

Queer Theory or Queer Choice of Identification?

Abstract: The word queer in queer theory has been used to identify gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Queer theory came from the roots of the gay and lesbian equal rights movement, but soon became synonymous with gender identity issues. It has been used to identify sexual minority people dealing with gender identification issues such as transgendered, hermaphrodites, pan sexual, two spirit, and other sexually based sociological subgroups of our society. The use of the word queer to identify people both with and without gender identity issues is a misnomer. It is polarizing and hinders the integration of gay, lesbian and bisexual people into mainstream society. It is time to remove the term queer as an identifier for gay, lesbian and bisexual people and the phrase queer theory to describe the study of these people.

Reclaiming Queer- History and Reappropriation

The purpose of this paper is to argue that the term queer, as it is used in queer theory, is polarizing and a misnomer that complicates the integration and normalization of same sex relationships into mainstream society. This integration into mainstream society is necessary in order to secure the rights and responsibilities accessible to all recognized members of society. I contend that the term sexual minority, though inadequate due to its exclusive identification of people based on their sexual behavior, is more appropriate to use for gay, lesbian and bisexual people. This is due to the lack of gender issues that are intrinsically the issues that transgendered, hermaphrodites, pan sexual, two spirit, and other gender conflicted people must deal with in our society.

Queer. The definition of the word is odd, outside the norms of heterosexual society. This was used as a derogatory word to describe gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people for many generations. In more recent years the word queer was used to describe not only gay, lesbian and bisexual people, but also people with gender identity issues such as transgendered, hermaphrodites, pan sexual, two spirit, and other sexually based sociological subgroups. In the recent past some gay, lesbian, bisexual people and their supporters have reclaimed the word queer much in the way that some Black Americans have chosen to reclaim the “n” word. “I take back the word from homophobes who use queer as a derogatory word to assault my integrity” (Sheared & Sissel, 2001, p. 257). Historically, the reclamation or reappropriation of a derogatory word has taken away the negative sting of the insult and has been intended to empower the people that were oppressed by the negative use of the word. In the early history of the fight for gay, lesbian and bisexual rights it was important to reclaim the word queer in an effort to defuse the power of the word to define separateness, differences and the inference that being queer was somehow a perversion of nature as defined by mainstream heterosexual society.

In the 1990s a movement named queer theory developed to draw attention to the need for inclusive writings, teachings and respect toward sexual minority people. “W/e are often not represented in real or meaningful ways in curricula and instruction in exclusionary mainstream learning circles” (Sheared & Sissel, 2001, p. 265). It was thought that educators could use the word queer to open dialogues about sexual orientations as well as draw attention to the need for civil rights for people who identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual. “It was against the

backdrop of a growing, increasingly institutionalized Lesbian and Gay studies, that queer theory arose” (Green, 2007, p. 28).

This small minority of intellectuals, sociologists and educators were able to stress the need for recognition of gay, lesbian and bisexual orientations as legitimate, naturally occurring phenomenon that deserved respect, dignity and legally protected rights in our society. “Queer is about identification rather than identity: in fact, it is about destabilizing social, cultural, political- all kinds- of structure-normalizing structures-that work to solidify identities and, in so doing, skew ‘power’ toward the “norm” (Whitlock, 2010, p. 82). Their thinking was that destabilizing the norm present at that time in our history meant the full recognition of gay, lesbian and bisexual people as citizens with the same rights as heterosexually identifying people. This was necessary because homosexual and bisexual people were being discriminated against in employment, housing, lending and other areas that decreased the quality and safety of their lives.

“Teresa de Lauretis first applied the term queer, in “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” in 1991, to understand how women can have a voice and represent their experiences using both concepts and language constructed by the patriarchal social and political order” (Ferguson, 2013, p. 6). Her reappropriation of the word queer was an attempt to empower gay, lesbian and bisexual people. The social activist group Queer Nation was formed in 1990 to make a political statement, fight homophobia; the hatred of homosexual people, and the discrimination against gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Queer theory was born of these roots.

