

**“We’re Normal--They’re the Real Deviants”:
The Problem of Seeking Human Rights through the Establishment of Normalcy**

Hailee Gibbons

SJS 600: Social Justice Studies Readings

Dr. C. Lee Harrington

Miami University

Monday, October 15

Please do not quote or use without permission.

hgibbo2@uic.edu

In 2011, the group Get Up Australia uploaded an online video entitled “It’s Time,¹” which quickly became extremely popular. Since its release, it has received over 6 million views. The emotional and moving video depicts the process of a young couple falling in love—it shows them meeting, exchanging phone numbers, going on dates, being introduced to parents, fighting, moving in together, washing dishes, watching TV, laughing, supporting each other during the illness of a loved one, going on vacations, celebrating birthdays, and finally, proposing marriage. The video is shot from the perspective of one partner—we do not see this person but we see everything through this person’s eyes. Since the visible partner in the video is male, viewers may assume the person who is not visible is female—until the very end when it is revealed that the person is also male and the video is about a gay couple. The video then ends with the line, “It’s time. End marriage discrimination.”

The basic premise of this video is to show a gay couple as similar to a heterosexual couple—in other words, everything they do is so “normal” that if you only saw one partner, you might not even know they were gay. In fact, since heterosexuality is considered “the norm” and many people view others as heterosexual until they learn otherwise, some people were most likely even shocked at the end of the video; perhaps shocked enough, as the video creators were hoping, to consider changing their position on the issue of marriage equality. Many efforts centered on the “right to gay marriage” campaign have used similar rhetoric, which sends the message to the dominant, heterosexual group, “We are just like you, and so we should have the same rights as you.”

This “quest for normalcy” (also sometimes referred to as assimilation) has shaped many movements centered on group rights. Unfortunately, marginalized groups seeking to be viewed as normal often further oppresses other groups who are also struggling for justice.

¹ “It’s Time” can be viewed at <http://tiny.cc/gkuwp>

Establishing “normalcy” as a basis for human rights is often ineffective because (1) dominant groups will never accept others as “normal” because it will require them to give up power to do so, and (2) it further oppresses other groups by excluding or alienating them and casting them as “the real deviants.” In this essay, I explore this issue using the “gay marriage” or “marriage equality” debate as a case study. I first define and provide a brief overview of group rights. I then discuss hegemony and explain how rights are given or denied based on which groups are dominant (and thus normal) and subordinate (and thus abnormal/deviant). Finally, I problematize marginalized groups’ quest for normalcy—specifically, I explore how the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community’s efforts to assimilate to the dominant group through “marriage equality” is an ineffectual way to gain rights and further marginalizes subordinate groups.

Human Rights/Group Rights

Human rights can be defined as “claims that individuals raise against institutions that are supposed to guarantee them the conditions and resources necessary for leading a minimally decent human life (a standard which is sensitive to social progress and socio-cultural relativity)” (Ingram, 2011, p. 278). Group rights, or collective rights, are defined as “rights that individuals possess only because they belong to a particular group” (Ingram, 2011, p. 277). Ingram (2011) construes Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as supportive of group rights, which states that all humans have the right to nationality or citizenship (United Nations, 1948). According to Ingram (2011), unless one believes that the only form of citizenship is to belong to a nation state, then “one must interpret the human right to citizenship as a universal right to a particular group right” (p. 277).

Ingram (2011) posits there are two broad categories of group rights: instrumentalist and collectivist. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on instrumentalist group rights.

Instrumentalist group rights can be further divided into two types. One type of instrumentalist group rights:

enable[s] members of disadvantaged and marginalized groups to *assimilate* into the mainstream. Although they function by granting differential entitlements, group rights of this nature are intended to be temporary and remedial, and, most importantly, oriented toward guaranteeing *sameness* of treatment for everyone, regardless of their individual or group-based differences. (Ingram, 2011, p. 279, italics in original)

Examples of these types of rights are bilingual education and affirmative action. In the context of LGBT rights, the right to marry or have a civil union with a same-sex partner would also fall under this category.

Another classification of instrumentalist group rights has a different function despite having the same individualistic focus. This type of instrumental rights “is not aimed at assimilating marginalized groups into the mainstream so that the members will be treated the same way as everyone else. Instead, this second class...is intended to protect the right to be *different* from the mainstream” (Ingram, 2011, p. 280, italics in original). An example of this type of instrumentalist group rights is religious groups seeking the right to practice their faith freely. In the context of LGBT rights, an example is public policy mandating HIV prevention or sexual education programs that promote sexual variance.

Thus, one type of individualistic group rights focuses on the right to assimilate and the other focuses on the right to resist assimilation. Given that the fight for marriage equality has come to define the LGBT rights movement, it is clear that gay marriage advocates are seeking equality through assimilation. But why? I argue in the next section that the social force of hegemony has used the concepts of “normalcy” and “deviance” to maintain the power of dominant groups (e.g., heterosexual people) over subordinate groups (e.g., anyone with a non-

heterosexual identity). Instead of resisting or fighting this structure, LGBT rights groups have tried to carve their own place within it by establishing themselves as normal, natural, and legitimate.

