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“Stereotypically Myself”: Familial Constraints, Gender Performance, and College LGBTQIA+ Identity

Claire Delplanche

Pacific University, delp2775@pacificu.edu

Mari Leslie

Pacific University, lesl2236@pacificu.edu

Haley Pock

Pacific University, pock7191@pacificu.edu

Nicole Servin

Pacific University, serv9456@pacificu.edu

Enie Vaisburd, MFA

Pacific University, evaisburd@pacificu.edu

Abstract

While the United States LGBTQIA+ community has encountered increased support within academic spheres in the last decade, many members continue to face alienation and discrimination within their families. This project explores the effects of familial constraints on the performance of gender and sexuality in LGBTQIA+ youth through mixed-media, specifically interviews that informed found poems and photography portraits. Participants were college-aged members of the LGBTQIA+ community chosen through convenience sampling. Interview questions focused on familial constraints and the performance of identity, the transcripts from which were used to create poems. We took six photos of each model, portraying familial constraints, liberating elements, and artifacts significant to their respective identities. Through these processes, we found that familial constraints such as cultural beliefs and religious doctrine often limit the formation and expression of identity in LGBTQIA+ youth. While each person’s experiences are uniquely their own, there exist many commonalities between the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth regarding family.

Keywords

Found poetry, photography, LGBTQIA+, gender

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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Artists' Statement

While the LGBTQIA+ community in the United States has encountered increased support within academic spheres over the last decade, many members continue to face alienation and discrimination within their families. According to Vanessa Bing, some common factors that influence a family's willingness to accept an LGBTQIA+ child include religious doctrines and cultural beliefs and traditions. Furthermore, Bing argues that a lack of familial acceptance can stall an individual's formation of identity, resulting in "a state of 'role confusion'" (2004). Conversely, David S. Reitman claims that familial support and connection can function as instrumental "protective factors" for LGBTQIA+ youth and their wellbeing (2013). Conversely, Christopher G. Shroeder argues that familial environments are rarely all positive or all negative. Specifically, he claims that "queer youth experiences in the family home are complex, involving a socio-spatial navigation and negotiation with(in) their family/home" (2015). Informed by this research, the following works explore the question: how do familial constraints affect the performance of gender and sexuality for U.S. LGBTQIA+ youth?

We explored this question through interviews and the creation of found poems and photo portraits. Our study included four interview participants and three portrait participants. These participants met our criteria of being college-aged members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and we chose them through convenience sampling on the basis of personal connections with the artists and researchers. The interview questions focused on the topics of familial constraints and the performance of identity. We then transcribed

the interviews and created seven found poems employ quotations from the interview transcripts. For the portraits, we took two primary photos and four secondary photos of each model in home settings. For each model, one primary photo represented a familial constraint while the other represented a liberating element in their life. The secondary photos of each model focused on objects and symbols of importance to their identities.

The initial exhibition of this work took the form of an art exhibition in which we displayed the portraits and poems alongside artifacts associated with "home," as well as projected notable quotations from the interviews. This exhibit also contained a participatory element in which we asked audience members to respond to the exhibit by writing on provided notecards facilitated by framed questions on a wall.

In future, we envision extending this project by increasing our sample size, continuing to obtain data through interviews and photographs, and create additional poems. In this continued work, we would like to include more diverse perspectives within the population of college-age LGBTQIA+ across the Pacific Northwest. In so doing the project could undertake the topic of "liberating elements" in the formation of gender and sexual identity in youth, as this project focused primarily on the role of familial constraints.

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If

If the constraints weren't there,
I would be a more empowered and confident individual.
If there were ideal conditions,
They would be accepting and tolerable.
If they were good people,
They would respect humans.

If the constraints weren't there,
I think I would think a lot less about what other people think.
I think I would care a lot less about whether people are going to think it's too much.
Like when [he] would make us dress certain ways
Because people were going to see us.
What *are* other people going to think when they see us?

I think,
If the constraints weren't there,
I would've been more confident in who I was.
And I don't think I would've had a lot of issues with expressing myself.
Especially verbalizing what I want.
I think
It would've opened the door for me to explore that avenue,
Regardless.
And that would've helped a lot.