Queer Conflates Gender and Sexual Orientation

Queer theory came from the roots of the gay and lesbian equal rights movement, but soon became synonymous with gender identity issues. “Queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire... queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire”(Jagose, 1996). Jagose even went so far as to state, “queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytical framework also includes topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ ”(Jagose, 1996). Within the queer theory movement there began a discussion of gender, gender roles, and gender preference in relationship to the gay, lesbian and bisexual orientation of people. One of the founders of the queer theory movement defined gender as the “fully and dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 28). The inference of this was that sexuality cannot be separated from gender in discussing gay, lesbian or bisexual orientations. However, this same discussion does not take place surrounding heterosexual orientations and gender roles. “Sedgwick proposes that modern understandings of western homosexuality may be founded on assumptions about inversion and gender transitivity-making queer people to be peculiarly located between genders” (Posocco, para. 4 2009).

Queer theory suggests that cross-gendered identification is common to all people. “How normative gender does not always line up with normative sexuality and how cross-gendered identification is not the aberration, but the very condition of gender norms” (Butler, 1999, p.18). This statement by Butler seems to suggest that there are gender identity issues in all people and I

maintain this is not true. I would suggest that this is in fact, unfounded and limiting, because most people who are bisexual, gay or lesbian do not have gender identification issues. Furthermore, it is disrespectful to people that are dealing with gender identity issues who, when they are able to live in their self identified 'normal' gender state, actually endeavor to be recognized as heterosexual. "Many Americans who have heard the word transgendered think it means another type of gay. The problem is that some transgender people are not gay." (Herman, 2011, p. 4). Joshua Ferguson discusses the research done by Catherine Cashore and Teresa G. Tuason (Cashore & Tuason, 2009). "by studying transgender and bisexual in the same study, the researchers foreclose potential specificities because they attempt to study both gender and sexuality, which participates in a conflation of gender and sexuality" (Ferguson, 2013, p. 5). This further illustrates that even within the context of queer theory there is significant disagreement of the definition of queer.

It is all in a Name

The importance of naming a community cannot be overestimated. Community has been identified as "a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action" (MacQueen, McLellan, & Trotter, 2001, p. 1929). It may seem on the surface of this definition that gays, lesbians and bisexuals share a common community with people dealing with gender issues such as transgendered and other gender identity sub groups, but in reality there are not gender issues at work in most gay, lesbian and bisexual people. In fact, that there is a historical context to the word queer as an identifier that grouped people with sexual behavior outside the heteronorm of our society together. This nomenclature has outlived its correctness and usefulness and the word queer has become a barrier to the necessary integration into mainstream society that gay, lesbian and bisexual people demand and deserve."Naming and describing lesbian, gay bisexual, trans-identified (LGBT) and other persons across these differences has been a challenge both inside and outside the LGBT community. Queer is a contentious word not only for heterosexual persons, but also for some (often older) members of the LGBTQ community" (Grace, 2004, para. 1). The reclaiming of the word queer and the evolution of queer theory has become an unintentional, but heavy yoke around the necks of gay, lesbian and bisexual people at this time in our history.

Queer theory was originally intended to provide greater inclusivity in regards to heterosexually based writings and teachings and to specify who was included in these groups. "Queer subjects are those that are consistently marginalized from normative and socially accepted identity categories, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, intersex, asexual, two-spirited among others" (Ferguson, 2013, p. 2). Queer theory has made the serious and simplistic error of identifying people simply by whom they chose to have physical sex with and then suggesting that this indicates that gay, lesbian and bisexual people have gender identity issues. It has also drawn the incorrect conclusion that having sex with a person that is of the same sex as you indicates that you are dealing with gender issues.

