events, there’s reason to believe that a better life lies on the other side of the closet door.

This show, like nearly all others that include gay characters, is not without its flaws. For instance, one of Queer as Folk’s biggest drawbacks is that it is on Showtime, a subscription cable network. While this means that they can take the extra steps and show graphic and controversial subject matter without fear of major consequences, it also limits the number of people who watch it. Certainly, it would be harder for a gay teen to get access to Showtime to see QAF than for him to have access to any of the other basic
cable channels. There are also some departures from reality that weaken the show. First of all, like I said earlier, Jennifer discovers Justin’s sexuality. This is in opposition to the typical way that mother’s learn of their son’s sexuality (as I noted in the Family chapter, sons usually disclose to their mothers directly). This doesn’t mean that Justin’s coming out process is completely unbelievable because it doesn’t follow the usual path (many mothers are informed indirectly), but it just becomes a little closer to fiction. Liberty Avenue seems to be a more potent example of this point. Liberty Avenue is so flamboyant, so gay-friendly and so audacious that it is difficult to believe that any place in America could actually be that open. Even if those places exist, they are definitely in the minority. The makers of *Queer as Folk* stretched the limits of authentic setting with Liberty Avenue. Therefore, gay teens who do manage to watch QAF may have difficult believing that there is reality in the show and may then have trouble identifying with the narratives he sees.

Additionally, despite everything the show does right with Justin, he is still not quite the complete package for which the gay teen would be looking. Unlike Jack of *Dawson’s Creek* (a show set in high school), we see very little of Justin in school, so gay teens watching are still unsure about how to negotiate their sexuality in school. In the same vein, Justin is only given one friend his age (Daphne), and she only makes infrequent visits to the show. That, in combination with the fact that he dates a man roughly 10 years older than him and the fact that he is virtually surrounded by adults, seems to reinforce the standard message that homosexuality is not something that is appropriate for teenagers to deal with. In that way, Justin is seen more as the exception
than the rule, and the gay teen is still conflicted about how he should navigate his coming out process.

*Will & Grace: The Will to be Different, With a Lot of Grace*

In 1998, NBC premiered a sitcom that followed the lives of longtime friends Will Truman (a gay lawyer played by Eric McCormack) and Grace Adler (an interior designer played by Debra Messing). They are joined on-screen by Jack McFarland, (a gay wanna-be entertainer played by Sean Hayes) and Karen Walker (a rich and sarcastic woman always with a drink in hand, played by Megan Mullally). Like QAF, *Will & Grace* never made an issue out of Will and Jack’s sexuality and there were no special episodes in which they came out of the closet. And although that means the viewer is left without the coming out narratives for these two main characters, there are others introduced throughout the course of the series that do have to learn to accept their sexuality (most notably, Barry, Karen Walker’s cousin, and Bonnie, the mother of Jack’s son). Also like QAF, this series includes multiple gay characters, and the fact that there are two that are central to the story means that on any given week, viewers are treated to two very different representations of gay men. Jack is the gay man everyone can recognize. He fits the stereotype perfectly because he is vain, effeminate, narcissistic and promiscuous (at least in the stories he tells). On the other hand, Will is a smart, well-adjusted, mature gay man. He does have qualities that appear stereotypical (he’s obsessively tidy and very conscious of his looks), but he is not stripped down to the bare archetypical gay. By pairing him with Jack, Will’s lack of stereotypical behaviors is enforced and, as a character, that makes him more effective in challenging heteronormative thinking.
The shows mainstream success meant that, in many cases, for the first time, the average American was seeing a gay character on television without any sort of dramatic or sensationalist approach. The facts that *Will & Grace* was on a mainstream network (NBC) and that it was a consistently high performer in terms of ratings showed that Middle America was consuming this product. *Will & Grace* was therefore a huge boost to gay viewers because, to them, the acceptance of these gay characters reflected an increased acceptance of homosexuality. As a product to mainstream television viewers, however, *Will & Grace* was limited in just how far it could push the envelope. Overall, “*Will & Grace* is an attempt to reach a wide demographic and not to educate the American public about gay life.”¹ For example, before the show had developed a strong fan base, it could not offend the audience by, say, showing any romantic interaction with any of the men that Will or Jack date. In fact, the show was well into its second season when it was beaten to the first gay male kiss in primetime television by *Dawson’s Creek*, as mentioned earlier. One possible explanation for this is that Jack McPhee was surrounded by heterosexuality, so *Dawson’s* could be more challenge stereotypes and be a bit more complete in it’s portrayal of homosexuality. As a show specifically geared toward homosexuality, however, *Will & Grace* was ironically more restricted in what it could do because it wanted to be a mainstream success. Therefore, it could not challenge mainstream sensibilities about the lives of gay men, at least initially. Additionally, in a heterosexist society, “homosexuality can only be represented through heterosexist categories and language.”² What that means is that when homosexuality, something not well known, is represented, it must be done using familiar discourse. Unfortunately, in

¹ Battles, Hilton-Morrow 2002 pg.492
² Battles, Hilton-Morrow 2002 pg.493
modern society, familiar discourse is heterosexist. Yes, *Will & Grace* received unprecedented visibility due to its massive mainstream success, but “it is important to remember that visibility often comes with the price of having to conform to or be made sense of within dominant cultural discourses.”  

One of the ways in which this conformity is done is by representing the characters in normalizing heterosexual couples. Just like the show’s title suggest, it really is about Will *and* Grace. And, just to make sure they covered all their bases, the producers/writers of the show also make sure that Karen and Jack are just as inseparable. In fact, there is such a careful division into the two male-female couples that even in promotional items, Will and Jack are never shown together (with the extremely rare exception of the cover of Season 1 DVD Set). When the marketers decided to mix things up, they might pair Will with Karen, but the four friends are still separated into to opposite-sex couples. Even more troubling but in the same vein, is the very last scene of the series finale. After all the major conflicts had been resolved, and the four friends have made up and gotten together in a bar, they are, as usual, split into their heterosexual pairs:

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1 Battles, Hilton-Morrow 2002 pg.493
2 NBC Universal 2006
Note that the two gay men are as far away from each other as possible. In affirmation of their opposite sex couplings, in the closing seconds of the series, they show Will and Grace kiss, followed by Jack and Karen doing the same:

The last images of a series devoted to the lives of four people, two of whom are gay men, are of the heterosexual pairing of Will and Grace and Jack and Karen. It means that for all the show did right, for all the progress is made, for the impact it had, the very last thing viewers are going to remember is two heterosexual couples.

During the series, there is a lot of talk about homosexuality, about being gay and living life as an openly gay man, but that's all there really is: talk. Jack cycles through boyfriends so quickly that we're only ever really presented with one relationship for him (that ends when Jack cheats). Will, who is far more mainstream in his dating life, is still

1 NBC Universal 2006
only given a few relationships that last more than a single episode. First, there’s the enigmatic Michael, Will’s ex-boyfriend of seven years, but their relationship ended before the series began. Second is James, who marries Grace so that he doesn’t get deported to Canada. However, this relationship only spans 4 episodes (3 consecutive), and ends when Will realizes James is a jerk (so, clearly, it wasn’t as serious as it seemed). The third relationship Will has is with Vince, and although they break-up for a while, it is Vince whom Will ends up with.

On the other hand, the female (and heterosexual) characters both had many serious love interests. Karen has a husband through most of the early seasons, and even after that relationship is over, she has a few long-term relationships (for instance, with Malcolm, played by Alec Baldwin, or Lyle Finster, played by John Cleese), one of which leads to a wedding. In a similar vein, Grace has a significant number of relationships too. First of all, she also has an enigmatic other from before the show, her fiancé Danny. He may be out of the picture by the time the show picks up, but she also has a string of boyfriends, both casual and serious, throughout the show. Whether it be Nathan (played by Woody Harrelson), a relationship that led to a proposal, or Ben, (played by Gregory Hines), or Nick (played by Edward Burns), Grace was never without a boyfriend close in the past or near in the future. They weren’t just dates though or single occurrences, as each of those characters were in at least 3 episodes. Finally, there was Leo Markus (Harry Connick Jr) who was introduced in the beginning of season 5 and was a fixture through the rest of the series, even though he and Grace get divorced (they reunite at the series’ end and spend the rest of their lives together). So much energy is devoted to Grace and her relationships that the series almost runs out of time to actually explore Will as a
sexual being. It’s possible that was the series’ way of making sure that they toed the line between talking about gay characters and potentially offending their audience by showing that their characters were gay. This is probably why Dawson’s Creek beat Will & Grace to the first male-male kiss, and why there are surprisingly few male-male kisses in a show devoted to the life of a gay man. Regardless of the motivation, though, Will & Grace appears to send the message that it is perfectly acceptable to be gay, as long as you don’t openly display your (homo)sexuality. And although the series made significant strides toward the end of the series, any affectionate exchanges that Will shared with any of his love interests all appeared rather stiff and with just a little more passion than the platonic embraces he shared with Grace.

Finally, like the majority of the other series under discussion, the characters in Will & Grace are all adults. In fact, both Will and Grace are in their early 30s when the show starts. Even in the rare episodes where there are flashbacks to Will’s coming out, it isn’t until he’s at Columbia. Granted, the show is specifically created to start at that point in the lives of the characters. Although the gay teen watching the show will get the message that his sexuality will not be an issue of contention in his future, he will still feel as though he is in limbo.

