

# Homosexuality as a master status assignment

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Homosexuality as a Master Status What defines a person? Is it something physically and biologically determined? Or is it behavioral and psychological? Perhaps it could be both. In most circumstances, people do not get to choose which of these characteristics define them. People judge other people??? that is just part of human nature. Sometimes a person can have one trait or characteristic that tends to overshadow all else. Sociologists have come up with a name for this social phenomenon; it is master status.

In order to describe how this works, status must first be defined as the position or role a person occupies in a group (Neubeck, Glasberg 2005: G-10). Then master status can be understood as the one status, among several that each individual has, that overrides all others; thus it dictates how a person is treated (G-6). In United States society, one case where master status frequently stands out is dealing with homosexuality. Although master status' can either improve or limit a person's opportunities, homosexuals usually experience only the negative effects.

One of the main reasons that homosexuals are given this master status is because heterosexuals have established themselves as the dominant group in society and therefore they control the power. Homosexuality is not limited to males; females are just as often discriminated against because of this one character trait. Inequality is seen and felt by everyone. The master status attached to homosexuality has affected all aspects of their lives, including marriage, employment, friendship and religion; it is seen throughout history and continues to play an equally influential role today.

Sexuality should not be described as a drive for pleasure or companionship, but as “ an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population” (Foucault 1978: 103). Sexuality has had the power to change society in ways such as highly analyzing women’s bodies, focus and contradiction on youth’s sexual activity, social and economic barriers for procreative behavior, and sexual instinct was suppressed (1978: 104-105).

So if sexuality has had so much power in the past and still continues to be a force of control, why is homosexuality criticized? Sexuality, as was used previously, refers to the dominant heterosexual behavior. Heterosexuality is the norm, and since this norm has so much power, it is even more dominant. Homosexuality then becomes even more distinct and contradictory to this norm. It is contrary to most of the developments that were brought about by homosexuality, such as the focus on procreative behavior and men’s analysis of women’s bodies.

Language alone can socially define normality and establish either a positive or negative association with terms. Both males and females are vulnerable to this social phenomenon of having master status. Typically, ‘ gay’ refers to a male of homosexual orientation and ‘ lesbian’ refers to a female. These terms were once very negatively used, but are becoming more acceptable as more people are coming out as openly being attracted to the same sex. This is not to say that homosexuals have escaped the master status by accepting the term’s used to define them.

They have only begun to accept that ' gay' and ' lesbian' just describe their orientation??? as in a question when dating or trying to find a mate. It is demeaning to use the term to identify someone. A few examples would be identifying a performer as a " gay actor" or a woman on television, such as Ellen DeGeneres, as a " lesbian host. " The first word in each of these examples is a perfect display of a master status. It first states the status of homosexuality and then the profession of the person. The order of the wording in these labels portrays the importance that is put on each term.

Clearly, the fact that the person is not heterosexual dominates their profession or career. There seems to be a negative connotation attached to homosexuality, especially in America. This is represented most clearly through language, both spoken and written. There are many other words for homosexual that have been created over time by society, some of which are now considered derogatory; for example faggot, queer, dike, flaming. Any parent in the United States would scold their child for saying faggot. Yet, according to the dictionary, this is just a word used to describe homosexuality (Merriam-webster. com 2009). It shows the stigma or negative association that discredits a person's worth, of people of homosexual orientation (Neubeck 2005: 266). Homosexuality is defined as " a tendency to direct sexual desire toward another of the same sex" (Merriam-webster. com 2009). A person who considers themselves homosexual belongs to a minority group in the United States. There are two categories of deviant behavior; deviant by being and deviant by behavior (Neubeck 2005: 264-266). Although people of homosexual orientation can commit acts of deviance, since they are considered the minority they are most often labeled

as deviant by being. This implies that just by having a physical and mental attraction toward people of the same sex makes them deviant and in need of correction. "The homosexual is condemned because he does not fit into the value system of our society..." (Cory 1963: 6). The way deviance is defined in relation to homosexuals is another example of master status. Although Neubeck states, "Gay males and lesbians have been fighting against the heterosexual-imposed norms that define homosexuality as deviant," it still puts a label on them (2005: 263).

The only control that homosexuals have over this label is whether or not they choose to accept it. One way that homosexuals have found to fight this label is by putting emphasis on the fact that being different is not the same as being inferior (Neubeck 2005: 267). A highly debated issue concerning homosexuality is whether sexual-orientation is biologically determined or if it is a socially learned behavior. One case study done about this topic gathered that "the homosexual desire seems in most cases to be implanted in those who develop an unusually strong attachment for one parent" (Cory 1951: 67).