Social Justice

In our heterosexually dominated culture, gay, lesbian and bisexual people have been

pigeonholed by the perspective that same sex relationships indicate gender identity issues. “It is important to understand that LGBTQ persons who reclaim queer and use it as a descriptor are doing so to remind other people that some words have histories connected to stereotypes that defile and dismiss those named” (Grace, 2004, para. 3). Additionally, as gay, lesbian and bisexual people begin to claim and exercise their rightful place in society with the full rights due them as human beings, they cease to be “marginalized” members of society. A good example of this is the United States Armed Forces policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” This policy which was meant to hide the identity of gay, lesbian and bisexual people therefore limiting the resulting discrimination in our military was shown to be destructive and hurtful not only to military personnel, but to families and society as a whole. In December of 2011 this policy was repealed and gay, lesbian and bisexual members of the United States military are now able to serve openly while enjoying the same legal rights as heterosexual members of the military. To use the word queer to describe these soldiers would place a barrier in the road of some heterosexual members of our society in their endeavor to understand that gay, lesbian and bisexual people share the same hopes, dreams, and fears as other soldiers. Queer does not promote assimilation, and if the word queer incorrectly implies that these people have gender identity issues it becomes more confusing for mainstream society to gain the necessary understanding of gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people need to be recognized and appreciated not just as sexual beings, but in the same holistic manner as heterosexuals. When observed holistically it is easy to recognize the similarities in heterosexual and homosexual people due to the absence of gender issues in both of these populations. Same sex relationships are not about gender issues, but about the sex of one’s partner. No one would suggest that heterosexuals have gender issues, and this is true for gays, lesbians and bisexuals as well. This is not to suggest that there is anything unacceptable about people with gender identification issues, but to illustrate that their issues are no less important, but very different from gay, lesbian and bisexual issues.

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people were in a very different place politically and as an accepted group in society in 1990 than they are in 2014. Having moved ahead to full citizenship in many places in the world and continuing to gain ground in civil rights in other parts of the world; gay, lesbian and bisexual people are becoming fully participating, protected members of society. As a result, many gay, lesbian and bisexual people no longer identify themselves as queer. “Queer is a term loaded with a spirit of oppression, violence and ‘othering’” (Rivera, 2013, para. 3). This has become a term that suggests conflict and resistance to mainstream society. This does not reflect the significant changes that have occurred in our society and the resulting integration into the dominant society. As our society becomes more educated it is crucial that our similarities to heterosexual culture be emphasized to help eliminate prejudice. There is still a need to celebrate our cultural differences, but we need to integrate into mainstream culture and law where we have belonged since the beginning. It is only in our self identification as people instead of “queers” and consequent education of heterosexual society to that fact, that we become able to enjoy the same freedoms and rights as all people.

Conclusion

Queer theory once provided an important function even in its inadequacy and inaccuracy,

but is a concept that has outlived its time and usefulness. It called for action and change at a time when gay, lesbian and bisexual people were being actively discriminated against in our society for being who they were. In our attempts to be just and inclusive, the word queer and the resulting queer theory took on meanings that were broad and inaccurate. There is no room for a theory that suggests that simply being gay, lesbian or bisexual means that you are by definition dealing with gender identity issues. It is important to note that queer theory has only been utilized as an academic theory and has not significantly impacted our daily lives. There is no discussion of queer theory by politicians or law makers. It has stimulated important discussion and writings in academic circles, but this has not significantly impacted our struggle for social justice.

Future research may prove that most lesbian, gay and bisexual people do not identify themselves as queer, that the inaccurate suggestions of gender identification issues have defeated the purpose of reclamation of the word queer. Research may also show that most people consider the word queer disrespectful and that it has become a barrier to equal rights and protection under the law. This research needs to be pursued and could result in gaining an appreciation and understanding of the human characteristics we all share.

I would like to thank the scholars that worked so hard in previous years to draw attention to the issues of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, genderqueer, intersex, asexual, two-spirited and other sexual minority peoples. We continue to move toward recognition, respect, assimilation and normalization of sexual orientation identification for all people. We also support the people dealing with gender identification issues and their efforts of dealing with their own unique issues.

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