Clearly, the warm reception of a series with two gay men as half the main characters meant that mainstream American society was ready to allow narratives into their home. Unfortunately, those narratives were constrained within the available language of American culture, which is still overwhelmingly heterosexist. Still, with half the main characters straight (Karen and Grace) and half of them gay (Jack and Will), one would expect that homosexuality and heterosexuality would receive roughly equal
attention. However as much as the show supported discourses about homosexuality, in practice heterosexuality still occupied more than its fair share of the plotlines. In the end, although this show does break ground by providing narratives of gay men to the general public, it doesn’t serve gay and lesbian viewers nearly as well. From the perspectives of gay teens, and gay viewers in general, these narratives are incomplete and fail to portray a fully human character.

In order to appeal to the widest possible audience, *Will & Grace* was forced to compromise the gay men on the show and sacrifice actual representations of their sexuality, while still including representations of heterosexuality. It is important to remember that this show is a consumable product that was not created to change the world, but to fulfill a perceived need in the market. NBC executives would have only green-lighted the project because they saw it as a profitable show. *Will & Grace*, then, is the perfect example of why television shows are inherently restricted in their ability to push the envelope: no matter what, their bottom line is that they must appeal to the largest demographic possible. This is why movies have more potential to challenge stereotypes, and it is toward film that I now turn this study.

**Gay Characters on Film: Hollywood and Homosexuality**

One of the biggest drawbacks of gay and lesbian programming on television is that if a series were to introduce a gay character, they could theoretically lose money from their advertising revenue. Typically, companies sponsor entire series, but can pull their funding from specific episodes if they feel they do not want their company associated with a controversial topic, like the introduction of a gay character. Even with series like *Ellen* or *Will & Grace*, where gay characters are central to the story, if a
particular episode is deemed too divisive for that sponsor’s taste (for instance, an episode featuring a gay kiss or a same-sex union), there can be serious ramifications. In this respect, writers and producers of television series must work under certain constraints, knowing full and well that they can only go so far and only do so much before their series will suffer. That is why there are many more possibilities for the film industry to make a statement or to challenge stereotypes; their sponsors know what’s going to be in the movie before they buy in, so the writers and producers can take those extra steps to send a message without hurting the financial feasibility of their project. Even more importantly, movies don’t typically make the bulk of their revenue from advertisers, but rather from ticket sales. For movies, then, as long as the story they portray is compelling and entertaining, the film will still be successful.

Another reason why movies can be more powerful than television, especially to the gay teen, is that their access to television programming is typically within their home, near their parents. For a teen that’s still coming to terms with his sexuality, even for a teen who has already come out, he may feel very uncomfortable watching gay-themed, or gay-friendly shows either with or near his parents. With movies, however, the teen has the chance to go see a storyline and character with which he can identify, which can help him feel less isolated, without having to risk discovery. Movies and movie theaters offer the teen a potentially anonymous venue to go see gay characters.

Gay Representation in film
Before this section, I’d like to make a quick note about the selection of films. This list of movies included is not an exhaustive one of all movies with gay characters. There may be others, even those with complete and realistic portrayals. However, these are the only ones that were also widely popular. Other films may have been better for gay teens, but their lack of mainstream success means these other gay-themed movies are unlikely to enter the lives of teens struggling to accept their emerging homosexuality. That being said, let’s start with mutant filled world of the X-Men Movies.

**X-Men: The Shared Plight of Mutants and Homosexuals**

*X-Men: The Last Stand* (X3) is the third in a trilogy of X-Men movies released in 2000, 2003, and 2006. The major conflict in each of the three movies is different, but they all involve the struggle to live as a mutant with special powers in a society that values normality first and is very unwilling to accept those different from them (hmm…sound familiar?). The first film chronicles the mutants’ struggle to fight back against a society determined to take away their rights, the second film depicts a plot to exterminate all mutants, while the third depicts the discovery of a “cure” that then becomes turned into a weapon. In all three films, there are parallels to the gay rights movement. The social climate in the movies even seems to mimic real-world bigotry, just replacing the label “gay” with “mutant.” Even so, it may seem a bit of a stretch to include X-Men in an analysis of homosexuality on film. However, the character of Senator Kelly, introduced in the first movie, seems ripped from any anti-gay rally and further defines the subtext of the movies.

As a promotional gimmick, the producers of the first movie set up a website (mutantwatch.com), that copies the arguments and matches the tones of other websites
for organizations like the Family Research Council and the American Family Association (both infamously anti-gay or valiantly pro-family depending on your perspective). The X-Men website includes this short piece from Senator Kelly: “America is built on the strength of families. The question is, what are families made of? The answer is people. Ordinary people…People like you. People like me. As I speak, there is a new and ominous danger facing our families. It is a danger facing every man, woman and child.”\(^1\) Had that quote not been predicated by the knowledge that he is a fictional character referring to mutants, it seems almost certainly to be referring to homosexuality. In fact, a real statement from the Family Research Council, at the time of the movie’s release, said: “the Family Research Council consequently seeks to reverse many of the destructive aspects of the sexual revolution…The council also, however, considers the increased acceptance of homosexuality as part of that tragic mix…it is unhealthy and destructive to individual persons, families, and society.”\(^2\) Again, these two quotes seem like they could have been taken from the same speech, and yet one of them is purely a work of fiction referring to mutants. With this subtext already founded in the release of the first movie, I turn my analysis to the third installment.

As stated earlier, the plot of the X3 concerns the discovery of a “cure” for mutants and the dilemma they face, whether to take the cure and fit in with the rest of society or to stay true to themselves and their identity as mutant and continue living their lives. It is a clear parallel to the attempts by real-world researchers to discover a cause for homosexuality. These researchers may simply be attempting to affirm the naturalness of homosexuality, but it is not difficult to believe that once a “cause” is discovered, the next

\(^1\) Gauntlett 2008 pg.95
\(^2\) Gauntlett 2008 pg.95
project will be a “cure.” The mutant cure in the movie is discovered by scientist, outspoken anti-mutant activist and father of Archangel, a mutant, Warren Worthington II. In his announcement of the cure, he uses phrases like “They are people like us. Their affliction is nothing more than a disease” and “We will now be the source of freedom for mutants.” Again, substitute the word “mutant” with “homosexuals” and you have unavoidable parallels to anti-gay activist discourse.

What is even more important about the third movie, especially for gay teens, is that one of the most salient subplots is that of Rogue (Marie), a teenage girl at Charles Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters (a boarding school for mutants). Her ability is that she can leech the powers, and in fact the life, out of any mutant she touches. The problem is that she cannot control her power, so any skin-to-skin contact with another mutant is harmful. Her status as a mutant means that she cannot touch or kiss or hug her boyfriend, Iceman (Bobby), or she could kill him. For her, the announcement of the cure is a very complicated event because she is conflicted between her desire to affirm being a mutant as natural and normal, and her desire to fit in and socialize with the rest of her classmates.

When she first hears about the cure, she rushes into the headmaster’s office:

Rogue: Is it true? They can cure us?
Storm: No, they can’t cure us. You wanna know why? There’s nothing to cure.

There’s nothing wrong with you, or any of us for that matter.

Her struggle to make this decision represents the perspective of scores of gay teens. They are struggling with the knowledge of their feelings, trying to come to terms with their sexuality, while at the same time wishing that they could fit in, that they could be like their friends. Ultimately, she takes the cure (the catalyst for her decision is seeing Bobby grow close to Kitty Pride, another girl at the school).
The power of this movie to represent the coming out struggle and the drive for normalcy stems from several factors. First, there is the unquestionable appeal of the movie. All three of the X-Men movies, each with running gay subtexts, were massive box-office smashes, and the third one was no exception. In fact, X3 was the most successful of the series, “taking $122 million on its opening weekend alone.”¹ Another reason why this movie has the potential to help gay teens is that it’s a movie they could see, and own the DVD, without any suspicion about their sexuality. Gay teens connect to the movie because they are struggling with the same emotions as Rogue. Since there are no explicit references to homosexuality, a teen who is an avid fan of X3 could be seen as just a fan of comic book movies, and not as someone looking for a gay narrative.

Unfortunately, that last strength is also X3’s biggest weakness. Even though it parodies anti-gay discourses, that of “the conservative minority’s fear of a ‘different’ minority,”² it can only do so much without any gay characters. The gay subtext of the movie is very strong, but it is still just a subtext, and the more casual consumer may not recognize it. More troubling is that the character most important to a gay teen’s reading of the movie, Rogue, is heterosexual, which means that the gay teen may feel very conflicted about identifying with her. In fact, as I already noted, it is her relationship with her boyfriend that causes her the most distress concerning her mutant status. In fact, the only other display of sexuality in the movie is the love triangle between Wolverine, Jean Grey/Dark Phoenix, and Scott Summers. Specifically, it is Wolverine’s heterosexual love for Jean Grey that is the central conflict of the story. In sum, although X3 has a great deal of potential and does an excellent job characterizing the internal struggle of most gay

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¹ Gauntlett 2008 pg.97
² Gauntlett 2008 pg.97

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teens, its lack of gay characters and its explicit references to heterosexuality mean that X3 still fails to satisfy gay teens’ craving for the narratives of gays.