This seems to suggest that homosexuality can be influenced by family structure or other sociological elements. On the other side of this argument, there is the belief that people are born either gay or straight. Even though there is no scientific or genetic evidence to prove this, there have been many studies done and most homosexuals interviewed take this view-point. McIntosh states, "[homosexuality] is still commonly seen as a condition characterizing certain persons in the way that birthplace or deformity might characterize them" (1968: 182).

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To support their cause and to fight for acceptance in society, it would be beneficial to convince people that sexual orientation is biologically determined. " Research indicates that people who believe that homosexuality is a choice are more likely to condemn it than are those who believe gays and lesbians are born that way" (Loftus 2001: 779). The master status of homosexuality has been in effect throughout history for centuries. It first became an issue at the closing of the seventeenth century when the display of sexuality became taboo.

Before then, sexual practices were commonly displayed in public and it was seen as shameless. But a century later, " on the subject of sex, silence became the rule" (Foucault 1978: 3). Since what society saw as ' normal sexual activities' was hidden, sexuality against the norm became forbidden. Although opinions and actions against homosexuals have only varied slightly in the past few centuries ??? there have been a few major changes. The master status of homosexuality has in no way disappeared completely, but in recent decades it has faded. Homosexuals have been fighting for social equality for many years.

One of the first known people to rebel against the heterosexual norm was Walt Whitman, a poet during the 19th century. It has now been debated that although he was probably a homosexual that hid this fact in order to get his work published, he did not cover his orientation up completely. There are many of his poems that can be interpreted as having homosexual feelings and attractions. One of these is called " As Adam Early in the Morning," and it reinforces this interpretation. (Whitman) writes, " As Adam early in the

morning...touch the palm of my hand to my body as I pass, do not be afraid of my body" (1891).

This poem is one of many that portray his hidden sexuality in his writing. If he had come out and publicized his sexuality though, people today may not have ever heard of Walt Whitman. His talent for writing would have been washed away by the 'gay poet' label he would have been given. This would have discredited all of his previous and future works. The largest step forward for homosexuals began as recently as 2004, when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize marriage between same-sex couples (Vestus 2009: 1).

By far the most contradictory aspect of homosexuals in the United States is marriage and civil unions. Until 2004 it was illegal for homosexuals to obtain a legal marriage license anywhere in the US; today, five years later, there are currently six states where it is legal to wed. Gay marriage is now legal in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Iowa, Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire (2009: 1). Vestas also found in a poll that most Americans still oppose same-sex marriage and the rights that come along with it.

Although it seems as though there has been significant progress toward legalizing same-sex marriage, it has not reached a federal level. For example, even if a couple is legally married in Massachusetts, once they leave the state they are not longer recognized as such. In a court decision, the federal government can overrule the state government in respect to their legal marriage rights. There are no federal restrictions in the United States on inter-racial marriages, height or weight differences, or even people

with mental retardation. So why is marriage between homosexuals such a highly protested issue? People who are extremely tall are not thought of as being any different from others except they might have to duck to go through a doorway; but homosexuality is thought to be a whole persona. Some say that the religious opposition is the reason people object to same-sex marriage, but only eight more states than those that legalized marriage allow for civil unions or domestic partnerships. A civil union is a legal status created in 2000 by the state of Vermont (Vestus 2009: 1). It bypasses the marriage ceremony but grants legal protection to couples at the state level.

This was the first time there was a way for a same-sex couple to have all the rights of marriage, without having a ceremony. A domestic partnership is very similar in that it does not have a formal marriage ceremony, but gives same-sex couples most of the legal benefits that married couples have. Civil unions and domestic partnerships removed the religious aspect of marriage and are based on only legal and social rights. So now what is the excuse for 36 states prohibiting all types of legal recognition as a couple to homosexuals?

The only characteristic that keeps these people from gaining legal recognition is their sexual orientation; this should not be the dominating status in considering eligibility for marriage. The master status of homosexuality defines couples. The norm of society says that a couple is a man and woman, but this excludes all homosexual couples. To put this in perspective, two people who have never met and are intoxicated with alcohol are able to marry in Vegas with a third person they do not know as their witness.

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Yet a couple, who has been dating and has considered all the responsibilities that come along with marriage but is homosexual, cannot marry in most states. One of the least researched and documented times when the master status of homosexuality stands out is when same-sex couples want to have children. But it should not be overlooked. Researchers in the United States have found that the most desirable home environment for children is a white, two-parent, middle-class family. But it is not explicitly stated that the two parents be of opposite sexes (Patterson 1992: 1025).