I think,
If the constraints weren't there,
I would be more outspoken about it.
I think,
In a space that was comfortable, I would've been a lot happier with myself.
I would just feel more free.
But I didn't.

So I can only imagine
How much happier and less stressed I would be
If I was actually able to explore that.
If they were good people.
If there were ideal conditions.
If the constraints weren't there.

Pretty Religious

Yeah, we were pretty religious.
My mom was really involved in the ministry of the church.
We would be there all three services.
My mom and dad used to be really chill,
But now it's shifted and my mom has become more vocal
About how it's bad.
About how it's wrong and it's a sin.
That I should know better than that.
When I'm talking to my mom, I have to reframe something
If I want to tell her about it
Because it usually has non-religious themes.
Even when I'm talking to people that my mom may know,
I reframe things.

Yeah, we were pretty religious.
My mom and dad's morals and beliefs were very rooted in Catholicism.
I think that guided what we wore,
What we thought,
What we were allowed and not allowed to do.
I think they have it ingrained in their minds
That no Mexicans are homosexual.
I think it all has to do with religion.

Yeah, we were pretty religious.
My dad is a deacon in the Catholic Church.
He does radio shows and stuff in the Catholic sphere.
It's his job to talk about his values.
But he's not completely walking the walk.
He's like, "sex is for a married man and woman to create a child."
But I know that my parents are still having sex.
The other night, my sisters kept asking him,
"Why do we need to go to church?"
And I was like,
"I do not want to be part of this conversation.
I'm getting up and leaving."
I'm just not that kind of person.

Yeah, we were pretty religious.



Portrait Series No. 1

Hush Hush

It's very well known in my family but we just
Don't talk about it.
I haven't done that good of a job of hiding so I'm fairly sure he knows
I'm queer,
And he hasn't said anything.
My parents don't want to ask, because they already know
The answer.
Me telling them is just reinforcing it.

Even the ways we dodge conversation,
Even if the conversation is brought up,
I have to hold myself back from saying things because I know
It's not worth sharing.
Now there's always something I hide.

When I was a kid, everything was so open.
Now that I'm older, I'm always hiding.
The things I'm interested in talking about I'm not comfortable talking about
Around him.
It feels almost like deception.
We're close, but it's like we don't actually know each other.

When I'm talking to my mom I have to reframe something
If I want to tell her about it.
Even when I'm talking to people that my mom may know
I reframe things.

I wonder
What the rest of my family knows, or thinks they know
About my sex life.
My love life.
Even just crushes, or the kind of people I'm attracted to.
It's not a conversation we ever have.
It's not something I can talk about.
It's a very hush hush thing
That no one talks about.

So,
We don't talk about it.

Gay but Also Mainstream

I remember I would cry a lot for literally no reason.
I remember that my dad used to get really mad about it.
I remember there was a lot of things I wasn't allowed to do.
I just thought that's how life was.

[He] was obsessed with making me tuck my shirt in.
And I would always untuck it.
Most of my childhood was just me trying to avoid
The ugly clothes my parents made me wear.
[He] would always make me wear my bra,
And I was like, "I'm eleven! I do what I want!"
Now, I'm hiding a lot.

My mom and dad used to be really chill with it.
My aunt is bisexual and had girlfriends growing up. And since I had her,
I thought it was fine and normal. But now it's shifted and
My mom has become more vocal about how it's bad,
That I should know better.
Now there's always something I hide.
We're close, but it's like we don't actually know each other.
It feels almost like deception.

In high school, I used to push things a little bit,
I used to wear a rainbow lanyard.
Anyone can wear rainbow stuff, and it's totally normal, so I thought,
"Wow I can wear this."
Gay but also mainstream.
But it's not something I can talk about.
Sometimes, when I get home, I'll change my shirt
So my mom doesn't see me
In a gay shirt.