As Good As It Gets: But Could Be Better

Within most contemporary gay teens’ memory is the 1997 film As Good As It Gets, set in New York City, starring Helen Hunt as Carol, a waitress and single mother, Jack Nicholson as Melvin, an obsessive-compulsive miser, and Greg Kinnear as Simon, a successful artist who lives down the hall from Melvin (both Hunt and Nicholson received Best Actress/Best Actor Oscars for their roles). The movie centers on the three characters’ relationships with one another and how each person changes through their time together. The action begins when Simon is brutally attacked in his home during a robbery and goes broke from the medical and other living expenses accrued during his recovery. After Simon runs out of options, he decides to return to his estranged parents in Maryland. Reluctantly, Melvin agrees to take him, and manages to convince Carol to come with them.

The reason this movie warrants analysis is that the character of Simon is gay, yet the film was still massively successful in theaters. It was the 6th highest grossing film of 1997, making $148.5 million,¹ meaning that the character of Simon was presented to mainstream society and millions of people received a new representation of homosexuality. His sexuality is hinted at, countless times, through the homophobic remarks of Melvin. During their first exchange, Melvin refers to Simon “Nancing around in your little garden,” telling Simon never to disturb him, even if “some fudgepacker you date has been elected the first queer president of the United States,” and then concluding

¹ boxofficemojo.com
by asking Simon, “Do you get me, sweetheart?” These types of remarks continue throughout the course of the movie, with other jewels including “Nelly, you’re a disgrace to depression” and my personal favorite, “No need to stop being a lady. Quit worrying...you’ll be back on your knees in no time.” What’s even more troubling than the prevalence of homophobic slurs is that Simon doesn’t react whatsoever to these comments. In both main exchanges, Simon is clearly affected by them, and yet he says nothing in return. The one time that he does react, after Melvin’s “back on your knees” comment, he yells back, “It’s high time for you Melvin. Your gay neighbor is terrified...TERRIFIED!” Even though he explicitly uses the word “gay,” this reaction is read more as a result of his extreme financial problems and being berated than as a result of a genuine response to homophobia.

Although this may seem like a problematic way of incorporating a gay character, the film demonstrates that Melvin’s remarks actually don’t stem from homophobia, but rather from his especially abrasive nature. He also makes racial slurs on fairly regular basis to Simon’s manager Frank (played by Cuba Gooding Jr.). For instance, when referring to Frank while talking to Simon, he says “That colored man.” When Simon defiantly says “And what color would that be?” Melvin responds, “The color of slow molasses.” And when Frank proposes that Melvin take Simon to Maryland, Melvin responds “Think white and get serious!” So, Melvin’s homophobic comments are somewhat neutralized by his racial slurs, meaning that, at the very least, he’s not just a homophobe.

This reading, however, still leaves Melvin’s view on homosexuality ambiguous, at best. He may be an all-around bigot, but just where does he sit on the subject of
gayness and what is his relationship to Simon? Near the end of the movie, after they’ve returned from their trip, when Melvin agrees to let Simon stay with him until he gets back on his feet, Simon is incredibly grateful.

Simon: Thank you Melvin. You overwhelm me…I love you.

Melvin: I’ll tell you buddy, I’d be the luckiest guy alive if that did it for me.

Melvin hasn’t experienced any real changes of heart in regard to Simon over the trip, with any positive changes by getting to really know him off-set by Melvin’s jealousy of Simon’s relationship with Carol, so this exchange demonstrates that Melvin really isn’t homophobic. A far more probable reading of his character is that Melvin grew up in a time where homophobic and racist language were accepted and expected, but in the vein of “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” he hasn’t changed his words even though attitudes (his and society’s) have changed since he learned to talk like that.

In general the movie does an excellent job of depicting Simon in a positive light and of making his sexuality a non-issue. In his other interactions, Simon comes across as deep, sensitive, artistic, and poetic. Carol takes a liking to him immediately and the two develop a close bond. Even though they were introduced, obviously by Melvin, as “Carol the waitress, Simon the fag,” both of those identities were treated as equal and neither person seemed to care. Furthermore, Simon is made into a multi-dimensional character by including pieces of his family history. He is estranged from his parents, and although his sexuality definitely played a part in that distance, it was not the sole factor. Additionally, when describing his relationship with each parent, they are relationships with which most gay teens can identify: he and his mother were close and she eventually
accepted him, while he and his father were always rather distant, and his father was less capable of accepting Simon.

One of the brilliant subtleties of the movie is the change that occurs in Simon about how he views his estrangement. He had always seen the negative rapport with his parents as entirely their fault, but after making the trip to Baltimore and talking to his mother, he realizes that he is partly to blame. By never having reached out before this trip, he was just as much to blame for the distance between him and his parents as they were. This mistake is another common one in the real world lives of gay teens. For any relationship to get better, both sides need to be working towards an improvement, and this is an idea commonly overlooked by gay teens (and men). The character of Simon then means that gay teens can see the relationship from the outside, see the realization from another perspective, and apply the changes to their own lives themselves. This is an influence that is possible only because Simon is presented as a real, authentic character, with flaws and a believable personality and psyche.

As much as this movie does right, there are still significant problems with both the representation of Simon as well as the movie itself. For instance, Simon doesn’t react to Melvin’s homophobic comments. Even though I’ve demonstrated that there is strong evidence that Melvin’s comments are not necessarily rooted in homophobia, the fact that Simon doesn’t step up and defend himself or homosexuality in general is still problematic. When viewed as a gay role model, Simon fails to inspire the viewers, homosexual and heterosexual alike, to stand up and stop others from using hateful language, regardless of its motivation. In fact, there is only one instance of any character that approaches a rebuke to Melvin for the things he says. When Melvin and Carol are
having dinner in Baltimore, and she asks him why he brought her on the trip, in his mumbling, he says something about “I was thinking maybe if you had sex with Simon…” He trails off and never explains what he meant, but Carol is so offended at the implication that she storms out of the restaurant. However, her reaction is ambiguous, because it can be interpreted as Carol being upset that she is being reduced to her sexuality. Again, one of the most problematic aspects of this movie is the fact that there are no instances of anyone clearly protesting the use of homophobic language, regardless of the motivation behind the slurs. Another large problem, in the vein of the use of language, is the fact that in a movie where one of three central characters in the movie is gay, the word “gay” is actually only used once in the entire movie (in Simon’s reaction to his financial misfortune and Melvin’s comments), which has a run time of 139 minutes. All of the other references to Simon’s sexuality are through Melvin’s slurs. To an extent, it primes the audience to receive homosexuality and a homosexual character in a negative light. Many of the positive things that this movie does are undercut by the fact that Simon’s sexuality is only named in a negative tone.

Additionally, Simon is entirely desexualized in the movie. Not only does he not have a boyfriend or a lover in the time frame of the movie, but there is no mention of past partners. The only man with whom Simon has a relationship during the movie is his agent/art dealer Frank. Although their relationship is a bit ambiguous, we are never given any reason to suspect that their relationship is anything beyond close friends, or even that Frank is gay. At the same time, there is inclusion of heterosexuality. Beyond the fact that Carol’s son implies a previous heterosexual relationship, she is also briefly shown dating at the beginning of the movie. At the end of a date, she and the man she was with come
back to her apartment and a realistic love scene ensues, including the date groping Carol’s breasts. The only reason the scene doesn’t go any further is because Carol hears her son calling for her. The implication here is that it is acceptable to be homosexual in theory, so long as the person is not gay in practice, while heterosexuality is encouraged in both theory and in act. In fact, throughout the entire movie, Simon is only showing kissing one person on the lips, and that person is Carol, and it’s a kiss of friendship. So, although Simon is depicted as fairly well-adjusted and intelligent, he appears to be gay in name only.

Another major problem with the movie is fact that, although Simon is a main character and Kinnear gets billing even with both Hunt and Nicholson, Simon gets relegated to the periphery of the story. More than anything, Simon comes across as the catalyst for the changes in the relationship between Carol and Melvin. In this way, what could have been a very progressive representation of a gay character, instead falls into the trap of the typical gay character, serving the needs of the straight characters and disappearing when he has served his purpose. There is no real closure to his narrative; the last we see of Simon, he is staying in Melvin’s apartment with no prospects and no idea what he’s going to do, even though he has a brand new outlook. In the end, the main reason for the inclusion of Simon’s character is that it is on the trip to Baltimore than Carol and Melvin have the chance to get to know each other and fall in love. Once again, even though there is a gay character central to the story, the driving force behind the narrative is heterosexual love. The audience is also never presented with Simon’s coming out narrative. We get to see some of the aftermath with his family, but even that is only second-hand. Gay teens may get to see Simon finally arrive at a high level of
understanding and confidence (at least by the end of the movie), but are still wondering how anyone ever gets to that point.

And a final problem, a common theme so far, is that Simon is an adult, yet again leaving gay teens without a character with whom they can identify. Overall, Simon is a positive portrayal, with real flaws, and a real change of heart when it comes to his parents. However, what this movie can do for the gay community, especially for gay teens, is limited because even the discussion of homosexuality, limited though it may be, is confined to the adult characters. Yes, he is a mature, sensitive, and confident (at least before the attack) gay man, but he is also an adult, a grown up, meaning that gay teens watching this movie are still left without any role model for how to be a gay teen.

