

School problems of non-heteronormative teenagers

Sociology



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The struggles of non-heteronormative teenagers are overlooked and not often considered. During high school teenagers of all genders and sexualities are discriminated, stereotyped, and dangerously misinformed about things that directly affect them. Through these experiences teenagers leave high school as less than adequate adults who then continue the cycle with their own children. The oppressive and misinformed atmosphere of high school needs to be addressed immediately for the sake of society and future generations of gender and sexual outlaws.

Pre-teens begin noticing things about their bodies and the bodies of their peers. Commonly known as “ The Gangly Phase” girls and boys begin growing in very specific areas. Girls experience the growth of breasts in addition to beginning their periods. Testosterone in boy causes a drop in vocal tone and of testicles. These changes sometimes happen all at once or each change happens one by one, in which case nothing will “ fit” on the adolescent’s body. A deep baritone which would sound fine on a grown man seems fairly odd for a twelve-year-old boy. By the same token, girls with considerably large breasts might be ridiculed in 7th grade by their peers who will later glorify women in magazines with the same assets. These girls and boys are also likely to look the opposite gender differently. Girls usually start finding boys more attractive and vice versa. This newfound interest in their peers progresses in relation to their hormone development and often leads to an intense desire for sexual relations between them.

But these are expected during puberty by adults who went through the same, so while there are struggles heteronormative children are in a better position. Non-heteronormative people have experienced oppression most <https://assignbuster.com/school-problems-of-non-heteronormative-teenagers/>

poignantly at or around puberty. Some children are physically unable to subscribe to heteronormativity. Bi-gender children are at a disadvantage right from birth because their genetics did not allow the doctors to identify them as male or female. Through arbitrary standards of measurement, doctors decide for a newborn child (and often, the parents) which gender they will be brought up as. When a child is born with testes and an often underdeveloped vagina, the first decision to make is what gender they are. If the measurements range to what the doctors perceive to be more “feminine” the newborn’s testes and sometimes to cut off an over-grown clitoris (what would have been a penis). For the rest of the child’s life they are brought to doctors for hormone therapy and more surgery. In their Sean Saifa Wall’s essay “ I am the “ I” it’s recounted that from childhood Sean was raised female but noticed severe differences during puberty. Though growing breasts was part of the process, Sean had tremendous abdominal pain, protruding facial hair, and a progressively deepening voice. When Sean’s mother learned about the pain, she brought “ her” to a pediatrician for a gonadectomy and hormone therapy without explaining what it was! For next few years of Sean’s life raised as a girl, she realized that unlike her other female friends she wasn’t interested in boys. Sean lived in fear of being a lesbian all throughout middle school and high school which eventually led to a fear of sex in general. Only after Sean gained insight about the circumstances of her birth did she finally begin to understand her body and eventually decide to identify as neither man nor woman.

Sean’s story is chilling on not only a psychological level but a medical level as well. People need to know their medical history so they can give any

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doctor they see an accurate measurement of what treatment will be safe and effective. Someone in Sean's position of being bi-gender with a history of surgery and hormone therapy needs to know their medical history or they are at great risk. Sean might have been able to present the pills to the doctor and explain that he had surgery, but any further (and necessary) information would have to be given by Sean's mother. Psychologically, Sean's fear of sex at an adult age clearly shows that hiding sexuality and the secrets kept by family can scar a person. There are many other bi-gender people who often don't know they are bi-gender for a majority of their lives and this causes trust issues later in life. If trust in family members, a person's first context for socialization, is not assured then there is nothing to prompt trust or an intimate relationship with someone outside of the family. Without simple trust in human interaction a person may at best become a loner and at worst a sociopath due to a lack of familial trust.