I used to be real nervous to perform gender and sexuality
Because I thought my mom would be there.
But now that I'm older and can go away from my mom, I do.
I go far away and work far away so I can do whatever I want and not have to
Worry about running into someone who may know or work with her.
I can act more freely and not have to worry
That it would get back to her, somehow.



Portrait Series No. 2

Chalky Soil

I could tell them or ask them anything. But I didn't
Because there were certain things they didn't know how to handle.
And there were some things I feel I needed to figure out on my own.
I didn't feel like they would understand me
Enough to give me answers that would help me.

They thought that LGBTQIA+ people were sick in the head.

I couldn't get really close to them.
I couldn't allow myself to grow closer to them
After realizing they had those views.
I didn't feel like it was my responsibility
To be the one to change those views.

Something was wrong with them.

I wasn't able to express myself a lot of the time.
And that really stunted my growth and my knowledge
Of what it means to be of a gender.
It's like trying to grow a plant in very chalky soil
That's wet enough for it to grow but it's hard and sturdy.
You can do it but it's hard to grow.

They weren't right.

I learned that you shouldn't be around people who don't support you.
So I came to the conclusion to do things on my own.
Ya know, still help out and maintain a tolerable relationship with them.
But just not getting as close to them as a normal family would.

They weren't normal.

It's really hard to put into words, but essentially
When you're not allowed to express yourself
It's hard to establish an identity.
Since I wasn't able to do that it's really hard for me to relate
Myself to my gender or even grow out of it.
And that's one of the things
That's set me back.

Constricted

I've created my own path and it wasn't an easy one.
Because my parents are both anti-LGBTQ.
Because my gender has shifted from what I used to identify as
And I'm a lot more fluid.

I had to put a lot of things on pause
Because I wasn't able to act on them. I think
A lot of the things that heterosexual teenagers experienced in their teen years,
I had to wait until post-high school to even think
About doing them.

My mom's family is more tolerant.
I think she's accepted that it's a thing
And will just show her distaste from a distance.
But my father
Is more vocal and is against anything outside of the traditional.
My brothers and I weren't allowed to wear pink, purple, pastel colors.
My dad had a superstition that if you sat at the corner of a table
You wouldn't get married and have a wife.

Personal choices that someone should be able to make
On their own,
I knew that they were such a big deal when I started fighting against them,
Even just like letting my nails grow long
Or my hair grow longer.

I think they have it ingrained in their minds that no Mexicans are
Homosexual.
When we came to this country, people getting piercings,
People being gay,
People doing bad kid things was like
A white people thing.
In their minds they thought
"We raise you better."

Ever since I left my house
I've been able to more freely express my gender.
I didn't realize just how constrictive it was.



Portrait Series No. 3

Stereotypically Myself

My siblings all know that I'm bi, pretty sure.
Both of my sisters are also queer.
When it's just me and my siblings, we're totally relaxed.
When my mom's around, we're all pretty comfortable.
But with my dad . . . I feel like I have to be more stereotypically myself.
More of who I was in elementary and middle school.

When my dad's around
I'm more quiet.
The things I'm interested in talking about
I'm not comfortable talking about around him.
He's a deacon in the Catholic Church,
And he's fairly conservative socially and stuff.

I think a lot of it is me projecting what I think he thinks of me.
I haven't done that good of a job of hiding anything.
I have twenty pictures of beautiful women strategically placed by the bed,
So I'm fairly sure he knows that I'm queer,
And he hasn't said anything.
There's definitely some tension there.
Whether it's all in my mind or not I don't know.

My mom's a lot more liberal and chill.
I actually did come out to her when I was about fifteen.
She was driving, which probably wasn't a great idea
Because we both started sobbing.
That was because she asked me about how I felt about my dad.
And I was like, "Yeah, that's the part that I'm afraid of."

I used to dress a lot more feminine, and I stopped dressing like that
After coming out to everyone but my dad.
I kind of did it on purpose, because I wanted people to know,
But I also didn't really do it on purpose. I think it was just like,
"Oh, I don't care as much about what people think."

I wonder
What the rest of my family knows about my sex life.
I have flags
But I don't put them up at home.