*In and Out: The Ups and Downs of Coming Out*

Also released in 1997, but this time with a gay character as the main character, was *In and Out*. *In and Out* is, essentially, the coming out story of Howard (Kevin Kline), but it’s not the typical coming out narrative. In fact, it is much the reverse. Just days before his wedding to Emily (played by Joan Cusack, who received an Oscar nomination for the role), a former student of his, Cameron Drake (Matt Dillon), outs Howard during his own Oscar acceptance speech. Initially in complete denial of his sexuality, the movie seems to be more about Howard’s attempt to deal with the inaccurate outing. However, as the film progresses, it develops into a narrative about Howard recognizing his sexuality, coming out (at the altar of his own wedding, no less) and dealing with the aftermath of his coming out. In addition to earning multiple awards nominations (in addition to Cusack’s Oscar nomination, there were also 2 Golden Globe nominations and a GLAAD media award win, among others), the movie was also a box office success, making $63.8
One of the most positive aspects of this movie is the fact that the reactions of everyone in town were very realistic. When Howard’s parents (played by Debbie Reynolds and Wilford Brimley) first came to his home moments after Cameron’s speech, they were immensely relieved when he immediately denied the truth to him being gay. Even Howard’s reaction (“I may sue!”) seems very much like how any American male would react in that situation. His mother, though, just to make sure that she doesn’t seem like they would love him any less if he were gay, reassures Howard, in her own old-fashioned way, by saying that if he were gay, “We’ll still love you…as long as you get married.” Howard’s students (he’s a high school English teacher) also react like good, red-blooded American teens, saying things like, “Aren’t you like incredibly embarrassed? Do you just want to stick a grenade in your mouth?” and “I know it’s wrong! It’s against like nature…it’s basic plumbing!” The reason that the realistic nature of all these reactions are important is because it grounds the action of the film in the world in which the viewer lives, making it seem like less of a work of total fiction. Also what’s important is that Howard is not portrayed as a self-hating gay; he’s not homophobic, and the way he denies the assertion that he’s gay is, not by declaring he’s heterosexual, but by saying “I’m getting married” over and over again. In this way, the teen who’s watching this movie does not get the impression that the idea of being gay is terrible to Howard, but simple that he sees it as something that wasn’t an option for him.

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1 boxofficemojo.com
In addition to the reaction of Howard, his family, and the rest of the townspeople, the sense of reality is also founded by the fact the movie is set in Greenleaf, Indiana (your basic Everytown, USA). The people who live there are just everyday Americans; the men are farmers, teachers, and shopkeepers and the women are housewives, mothers, or teachers too. This enables the movie to be something with which people all across the nation can identify. By the end of the movie, at graduation, after Howard has been fired for coming out (another event that seems very true to life; high school teachers are likely to face significant consequences if they come out), the entire town rallies around Howard in a somewhat cheesy, yet more or less believable display of the acceptance of his sexuality. Whether this movie is a bellwether of American culture or it’s an attempt to change American culture and make Greenleaf more the rule than the exception, the action of the film is firmly grounded in reality.

One of the main drawbacks of the film is the fact that all of Howard’s mannerisms are so stereotypical. He loves showtunes, has a near obsessive relationship with Barbara Streisand, he cannot resist dancing to Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” (which is actually one of the catalysts for him accepting his sexuality), and he speaks expressively. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the fact that Howard is stereotypically gay, it seems as though the filmmakers would have thought that it would have been difficult or unbelievable had they introduced Howard as a heteronormative male, with the exception of his sexuality. However, this flaw is more or less neutralized by the fact that masculine reporter Peter Malloy (played by Tom Selleck) is also gay. Peter is one of the best characters for gay teens struggling with their sexuality not only because he’s a very different portrayal of a gay man, but because for his entire run on screen, he’s constantly
urging Howard to come out, to tell his family and friends, and to accept the fact that he’s gay (in a particularly comical scene, Peter tries to convince Howard that he’s gay by planting a passionate kiss on his lips, from which Howard does not pull away). After Howard finally comes out, he is in a complete state of panic, saying “I’m a monster…I’m a lunatic…” but Peter interrupts and says “You’re a hero!” The message is that even if there are negative consequences, the best thing a closeted gay person can do is come out. Even more, his coming out story shows the teen watching this movie that sometimes, sexuality can be a non-issue for a family:

   Peter: I came out to everyone, my folks, my boss, my dog. One day I snapped. I couldn’t take lying to the people I love.
   Howard: What happened?
   Peter: My mom cried for exactly ten seconds. My boss said who cares. My dad said “But you’re so tall”

Gay teens who see this movie are able to finally see a person who does not struggle with his sexuality, who’s accepted himself, and they get to see a narrative of a coming out story that does not have the drama typical of the majority of those narratives.

Another one of the positive affects come from what would have been the wedding reception (instead of telling the priest, “I do”, Howard said “I’m gay” leading to utter chaos and, clearly, the cancellation of the reception). In this scene, there are a group of older ladies, Howard’s mother Berniece included, and they’re discussing what just happened. Howard’s mother starts realizing what it must have been like for Howard to live with that secret:

   Howard was just being honest…What’s wrong with that? What are we so afraid of? What do we think will happen if we all just spill the beans?

The women all then go through their own coming out process, revealing secrets they’ve held in that had been tormenting them (everything from stealing a dead woman’s Rice
Krispie treats recipe to hating The Bridges of Madison County to someone’s husband having three testicles comes out). Afterwards, they all feel immense relief once they finally are honest with each other. Through this scene, the women have found a way to empathize with Howard revealing their sexuality, because these secrets were all things that they thought would be horrifying if anyone found out. What they discovered, much like Howard, is that no one really cared and everyone was happier once they came clean. It was a simple yet profound way for the filmmakers to give at least the slightest glimpse into what gay people go through. It may not be the same thing or on the same level at all, but at least it’s a start.

Howard’s father Frank is another important character in this movie, even though he tends to occupy the periphery. He is an old-school type of man, a farmer very set in his ways, and yet when Howard comes out, he accepts him, but not in a way that would render their relationship unbelievable. He loves Howard, and will love him no matter what, but he completely ignorant on the topic of homosexuality. After the wedding (that never was), Frank tracks Howard down at Howard’s house, and the following exchange ensues:

Frank: Are you still gay?
Howard: Yep.
Frank: Are you going to have an operation?
Howard: Excuse me?
Frank: Are you going into show business?
Howard: Absolutely! Vegas…
Frank: I’m making an effort here. I’m a farmer…That Barbara Streisand, did she do something to you?
Howard: Dad!
Frank may not know what he’s talking about, and he may be asking questions verging on offensive, but he’s making an effort to get to know his son. He has these hard held stereotypes and it’s going to take work to get rid of them, but he’s willing to have the discussion. Again, this serves both to give the gay teen hope that their parents will be accepting and to help give fathers who may have a gay teen the courage to start a conversation with their son.

As much as this movie does right, it is not without its drawbacks. I’ve already discussed Howard’s mannerisms as very stereotypical, but that is a minor issue. A great problem is how much emphasis the movie places on heterosexuality, and especially the celebration of heterosexuality in weddings. The wedding between Howard and Emily is the center conflict of the entire movie, and even though he is gay, the wedding is consistently discussed. The entire town seems to be involved in the wedding in someway, largely because these two have gone for so long being unmarried, which seems to affirm that heterosexual behavior is crucial to one’s life in American society. Furthermore, a large portion of the aftermath of Howard’s coming out is devoted to Emily. Even though his declaration has its second biggest impact on her life, there is a near inordinate amount of time spent on her reactions. Her panic about the possibility of never getting married (a reflection of small town cultural values) can only be quelled when, at the conclusion of the film, she and Cameron fall in love.

The end of the movie takes place at the vow renewal ceremony of Berniece and Frank, again, with a heterosexual couple taking center stage. As the credits roll, they run with the reception in the background, with most of the characters making appearances on the dance floor. Howard and Peter seem to have gotten together by this point, but when
they are shown dancing, they are more dancing near each other than with each other. Additionally, they are the only “couple” whose credits are not given together. After Kevin Kline’s credit roll, the shot flashes to Cameron and Emily together (with Dillon and Cusack’s name appearing on screen), and only then is Peter shown (and Selleck’s name), again making sure that the two men are separated. The credits continue in this fashion showing couples dancing with the actors names appearing together, Walter (Howard’s brother) and Sonya (Cameron’s supermodel ex) and the four high schoolers with speaking parts, split into couples (Jack with Meredith and Mike with Vicky). This seems to imply that Howard being gay is only accepted because there are no overt displays of homosexuality, while heterosexual displays are not only allowed, but also expected from the couples.

One scene that might seem to contradict this theory is one already noted, when Peter kisses Howard. However, at the time, Howard was still 100% sure that he was heterosexual, so this wasn’t so much of a homosexual kiss as it was a gay man kissing a heterosexual man. Even if this weren’t the case, it is the only kiss between two men in a movie with a gay title character, and where heterosexual kisses abound. In this way, this problem comes back to the fact that Howard is essentially desexualized, especially after he comes out. This is especially problematic for the gay teen because although he’s received a myriad of “it’s ok to be gay” messages throughout the course of the movie, he’s also getting a “so long as you don’t show it” clause. Furthermore, they are on the side of a road, near a vacant field, completely by themselves (i.e. segregated from the rest of the town and movie). Again, this seems to present homosexuality, or at least a homosexual act, as something that is outside the limits of American society.
A final problem for this movie from the perspective of the gay teen is that Howard is an adult. He’s spent the majority of his life in denial of his sexuality, so the gay teen is still left without any model for coming out as a teenager. In fact, the only teens that have any prominence in the movie at all are Jack, Meredith, Mike, and Vicky, Howard’s students. The problem here, again, is that they are paired off in heterosexual couples so, again, the gay teen gets the message that the only way to been a teenager is to be straight. The principal comes very close to explicitly saying this while the town is standing up for Howard at graduation. While trying to defend the decision to fire Howard (which was framed as Howard’s resignation, but no one believes it), he says:

As Howard very well knows, the decision is not yours. It’s a gonad thing…a grown up thing!