Gay or lesbian parents are not as rare as many people think. Estimates have been made that there are from 6 million to 14 million children in the United States being raised by same-sex parents (1992: 1026). Keep in mind that each of these couples had to fight the legal system in order to obtain permission to adopt or assume custody of these children. The legal system makes it very difficult for couples to gain such privileges. In some cases they even “ assumed that gay men and lesbians are mentally ill and hence not fit to be parents” (1992: 1028).

These rulings were all based solely on the sexual orientation of the partners. It is easier for a drug addict to obtain custody of a child than a homosexual male or female. Homosexuality overrides all the other qualifications that a couple may have met to adopt a child. Instead of just being considered a man, a gay man does not fit the ‘ father figure’ most adoption agencies are looking for. “ Some adoption agencies have allowed gays and lesbians to adopt openly gay children, but only when the child has expressed a ‘ clear and definite sense of his or her sexual identity’” (Neubeck 2005: 495).

A gay man or woman may encounter many difficulties when applying for a job or finding a career. One of the most documented cases of discrimination based on sexual orientation is in the military. Apart from people thinking they are just unfit for the position, “ their very beings are considered so outrageous, that it would create chaotic conditions and unnecessary conflict if they were to be hired” (Cory 1963: 140). This discrimination based on sexual orientation was noted especially in the United States, since that was the only country that required heterosexuality to join the armed forces during WWII (Cory 1963: 142).

Now, many decades later, this requirement has been formally eliminated, but de facto discrimination is still prevalent. That is, instead of there being an outright law prohibiting homosexuality in the military, now it is an unspoken understanding people are supposed to have. The military is not the only occupation that discriminates against homosexuals. Even the most skilled worker’s talent may be overlooked by their orientation. If the most gifted doctor submitted a resume that had the ‘ homosexual’ box checked, all other criteria may be thrown out; because who would want a gay or lesbian doctor?

This is a common opinion of many people in society. Even in occupations much more ordinary than doctors, homosexuals face unfairness based only on their sexual orientation. They can face discrimination even in jobs that require no prior work experience or high-education completion. Often gay men and lesbian women are not even considered as candidates for these jobs. Jobs of this sort really show the problem that is occurring. When homosexuality is the only reason for not hiring a person, it makes the master

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status really stand out. Religious views are often blamed as being the basis of categorizing homosexuals as deviant by being.

In many religions, it would not matter if a person was charitable, honest, trustworthy, and prayed every day because homosexuality is not permitted in the Bible. Focusing mainly on Christianity, religion considers engaging in homosexual behavior a sin. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19: 4-11 has been interpreted to suggest that “ homosexual practices had brought a terrible divine vengeance upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that the repetition of such ‘ offenses against nature’ had from time to time provoked similar visitations of divine wrath” (McNeill 1976: 43).

To summarize a passage by McNeill, being homosexual did not bring on this wrath, but participating in homosexual practices went against the way of nature. This somehow says that in Christianity, if a person hides their orientation and does not act upon it, they will be accepted. Many men hide homosexuality by going into priesthood. They have heard through religious teachings that it is a sin to engage in homosexual activity, so they seek a lifestyle that shies away from any type of sexual interaction or relationships.

Religion is possibly the guiltiest of judging people based on sexual orientation as a master status; yet it also claims that God loves each and every person equally. This contradiction has led many homosexuals away from this religion and its practices. Christianity immediately rejects homosexuals immediately and deems them sinful. This is one of the most serious judgments that can be made. A man, biologically determined by sex,

is always a male unless he is gay. A woman, able to bear children, is always a female unless she is a lesbian.

Homosexuality is a case when even sex is overlooked by the master status of gender. Gender is defined as “ the ways of behaving and relating to others that members of society expect of the two sexes” (Neubeck 2005: 204). How can behavior define a person more distinctly than biological make-up? Gay men lose credibility in employment and military opportunities, family, and religious acceptance. None of these qualities should define a person completely, but sometimes they do. In the United States, gender seems to be more highly valued than sex.

From the eyes of a gay man or a lesbian, belonging to a group that is not part of the dominant heterosexual society overshadows all else. In a personal information survey, checking the homosexual box should eliminate the rest of the questions because once that is taken into account, nothing else seems to matter. Works Cited Cory, Donald Webster. 1951. *The Homosexual in America*. New York: Greenberg. Cory, Donald Webster, John P. LeRoy. 1963. *The Homosexual and His Society*. New York: The Citadel Press. Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*.

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