Within the teenage micro-culture, misinformation is not uncommon and can have serious consequences. In the case of sexual intercourse, one of the most universal acts, there is a stunning lack of information. Across the country, only 13 states whose schools teach sex education are required to make the information they give medically accurate. Worse yet, the rest of the schools avoid the subject altogether and leave students further in the dark. Often sex education is left solely to the parents who also avoid the topic. Between parents and schools refusing to give consistently reliable information, teenagers are forced to seek out the information themselves with no prior knowledge to go off of. The internet is the most common way to get information but so much of that information is false. Unlike with other

topics, teenagers with no prior understanding of sex cannot properly sift through the unreliable information to find accurate teachings. Effectively this causes teenagers to seek out information from other sources that might take advantage of this. A teenager may find another teenager who knows about the intricacies of sex but not about protection, however if the teen wants to have sex and the other is willing then there is seemingly no need to back track. Consequences like pregnancy are most common for teens experimenting with heterosexual sex, but homosexual couples are still at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and are not any safer without the threat of pregnancy. Worse yet are adults who take sexual advantage of poorly informed teenagers. Dramatized in *The Vagina Monologues*, a woman recounts her losing her virginity to a 24-year-old woman at the age of 16. Though the experiences were good for her, this is disturbing because the older woman was basically taking advantage of the girl. The woman in the monologue was not unaware of sex and hadn't been initially seeking the woman's mentoring, but lesbian relationships in general were foreign to her and therefore putting her at a disadvantage. Teenagers who take advantage to each other are just as awful as adults who do the same to teenagers, and both should be ashamed of themselves for putting their partner at risk or simply using them for sexual pleasure.

As is the custom in America, black people who do not subscribe to heteronormativity suffer greatly for arbitrary reasons. There is a totem pole in the LGBT community that is hardly ever spoken of, but is well known. This totem pole ranks them within their micro culture and decides who is the most and least deserving of respect. White gay men are at the top, followed

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by white lesbians, and finally at the bottom there are black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Once more, the everyday pressures of life are combined with and increased by the stress of high school. Black students are very often minorities, and even when they aren't there is still discrimination. In particular, any black teenager who is not straight is ostracized by their peers for supposedly trying to get attention. More often though, the history of black oppression in America has fueled the parents of black teenagers to become the main oppressors of their childrens' self-expression. The main struggle for black people since black-oppression and technical legal liberation is to be accepted by mainstream society. "...black survival required accommodation with and acceptance from white America... And acceptance meant that only " good" negroes would thrive-especially those who left black sexuality at the door when they " entered" and " arrived." (West 124) Part of this is fitting into the average, normal family as seen by the rest of the world and their childrens' differing sexual preference or gender identity does not fit in. When their children cannot help keep up the appearance of a being " good negroes" by showing how normal and well-adjusted they are (i. e. straight) then they are immediately pressure to cut out any behavior their families see as abnormal. When it comes to the family unit, black teenagers who are non-heteronormative are fed lies that they are abnormal and oppressed pretty much from birth.

Even with open-minded parents there are dangers of not conforming to heteronormative standards at a young age. Christine Smith's comic strip Princess depicts a young boy who dresses up like a princess and is mocked for it by a neighborhood boy. In the comic, the boy's mother appears to be

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indifferent to her son's fashion choices and only is angry at the neighborhood child for bullying her son. However, there is a moment in the beginning of the book where a voice is calling out to the boy to not dress up as a princess, to which he denies the request immediately. This voice is not explicitly stated to be his mother who we see later in the comic, it could be his father (or perhaps another mother), but still it brings to mind some troubling questions. If it is the mother, then is she only concerned with her son's dressing up as far as it concerns their neighbors? Why would she deny her son the right to cross-dress but then suddenly defend him when a neighborhood boy gets involved? By the same token, if it's another parent, then what sort of conflicted environment is this boy growing up in where one parent supports him and the other denies him? Furthermore, these circumstances do not only have the power to harm him in his childhood but also in adult life.

The slippery-slope of adolescent experiences affecting adult life does not only effect those who are physically born bi-gender, it also affects those who simply identify outside heteronormative standards. Transgender teenagers are prone to ridicule and abuse by their peers. One particular instance is with bathrooms. Teenagers who either have had surgery or are just on hormones need to "pass" for their gender or risk violence. There is no unisex bathroom where they can feel safe, there are only "Men's" and "Women's." Either bathroom has risks to the teenager in question. If a male-to-female transgender teen uses a girls' bathroom, another girl may see her even slightly masculine features and report a boy in the girls' bathroom. On the other hand, if that same teenager uses a boys' stall and is caught then the

teenager is likely to be sexually harassed if identified as a girl or beaten if identified as an “effeminate boy.” There is no safe option for trans-teenagers and they must grow up in constant terror every time they use the bathroom. Using hormone-therapy or surgery is intended for a person who identifies as the opposite gender to be liberated and express themselves, but to survive a teenager must make absolutely certain they pass as one gender for security. In the end, hiding their identity as a trans-gendered person only excludes them and causes insecurity in the teenager.