The problem is here is that the “it” to which the principal is referring is vague. It’s unclear whether he’s saying the decision to fire Howard was a “grown-up thing” or the subject of homosexuality in general. This ambiguity is harmful because there is a very high likelihood, especially considering the lack of gay teen characters (and the clear heterosexuality of the teens that are included), that the gay teen will hear the principal speech as affirmation that the subject of homosexuality is not to be brought up among teenagers. In the end, as much as this movie does right, especially in the way of the emphasis on coming out as a necessary and positive step, it still leaves the gay teen wishing for more.

_Brokeback Mountain: Breaking Boundaries and Changing Minds_

_Brokeback Mountain_ was first screened at the Venice Film Festival in late 2005, where it won the Golden Lion Award, and went on be screened at numerous other film festivals, with its limited commercial release on December 9, 2005. Word of the movie’s
plot quickly spread and the film received considerable attention even before it opened nationwide. *Brokeback* rapidly became a hot topic, and it was hard to avoid discussing the “gay cowboy movie,” as it was nicknamed, before anyone had even seen it. By the time that it did open across the entire nation on December 16, 2005, it was a huge success, and earned $2.6 million in its first weekend of full release.\(^1\) Clearly, even before the majority of the American public saw the movie, the concept of the film itself was already receiving massive attention.

The question then is why did this movie cause such a stir? It certainly wasn’t the first movie that included gay characters, nor was it even the first movie to have gay characters as main characters, central/crucial to the plot and yet the film was often described as groundbreaking and innovative. So what was the big difference? For the first time in a major mainstream film, supposedly gay characters were depicted struggling to come to terms with their feelings and defining what exactly their sexuality meant. Even though it became known as the “gay cowboy movie,” Jack and Ennis did not think of themselves as gay, because it was such a devalued and demoralized identity. In fact, on multiple occasions, they deny that they’re “queer,” and Ennis is never depicted having a relationship with another man after Jack. That’s one of the reasons that the movie had such widespread appeal and wasn’t just another Indie Flick about some gay cowboys. People, gay and straight, could connect to the movie because the emotions that Jack and Ennis experience, the joy and happiness along with the pain, the sorrow, and the confusion of a love that can never be fully realized.

\(^1\) boxofficemojo.com
Even though the main conflict (the master plot of love that cannot be realized) is recognizable to just about everyone, it does have specific power for the GLBT community. *Brokeback* was an attempt to accurately and honestly portray the struggles of two confused teenagers (both characters were 19 at the beginning of the movie) in 1963 Wyoming who struggle to accept the attraction they unexpectedly find for each other. The reason so many gay men (and, potentially, lesbians and bisexuals too) responded so strongly is that Brokeback showed a romantic connection between men without any embellishments. As one viewer put it, *Brokeback Mountain* “was the first time in my life I had seen a true connection between two men—no stereotypes, no big drama scenes, just two men having a deep emotional connection.”\(^1\) The movie, through the relationship between Jack and Ennis, showed what many men go through when their emergent feelings toward other men conflict directly with the socialization they’ve received, telling them that loving another man is unnatural and unacceptable. It’s the classic narrative of the conflict between what two people naturally feel and what society has told them what they should feel.

*Brokeback* also served to break down the emotional barriers that many gay men had erected in order to survive in a homophobic environment. In the words of one person, “There are so many memories, so much pain. I had successfully buried most of it until this movie brought it all rushing back.”\(^2\) This impact of the film is probably one of the more important ones because, by depicting the pain and struggle of Ennis and Jack, viewers were able to experience their own feelings and begin to deal with them, instead of repressing them. Another viewer said “I locked away a lifetime of hate and persecution

\(^1\) Sledge 2007 pg.33-34  
\(^2\) Sledge 2007 pg.72
in an emotional tinderbox that ignited the day I saw *Brokeback Mountain*. Suddenly, all the hurt exploded… *Brokeback Mountain* started me on a journey of self-healing.”¹ Even though gay teens who saw the movie may not have experienced a lifetime of repression, it’s certainly a feeling they can recognize. *Brokeback* also helped to reflect the damage done to gay people by living in the closet; “What the film so poignantly portrayed for me is that living in the closet not only takes an incredible amount of psychological energy to monitor and censor your every word or move, but it robs you of being fully human.”²

Another reason so many people reacted so strongly is that it also spoke to heterosexual viewers who, many for the first time, saw and experienced what many gay men go through in an attempt to repress their feelings in order to fit in (i.e. live in the closet). Through the film, heterosexual viewers, who are likely to have no experience with the pain and confusion of living in the closet, Brokeback “made [them] realize, in a tiny way, the problems that gay people cope with every day of their lives.”³ *Brokeback Mountain* was an attempt to depict a relationship between men as not political, not deviant, and not something to avoid, but rather as just another real emotional connection. The movie was a raw depiction of the joys and the sorrows, pleasure and pain that can result from any relationship as powerful and as strong as the one between Jack and Ennis, and therefore it had the potential to normalize homosexuality to many people. *Brokeback Mountain* was so groundbreaking and so innovative because it managed to not only affect gay viewers, but many heterosexual viewers as well, even those who had considered

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¹ Sledge 2007 pg.128
² Sledge 2007 pg.76
³ Sledge 2007 pg.123
themselves open to gay and lesbian people. As one such viewer put it, “After I saw it…I realized how blind I really was to the reality of being gay.”¹

When the dust had settled, and all the numbers were in, it appears as though the producers, writers and directors were successful in their attempt to create and produce an artistic film that broke new ground on a controversial topic, and yet still was a viable economic entity. Once it’s theatrical run had ended, Brokeback Mountain had earned over $83 million domestically, with one of the highest opening weekends per theater averages of all-time (#10, earning almost $110,000)² and garnering 7 Golden Globe nominations (and 4 wins) and 8 Oscar nominations (3 wins). If nothing else can be said about Brokeback Mountain, it’s clear to see that American culture was willing to accept a so-called “gay-themed” movie, on an impressive scale, as long as the story was still compelling. Fortunately, this film lived up to its potential to give gay audiences a brutally honest depiction of the difficulty they may have while discovering their sexuality while also giving heterosexual viewers a glimpse into the struggle common in the lives of gays and lesbians.

Unfortunately, however, as with every other case I’ve examined, as much as this film does right for gay teen viewers (and this film does even more than the others), it is not without its flaws. One of the problems is that gay teens are not likely to see this movie if they are still closeted. There was so much press and hype surrounding the movie that a gay teen may feel very uncomfortable seeing the movie if they’ve yet to come out. Another issue is that, as stated above, their sexuality is not ever fully defined. It is unclear whether Jack and Ennis are gay or bisexual, especially when they are both shown to go

¹ Sledge 2007 pg.122
² boxofficemojo.com
on and start families with women. That aspect could be more a product of the time and location in which the story is set (rural Wyoming in 1963), but it nevertheless complicates the movie’s ability to show “gay” characters when they themselves never claim that identity (again, it’s a label they deny). The setting may seem to be another problem with the movie when relating to contemporary society. If the film was set in 40 years in the past, in an especially bucolic area, how can it connect with viewers in 2005 and beyond? The answer is that, although there has been significant progress in the status of American gays, the fact still remains that the emotions that Jack and Ennis experience are applicable, even today; just like modern gay men and women, Jack and Ennis are struggling to accept their sexual feelings in an environment that does not allow them to express themselves without fear and that forces them into hiding. Even if the struggles of gay men and women in current times are less severe, they are no doubt still the same emotions.

The main drawback is the fact that there is still no positive depiction of gay life. Brokeback may do a great job showing the consequences of not accepting your sexuality, but it doesn’t show how a character (or person) goes through the process of accepting themselves. Regardless of the film’s intentions, the gay teen who has the opportunity to see this movie could be motivated to accept his sexuality for fear of the alternative, but he still is without a narrative that can show him how a given character accepts his sexuality.

Conclusion

What I’ve shown, through an analysis of these five television shows and four films, is that even when the media has included gay characters as central to the story, they have still left much to be desired. The media fail to serve gay teens in the same ways they
serve straight teens. Straight teens can look to just about every form of media and see numerous representations of being straight; their narratives are common in popular media and by seeing their lives consistently reflected in the shows and movies they watch, they receive affirmation that what they’re feeling is normal. For gay teens, however, the opposite is true; when gay characters are included, they tend to serve the plotlines of the main (heterosexual) characters. A big part of the reason for this phenomenon is that movies and shows are “produced for a presumably heterosexual audience, so when a gay character is introduced, the focus is usually on the straight character.”

Gay teens turn to the media because they are so isolated in so many of the other areas of their life, but the messages they are likely to receive only reinforce what they’ve been told: that heterosexuality is the norm and that homosexuality is, at best, something left for later in life. This lack of support from the media means that gay teens are left to fend for themselves, without the help of narratives that normalize their struggles or, at the very least, give them a hint as to how characters and people like them have dealt with the problems gay teens face.

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1 Tropiano 2002 pg.109
Light at the End of the Tunnel

Why Should Teens Come Out?

“Although [coming out] is going to make problems, those problems are not so
dangerous as the problems of lying to yourself, to your friends, and missing
many opportunities.”

~Bayard Rustin

“When you come out, you change—utterly. You are for the first time yourself.”

~Sir Ian McKellen

“It is better to be hated for what one is than to be loved for what one isn’t.”

~André Gide

In the face of everything I’ve outlined, it seems as though there is little to no
motivation for a gay teen to actually come out and declare his sexuality. In a society that
favors only a very specific type of man, why would a male teen ever give up his privilege
by declaring his homosexuality? Why would a teen who has been taught through sports
that he cannot compete and still be gay risk losing his honored “jock” status by coming
out? In teen culture that uses the word “gay” as anything and everything that’s bad, why
should a teen ever voluntarily align himself with that word? When a teen’s family can
only teach him and give him examples of how to be straight, why should he choose to
make his own way? And when the media either only gives him images of straight men or,
when there are images of gay men, they are either emotionally crippled or diseased, how
is a teen supposed to feel the need to contradict these messages? Most popular research
focuses on how the coming out process affects the teen or how his relationships change
when he does begin to declare his sexuality, but all of these theories and studies are based
on the supposition that gay teens have good reasons to come out. The underlying
assumption, one that is rarely examined, must be questioned: why should he come out? In
this section, I will carefully outline what it means to stay in the closet, and how the everyday acts of lying and concealing one’s sexuality hurt the teen more than any potential dangers of coming out.

The “closet,” out of which and gay person must come, refers to a mental state in which a person actively hides his/her homosexuality. Often, it is “less about denying than about acknowledging one’s homosexuality and ‘choosing’ to conceal and manage it. The closet allows one to be in the world as a respected, good person, despite possessing a stained identity.”¹ In general, living in the closet is a full-time job and tends to affect both the personal and interpersonal development of the gay teen because “to be in the closet means that individuals act to conceal who they are from those that matter most in their lives...Being in the closet will shape the psychological and social core of an individual.”² The closeted teen must learn not only that his sexuality is not something to be shared, but how to interact with other people without ever revealing such an important part of himself. Doing so may help him navigate a hostile environment but it also means he is “more than likely to forfeit the kinds of intimate companionship and love that make personal happiness possible.”³ What then happens is that the teen must devote inordinate amounts of energy and attention as he attempts to perform the part of the heteronormative teenager: “For closeted individuals, daily life acquires a heightened sense of theatricality or performative deliberateness.”⁴ His daily life then becomes entirely focused on staying in character and continuing to “pass” as properly heterosexual. Staying in the closet and “passing [take] considerable energy to make sure that leaks about one’s sexual orientation

¹ Seidman 2004 pg.124
² Seidman 2004 pg.30
³ Seidman 2004 pg.30
⁴ Seidman 2004 pg.31
do not occur...The fear of discovery is relentless.”¹ The gay teen in the closet recognizes his sexuality, but also continues to believe that it is something of which he should be embarrassed or, at least, not something he should share. At its core, “shame, fear, terror, and disgust not only are the emotional stuff of the closet, but sustain it.”²

Now we have a clear depiction of what it means to be in the closet, and some of the emotions that are produced by living that way, but it’s still unclear how this affects the teens. One of the most important ways that living in the closet adversely influences teens is that it drastically changes any relationships with other people that the teen may attempt to cultivate. At the very base, it means that the identity he is presenting to others is a lie: “Withholding and suppressing personal information and interests in order to gain peer acceptance results in a false persona that is kept in place with vigilance and elaborate defenses.”³ The more the teen gets to know another person, the more intricate the façade must become in order to hide increasingly intimate personal information. Doing so requires the teen to keep complete control over all events in his life so that he can plan any and every response he may have to give. Being in control becomes so necessary to the teen that “spontaneity may be suppressed as the youth attempts to control all behaviors and agonizes about all uncertainties.”⁴ His behaviors become unnatural and detached in an effort to suppress any possibility of outing himself.

When a gay teen stays in the closet, he is forced into a life of dishonesty in which all of his actions and interpersonal connections are based on maintaining a lie. The ugly truth is that it means that the teen not only has to hide his sexuality, but many significant

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¹ Hunter 2007 pg.91  
² Seidman 2004 pg.124  
³ Owens 1998 pg.25  
⁴ Owens 1998 pg.25
details about his life as well. He is unable to discuss his stresses, he cannot express his concerns or fears, and he is incapable of sharing more than just the most superficial details for fear that any further disclosure will reveal his deepest secret: his sexuality. Gay teens living in the closet are not hiding just any aspect of themselves; they are hiding one of the most basic and essential facets of human existence. Unfortunately, because “sexual orientation is so central to personal identity, keeping it a secret from another person necessitates withholding considerable information about oneself.”

Validation, for all teens, is important for them to build their self-confidence and self-esteem, but for the gay teen living in the closet, he is unable to receive any sort of authentic validation. Even if his public image were perfect and he were completely accepted for that projection, “it was meaningless because [he] knew at the deepest level that [he was] play acting.” Everyone around him may be affirming his actions and lauding his behavior, but what they are actually doing, at least from the perspective of the gay teen, is confirming his suspicion that he is only being accepted because they are not aware of his genuine identity. “When a gay man presents a false, inauthentic self to the world and is subsequently validated for that façade, he will feel hollow, and the validation won’t be satisfying.” The gay teen becomes invested in this fake identity, even though it is ultimately keeping him from forging any real connections. The false persona may be “a self that would earn [gay teens] validation by others, but [their] true selves remained hidden from everyone.” Often, teens hiding their sexuality develop an obsession with perfection in order to take advantage of the “halo effect”, where negative

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1 Hunter 2007 pg.90
2 Downs 2005 pg.25
3 Downs 2005 pg.27
4 Downs 2005 pg.25
aspects of a person are overlooked when they possess significant and visible positive qualities. In this case, by appearing as close to perfect as possible, others may overlook or not notice the fact that gay male teens are “flawed” (i.e. that they are gay). This usually has a self-defeating effect, further isolating himself from the people around him because “that practice also distances [the teen] from others. At the end of the day, what other people really connect with is another person’s humanity, not his façade of perfection.”

Living in the closet does more than just damage how a gay teen relates to others; it also fundamentally affects how a teen feels about himself. Successfully presenting a heterosexual pretense “protects a teen from the social consequences of being openly homosexual, [but] it cannot protect a teen from the psychological effects of living a lie.” Although the gay teen may benefit from hiding his sexuality by fitting into a heterosexist society, the more he continues to deny the fact that he is gay, the more deeply his sense of embarrassment becomes rooted: “continual lying leads to a chronic sense of shame.” He may even attempt to compensate for his apparent “failure” by becoming obsessed with other areas of his life or other activities. And despite the fact that this may earn him praise and may even appear to alleviate his sense of disgrace, “the suppressed teen’s development may be truncated while she or he attempts to over-achieve in order to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and unacceptability.”

What becomes clear from this line of thought is that even though passing may lessen the difficulties of living in a society that devalues his sexuality, it also keeps the gay teen from ever completing his

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1 Downs 2005 pg.179
2 Owens 1998 pg.105
3 Owens 1998 pg.105
4 Owens 1998 pg.105
emotional development. “Passing” only instills in the gay teen an intense feeling of shame as well as the idea that his sexuality is something both unacceptable and aberrant.

Passing successfully as heterosexual can also ruin a gay teen’s ability to trust, both himself and others. His life is based on recognizing his true identity, but then making sure that no one else ever knew it. For the gay teen in the closet, “life wasn’t ever what it seemed to be on the surface. Nothing could be trusted for what it appeared to be.”

His life becomes completely separated into two parts, and the only side he allows others to see is the lie. Dishonesty and deceit become the gay teen’s reality and “in learning to hide part of [himself], [he] lost the ability to trust anything or anyone fully.”

If he is incapable of being honest with himself and accepting his sexuality as a natural part of his identity, the closeted gay male becomes incapable of believing that others could be honest with him as well. One of the most pernicious effects of this lack of trust is that he is thus incapable of being sure that he will receive support if he were to disclose his sexuality to someone. He won’t be able to learn to trust others until he learns to trust himself and his instincts. It’s a dangerous and destructive cycle, but it can be broken, and all it takes is a brave act of honesty. In the end, despite the fact that American society marginalizes being gay, “it is easier for a person to be sure of something, even if that something is as devalued as homosexuality.”

Happily, there are reasons to come out other than just why it’s bad to stay in the closet. To this point, all I’ve done is the literature equivalent of Brokeback Mountain: I’ve shown why it’s so damaging to gay teens to not openly live their lives, but I haven’t

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1 Downs 2005 pg.46
2 Downs 2005 pg.46
3 Savin-Williams 2005 pg.72
yet shown the positive changes that happen when gay teens come out. First, admitting their sexuality to others can greatly reduce anxiety and strain on the teen because “keeping secrets, becoming emotionally inhibited, and passing as something one is not are major stressors.”¹ Coming out should not be seen as another way of avoiding negative consequences, but rather as a courageous act of self-affirmation and self-love. Publicly proclaiming one’s sexuality can lead to, among other things, “higher self-esteem”, “wholeness with personal identity”, “better sense of personal freedom”, “decreased feelings of loneliness and guilt”, and “increased feelings of authenticity.”² Once he comes out, a gay teen need not regulate every aspect of his life nor devote substantial quantities of energy and time to the task of maintaining his closet. Considering the immense amount of his life a gay teen devotes to his closet, coming out should be seen as a brave act of liberation, the one way a gay teen can free himself from the psychological and physical strain of hiding such an important part of himself for so long. For the first time in his life, he is able to simply be himself without constantly worrying whether or not someone will discover his sexuality.