There is a lot of pressure to choose one or the other, especially when it comes to sexuality for teenagers. Gay and lesbian teenagers struggle when it comes to figuring out their sexuality and how to explain it to others. For bisexual teenagers this is even worse because not only do they deal with the confusion of liking both genders, they also deal with criticism from their gay and lesbian peers. Bisexual people often have to “prove” their sexuality to both their straight and homosexual peers. Straight teenagers are convinced that anybody who identifies as bisexual is either trying to get attention or just can’t come out of the closet fully. It’s so normal in modern society for girls to make out with other girls not because they identify as non-heterosexual but simply because they want attention from their peers.

Worse yet, they often get this attention! Anytime during a party when this happens both boys and girls surrounding the kissing pair will cheer encouragingly and take photos or videos. However, girls who do this are let off the hook because they claim to just be experimenting or it doesn’t mean anything. True as that may be, it has set up a strange double standard for girls who admit to identifying as bisexual. Unlike their straight counterparts

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who engage in lesbian activities, bisexual girls are practically forced back into the closet because no one takes them seriously. They are grouped in with those whose sexuality is not in question and ignored for it. Bisexual teenagers cannot even get support from their peers who subscribe to homosexuality. One might assume that the ignorance of others and the difficulty of coming out of the closet would be homosexual teenagers to the side of their bisexual peers. This is not the case. Bisexual teenagers are once again bullied into picking a gender, either the same or opposite. If a bisexual goes out with someone of the opposite sex, then they are suddenly not gay enough for their peers. If that same person wants to go out with someone of the same sex then they are equally ostracized. There is still the idea that whoever they date automatically picks the gender they are interested in, and even then there are still doubts regarding their sexuality.

My bisexual sister once told me about a lesbian classmate who acted less than sympathetic toward her story of how she discovered she was bisexuality. In our household, we also live with the idea that you must pick a gender, as impressed upon us by our family. This fact made self-discovery difficult for my sister because she couldn't ask questions about things she had no real context for. After a few years, and with the help of close friends, she finally came to terms with her sexuality and lives a happier life for it. When telling this story to her friend though, she was not met with sympathy but rather apprehension. Her friend didn't believe in bisexuality; to her, you were only attracted to one gender or the other and she made the assumption that my sister was still just attracted to guys. Her exact words

were, “ But you’re still straight.” No matter what my sister told her, the girl wouldn’t be swayed.

Between being told to choose a gender to be or love, teenagers around the world have been given a very narrow world view. As stated earlier, teenagers are constantly told that they need to choose one identity or the other.

Though heteronormative standards are generally placed by the parents, they are solidified by high school politics.

“ The worst mistake you can make is to imagine that college is like high school. That’s a nightmarish vision.” (Schoem 4)

A nightmare indeed. In effort to seek identity, teenagers are prone to bullying others and harsh judgement to find a sense of self. Despite the fact that these are futile efforts, this I still alive and well in high school. Excuses can be anything from fashion choices, music tastes, or hobbies and all are used to establish and keep a ranked class system within the school. When it comes to gender and sexuality expression, non-heteronormative students are immediately at the bottom of this system and they are not helped in the least. Everyone has their own baggage and emotional issues, but instead of recognizing this and offering aid to others in their school through simple compassion high school students use these are a way to oppress others. “ But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “ sub-oppressors.” (Freire 45) In theory, high school should be the perfect place for teenagers to give and be given understanding for their issues. They are in an institution surrounded by others with differing though similarly

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difficult problems and often are treated under the same circumstances, However, the idea of high school is so nauseating that it's become a joke in many forms of media, yet this serves only to downplay the struggles of those still in high school-and especially teenagers who do not fit the mold of a predominantly heteronormative society. So no one, not even the teenagers experiencing oppression take it seriously. They are told to accept the nightmare of high school as unchangeable fact and they do. Worse yet they sometimes add to the nightmare themselves.

For non-heteronormative teenagers, high school is a nightmare because of their peers, authority figures, and the overall confusion of how to be themselves. These affects last long after high school because compassion and acceptance are not part of the school curriculum.