Additionally, once a gay teen comes out, he begins to develop a better outlook on honesty and his relationships with others. It may be a tough transition to make, though, considering that “the practice of honesty is difficult to start, especially when you grow up learning to hide the more shameful parts of yourself.”³ It is only once the gay teen understands that his sexuality is neither shameful nor something that should be hidden that he can begin to live sincerely. Gay teens, and gay males in general, grow up learning

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¹ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.213
² Savin-Williams 2001 pg.213
³ Downs 2005 pg.177
to lie, it becomes a second nature, but by coming out he begins to live as himself, honestly and openly: “He is presenting his true self to everyone, and there’s no shame in it at all.”\textsuperscript{1} By coming out and declaring his sexuality, he not only can start developing genuine relationships with his friends and family, but with himself, because “healthy personalities develop when that are shared openly and honestly with others.”\textsuperscript{2}

It is often very difficult for teens to get to the point where they are able to come out and be confident and positive in their identity, and unfortunately, the tired cliché that “it is darkest just before the dawn” does seem to hold true in the case of gay teens and men. In their study of psychological changes during different identity development stages among gay males, Halpin and Allen followed the identity development model created in 1979 by Vivienne Cass, which includes six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis. During the initial stages of confusion and comparison (characterized by uncertainty and doubt), individuals rated things like their happiness, self-esteem, and life satisfaction as neutral to slightly negative. Here, their “lack of awareness of an emerging sexual identity is actually protective.”\textsuperscript{3}

Through this study, they discovered that the greatest levels of distress correlated with the middle stages of identity development. One of the main reasons most gay teens are so reticent to progress beyond the early stages along Cass’ model is that their levels of anxiety initially increase. Both their research participants and gay males in general tend to be loneliest, least happy, and least satisfied with life during these stages of tolerance.

\textsuperscript{1} Downs 2005 pg.178  
\textsuperscript{2} Owens 1998 pg.29  
\textsuperscript{3} Halpin and Allen 2004 pg.122
and initial acceptance (characterized by tentative self-declarations and hesitant affirmation). However, this can be explained primarily as anxiety over leaving their previous identity behind. At this point in their development, they have to carve out a new way of life; they must reject their old defense mechanisms and cultivate new, healthy ways of coping. So, this level of distress could be explained by “the lifestyle changes and social interactions associated with adjusting to this identity”\(^1\) and “the poor adjustment of these stages may therefore be associated with…uncertainty.”\(^2\) This point can’t be stressed enough: the biggest reason why their levels of distress increase when gay teens first start accepting their sexuality is because they are attempting to unlearn everything society has taught them. While he’s going through this process, he has no script to follow, no narrative with which to compare his life (due to the failures of, among others, the media). The fear of the unknown is ever present during the middle stages of identity development, and it is that fear that lies at the root of the anxiety of gay teens who find themselves in the stages of tolerance and initial acceptance.

Despite this apparent decline in happiness, there is still a good deal of light at the end of the tunnel. Halpin and Allen’s results were able to support what is commonly held among most theorists and academics writing about coming out, along with any gay boy, teen or man who’s ever openly declared their sexuality: although it may be difficult and frightening to come out of the closet, the feelings of freedom and authenticity at the end of it make all the pain and strife worth it. They showed that participants who were in the later stages of pride and synthesis (characterized by rejection of heterosexist socialization and the integration of his homosexuality as part of his identity) had “a stable sense of

\(^{1}\) Halpin and Allen 2004 pg.123  
\(^{2}\) Halpin and Allen 2004 pg.124
sexual identity” and “social relationships and support by others.”¹ More than just being confident with their sexuality and with their identity, gay males in these stages finally “have a strong sense of self-esteem, increased satisfaction with life, are less lonely, and report being…happy.”²

The fact still remains that in contemporary American society, despite all the changes that have occurred and despite the progress made in cultivating a more accepting atmosphere, coming out presents a very significant hurdle in a gay teen’s development. However, not only does being in the closet adversely affect the well-being of that teen, but coming out offers him a whole new world and outlook on life, one that is based in honesty, approval, and authentic validation, not based in lying, deceit, and false-personas. Even more incredible, though, is the fact that not only are more gay males coming out, but more and more are coming out at earlier and earlier ages, many while still in high school, and some as early as middle school. This means that, in addition to navigating the already murky waters of adolescence and dealing with the same problems as their heterosexual peers, most modern gay teens are also coming out and affirming their identities in a society that still alternatively devalues their sexuality or pretends that gay teenagers simply don’t exist.

¹ Halpin and Allen 2004 pg.123
² Halpin and Allen 2004 pg.123
Conclusion

The diagnosis of homosexuality as a "disorder" is a contributing factor to the pathology of those homosexuals who do become mentally ill.... Nothing is more likely to make you sick than being constantly told that you are sick.
~Ronald Gold

Straight Americans need... an education of the heart and soul. They must understand - to begin with - how it can feel to spend years denying your own deepest truths, to sit silently through classes, meals, and church services while people you love toss off remarks that brutalize your soul.
~Bruce Bawer

So far, I have shown that gay teens face a very difficult situation when it comes to declaring their sexuality. They are constantly faced with messages that they are not normal and that their sexuality is something that should stay hidden. However, as outlined in the previous chapter, there are also very important and compelling reasons to come out of the closet. As I noted in the introduction, contemporary gay teens, on average, self-identify around 16 years old, and some identify “as early as age 14.”\(^1\) It is especially interesting that even though homosexuality is still highly devalued in American society, it is no longer an invisible minority. Whether or not the negative representations outweigh the positive representations of gay men, the fact still remains that homosexuality is no longer simply ignored, which has a rather encouraging effect on gay teens: “the heightened visibility of gay men and lesbians in our society is now prompting individuals who experience same-sex arousal to recognize it, label it, and act on it at earlier ages than in previous years.”\(^2\) So, gay teens are coming out in a heterosexist environment, and at earlier times than previous generations. What remains to

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\(^1\) Owens 1998 pg.35
\(^2\) D’Augelli 2001 pg.59
be seen, however, is how this affects modern gay teens and how they differ from previous generations.

For gay teens, coming out of the closet is an essential part of developing a positive self-image, and “the construction and integration of a positive gay identity…requires that the self, the gay world, and the straight world become consolidated into our personal identity.”¹ No gay teen is isolated from the rest of (heterosexual) society, so they receive all of the messages that have already been discussed. In a heterosexist society, “everyone is raised with a default heterosexual identity,” but for gay teens “to be resocialized, one must unlearn one’s socialization as heterosexual or separate one’s self from a heterosexual sexual identity.”² Given the fact that masculine expectations, sports, schools, family, and the media all support a negative view of gays, “in the process of becoming healthy, happy adults, these [gay] teens must change their internalized concept of sexual minorities and reverse the heterosexual ‘programming’ to which they’ve been exposed.”³

Specifically, gay teens have typically only been introduced to homosexuality through stereotypes that may or may not apply to them in any way. For each gay teen, “at some point in [his] self-identification, a teen compares [himself] with what [he] knows about homosexuality.”⁴ It is at this point in his development that a gay teen’s struggle between self and society comes to a peak: “Conflict can occur between a teen’s positive self-esteem and her or his own internalized homophobia with its negative connotations…Having ‘bought into’ society’s negative values and social conditioning,

¹ Alderson 2000 pg.178
² Hunter 2007 pg.41
³ Owens 1998 pg.9
⁴ Owens 1998 pg.136
queer kids may begin to hate themselves intensely.”¹ For gay teens, then, it becomes imperative to discard everything society has taught them about homosexuality. American culture conditions people, gay and straight, that certain behaviors and identities are natural or normal, but for gay teens, “coming out and accepting…homosexuality…[is] a rejection of mainstream moral beliefs about what is right and what is wrong.”² The only way in which a gay teen can ever develop self-esteem is to reject these negative ideas that have surrounded him his whole life and, in place of them, affirm his own feelings and emotions as natural and normal.

Some authors/researchers have proposed that the reason gay teens are making the transition to a positive gay identity so early is that they have become, more or less, normalized in contemporary society. Furthermore, most previous studies regarding the mental health of gay teens have come under fire for massively over-representing the problem. As they have been nicknamed, “gloom-and-doom” literature suggests that gay teens are depressed, suicidal, and plagued by eating disorders. However, if one looks at the way in which data was collected for them, one discovers that the findings cannot be generalized to the majority of gay teens. Test subjects “usually [were] recruited for study because of their participation in targeted organizations”³ like support groups. Early researchers cannot necessarily be faulted for their use of these teens because those reaching out for help are the ones that are easiest to find. It would be very difficult to gain approval to go into a high school and simply ask who is and is not gay, so community centers and counseling programs are often the easiest ways to gather data for studies on

¹ Owens 1998 pg.22
² Alvarez 2008 pg.253
³ Russell, Seif, Truong 2001 pg.111
gay teens. However, the fact that early research laid the framework for studies to come meant that even as gay teens become more and more visible in society, researchers continue to follow their example. This then leads to “a one-sided view of gay youth as psychologically vulnerable.”\textsuperscript{1}

However, “recent scholarship and accounts…suggest an adolescence [that is] increasingly smooth for youth with same-sex desire.”\textsuperscript{2} Some of the more optimistic researchers have even gone as far to say that “gay adolescents have the same developmental concerns, assets, and liabilities as heterosexual adolescents.”\textsuperscript{3} The same author goes on to equate gay teens with just about any other minority:

This is not to deny that some [gay teens] are ridiculed because of their gender expression. Or that they cannot openly date those they love because same-sex dating in high school is still difficult for most. Or that they feel they must keep something of themselves secret from their families and friends. But same sex attracted teenagers are not the only young people facing these problems. Disabled kids, above- and below-average-intelligence kids, unattractive kids, over-weight kids, and ethnic minority kids are also ridiculed.\textsuperscript{4}

Unfortunately, this seems to be missing the point entirely. In this quote, the author appears to be saying that gay teens are like all these other minority groups because, like gay teens, they face discrimination. However, these minorities rarely, if ever, have to worry about openly dating in their high school, a reality for gay teens to which even this author admits. It may be true that, for instance, “unattractive kids” or “below-average-intelligence” may have a harder time socializing, but it’s not often that they would face public or even violent hostility for openly living their lives. Even ethnic minority teens do

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Cohler, Hammack 2006 pg.51
\item \textsuperscript{2} Cohler, Hammack 2006 pg.48
\item \textsuperscript{3} Savin-Williams 2005 pg.222
\item \textsuperscript{4} Savin-Williams 2005 pg.219-220
\end{itemize}
not face the same level of stress either. For them, at least, they share their minority status with their families and therefore have support systems readily available.

Regardless, the fact remains that no other minority group faces a coming out process. When they realize their sexuality, gay teens must actively join a minority group and deal with the stresses related to being a minority. That’s one of the first points that really separates gay teens from any other minority group. By coming out and declaring themselves homosexual, gay teens are giving up the charade of living in the closet, and the relative ease with which they had previously been able to proceed through their adolescence unnoticed. Coming out can be especially difficult for those teens that are especially effective when passing as heterosexual, because they then must also renounce the privilege that comes with being a heterosexual male in American society. There is “no comparable socially stigmatized event that heterosexual youths typically undergo in their relations with [family and friends] that has such far-reaching personal consequences.”¹ The fact that gay teens have to work out their own identities and coping strategies so early in life inherently separates them from heterosexual teens; “In a different and more intensive manner than heterosexual youths, [gay] youths must develop skills to judge and anticipate acceptance from peers and adults, seek information on their own…and examine their values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding sexuality and their sexual orientation.”² Because gay teens are coming out, and coming out earlier, at a very early age they are developing the emotional maturity and the strength of character to examine their developing identity, and defend it against stark opposition.

¹ Savin-Williams 2001 pg.199
² D’Augelli 2001 pg.118
Minority stress associated with being gay may make teens more vulnerable to these disorders, but it is not just any sort of minority stress. The specific type of minority stress gay teens face is not necessarily just about being gay, or even just about being a minority. Instead, the unique position of gays is due to the heterosexual majority’s treatment of homosexuality as an exceptional form of difference. Other minorities may be different, but gays are in a category all their own, because, in contemporary society, there are no other minority groups that are as harshly stigmatized as gay males. Despite such intense discrimination, the vast majority of gay teens manage to navigate their adolescence without significant problems; that “despite the stigma and intense stressors, most…gay persons function relatively well.”\(^1\) The reason that their success is not well-known is because “the ability of teenagers with same-sex attractions to withstand and adapt to oppression and its effects [goes] unnoticed, unrecorded, and unexplained.”\(^2\)

Despite the stress they face, “sexual-minority youths are fabulously successful in navigating the terrain of their sexuality and becoming healthy, well-functioning adults.”\(^3\) Even if a gay teen does develop some sort of psychological disorder, it is important to note that it is a rare case. As cited at the end of the masculinity section, only about 10-20% of gay males develop eating disorders. Although the numbers are significantly higher than those among heterosexual males, it seems that few people recognize that between 80-90% percent do not develop an eating disorder. This may just be one example of a psychological disorder that was said to be prevalent among gay males, but it

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1 Hunter 2007 pg.15
2 Savin-Williams 2005 pg.69
3 Savin-Williams 2001 pg.236-237
is indicative of most other cases. Across the board, the negatives are emphasized above the positives when it comes to stories about gays.

There are a couple possible explanations for this phenomenon. First, it could simply be the fact that, thanks to the outdated and inaccurate gloom and doom literature, people expect to hear that the lives of gays are plagued with psychological defects. The stories about how gay teens are more likely to fall victim mental illness are so prevalent because it’s what people are looking for. That isn’t to say that researchers necessarily are biased when it comes to these studies, but simply that people tend to both remember and report that which reinforces their previously held beliefs, not challenges them. If newcasters and viewers alike have certain expectations about gay teens, the stories are going to be interpreted through a filter that sees gay teens in a negative light, not one that emphasizes their incredible abilities. Another highly probable explanation is that stories reporting bad or frightening statistics, not just those involving gays, make for much better news stories than happy or positive ones. A headlining report about how the vast majority of gay people come out during their adolescence and are mentally healthy and mature is not going to pull in as many viewers as the one discussing the myriad problems gays face and their effects. Again, this is true with any story; no one wants to hear about the countless products that are safe, but they certainly want to hear the one or two that will kill them. The difference here is that no one is going to believe that those outlier products that are unsafe and dangerous are representative of everything that can be bought. Unfortunately, the same is not true for gay teens. The extreme cases are seen as typical of all gay teens because most people rarely hear the stories of gay teen, and even more rare (if ever) are narratives that contradict those typical pessimistic portrayals of gay teens. In
this case, the lack of visibility of gays means that the few narratives that are conveyed (typically negative) are interpreted as the only narratives. Luckily, though, the lives of the majority of gay teens are not plagued by psychological breakdowns and mental illnesses. Instead, most gay teens develop the extraordinary ability to work through their coming out process (and develop a positive self-identity) at the same time that they’re navigating the same adolescent concerns as their heterosexual peers. And, instead of being broken by the immense demands that are placed on them, gay teens are rising to the occasion and, somehow, finding a way to deal with it all.

In direct contradiction to many past narratives, for the new gay teenager, “gay adolescence is being redefined as a time of angst and struggle and as a time of pleasure, acceptance, and limitless possibilities”\(^1\) (emphasis in original). This means that although the difficulties they face have changed relatively little in the recent past, contemporary gay teens have learned to develop an incredible resiliency that enables them to live their lives openly and happily. In their quest to develop a positive identity as a teenager that includes the identifier “gay,” gay teens have an accelerated emotional developmental path. They reach a level of self-awareness that is very rare among their heterosexual peers because heterosexual teens are not forced to examine themselves and their feelings nearly that closely. Gay teens must, and must do so with such confidence that they could defend their innermost feelings against an onslaught of heterosexist messages. As one teen put it:

I think that one of the main reasons that straight males hate us [gay teens] is because they really know that emotionally we are more worked out than them.\(^2\)

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1 Savin-Williams 2005 pg.200  
2 Owens 1998 pg.122
This point is an important one to note. The ability to be more emotionally “worked out” than heterosexual teens is a direct effect of having to come out in a heterosexist society. Gay teens have to know their most intimate emotions and declare them to others because if they don’t they would otherwise be stuck with the heterosexual label that every person in American is automatically assigned. Gay teens also have to explain themselves and defend their identity, which necessarily means that they need to have their emotions worked out. There is no comparable event to coming out among heterosexual teenagers, even among other minority teens, that requires the same amount of self-knowledge. It’s a level of self-awareness that straight teens (and adults) rarely reach, and yet it’s essentially a requirement for gay teens.

Although “the fact that most queer kids do develop into strong, self-confident adults hardly justifies the process as a character-building exercise,”\(^1\) it still remains that because gay teens are put through so much stress, most become extremely confident in their identities and they build an incredibly strong self-identity. They develop a resiliency that is utterly incomparable to any other group of people of any age, and that’s precisely because they grow up and come out of the closet in direct opposition to everything I’ve outlined. This quality, though, is rarely noted: “This resiliency—a necessary adaptation to living in a heterocentric and homonegative environment—is generally not recognized.”\(^2\) Considering the fact that gay teens create their own developmental narrative (very few ever see one that applies to them) and know their feelings well enough to contradict the basic conceptions of heterosexist American society, their strength and sheer toughness is not surprising at all.

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1. Owens 1998 pg.238
2. Savin-Williams 2001 pg.237
Regardless of whether or not they are recognized for their strength, gay teens are no longer allowing themselves to be victimized. Instead, they are becoming their own role models and developing a script for how to live their life as a happy and healthy gay teen. Even more astounding is that they are doing this before they can see R-rated movies, many before they can even drive. Gay teens are learning how to trust themselves, despite what they’ve been told, in a part of their lives that is defined by its confusion and emotional chaos. The gay teen who does this becomes mature enough to understand himself so well that he can declare his innermost feelings to other people, and even defend them against detractors if need be. In the end, gay teens may come out of the closet and step right into the fire, but they are not allowing themselves to be burned. In spite of American masculinity, the influence of homophobic sport culture, the tyrannical urge to conform in high school culture, the structure of hetero-centric families, and the messages of the media, modern gay male teens resiliently emerge from their closets with enough strength of character and self-assurance to join the crowd and proudly declare, “I’m here! I’m queer! Get used to it!”
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