Hegemony and the Creation of “Normal”

The current system of power and oppression in the United States of America is created and reinforced through hegemony. According to Hall (1977), hegemony “refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups” (p. 16, as cited in Hebdige, 1979). The dominant group is able to produce and maintain hegemony “by winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 16). This is accomplished through the formation of “normalizing communities.” According to Magolda and Ebben (2007):

Normalizing communities are based on those in power defining a cultural center and “natural order” that renders the dominant group behaviors and values acceptable while marginalizing others. Normalizing communities privilege certain individuals, activities, roles, and relationships and portray them as *normal*. (p. 145, italics in original)

In other words, depicting the values, ideologies, beliefs, and practices of the dominant group as normal, natural, logical, or right allows hegemony to be maintained without imposition, coercion, or force (Hebdige, 1979; Magolda & Ebben, 20007).

Groups seeking rights are often formed by a community of people with a common social identity, such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, mental ability, and religion.² Currently, the following groups are dominant and thus perceived

² This examination of group rights focuses on common social identities, but this list is not exhaustive—for example, people who are homeless or unemployed may also seek group rights.

as normal: men, white people, cisgender³ people, middle-aged people, middle and upper class people, heterosexual people (particularly those in monogamous marriages with children), Christians, and physically and mentally able-bodied people.

Rather than challenging the hegemonic concepts of “normal” and “abnormal,” many oppressed groups have focused their energies and efforts on trying to assimilate and fit in with the dominant group by being seen as equally “normal.” The motivation to assimilate is most likely not just fueled by the desire for equality or rights—it is also a function of how they want to see themselves and be seen by others. As Warner (1999) notes, “Nearly everyone, it seems, wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us?” (p. 53).

LGBT Group Rights in a “Normalizing” Society

When considering the issue of assimilation and the desire for normalcy as a way to achieve group rights, the LGBT rights movement is an excellent case study. While not all queer activists consider gay marriage their main political priority, “gay marriage has become the cause célèbre and has come to stand in for gay and lesbian politics as a whole” (Halberstam, 2012, p. 103). Through a variety of media, speeches, legal cases, political rallies, and other forms of publicity, these groups have tried to send a message to heterosexual people that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are not “perverts” or “deviants” or “pedophiles” and instead are just like heterosexual people. LGBT couples’ love is “normal” too, and the “normal” way to express your love for heterosexual couples is through marriage. Using this logic, the “right to marry” would seemingly be a major victory for the LGBT community in their quest for equal rights, achieved through the politics of normalcy and assimilation.

³ The term “cisgender” refers to people whose gender identity matches their assigned sex at birth. The term complements “transgender.”

However, the issue is not as simple as “having the right to marry” versus “not having the right to marry.” This dichotomy does not acknowledge the numerous problems associated with assimilationist attitudes and reactive politics, or the institution of marriage itself. Gay marriage advocates rarely, if ever, recognize that their efforts to achieve marriage equality often reflect the opinions of their strongest opponents—in other words, arguments on both sides of the debate are shaped by homophobic and heterosexist attitudes.

For example, some people argue that gay marriage should be illegal because the purpose of marriage is procreation. While this is not truly the case (married heterosexual couples without children are not treated much differently than married heterosexual couples with children), it does send a powerful message about what forms of sexual intimacy are legitimate and appropriate for the institution of marriage and what forms of sexual intimacy are not. Some marriage equality groups have attempted to address the fact that LGBT love is considered illegitimate under current marriage policies by claiming that the right to marry will make LGBT more like heterosexuals—it will provide a system for modifying behavior so that LGBT people may commit long-term to one partner and practice monogamy. As Warner (1999) notes, “Marriage, in short, would make for good gays—the kind who would not challenge the norms of straight culture, who would not flaunt sexuality, and who would not insist on living differently from ordinary folk” (p. 113). This rhetoric not only idealizes marriage but also reinforces homophobic belief systems that LGBT people are deviant—and society could “fix” this “problem” if it would allow LGBT people to marry.

Furthermore, the desire to be “normal” has become connected to the desire to be viewed as “moral.” This reinforces the dominant connections of normal/moral and abnormal/immoral.

Warner (1999) observes:

The prevalent wisdom...seems to be that variant desires are legitimate only if they can be shown to be immutable, natural, and innate...This is one reason why so many gay people are not desperately hoping that a gay gene can be found. They think they would be more justified if they could show that they had no choice, that neither they nor gay culture in general played any role in shaping their desires. Some conservatives, meanwhile, trivialize gay experience as “lifestyle,” as though that warrants interfering with it. Both sides seem to agree on an insane assumption: that only immutable and genetic sexualities could be legitimate, that if being gay could be shown to be learned, or chosen, or partly chosen, then it could be reasonably forbidden. (p. 9)

In other words, the desire for normalcy in some gay men and lesbians is so strong they hope that science and research involving sexual orientation will demonstrate their legitimacy—not just to conservatives, but also to themselves. They seem to have accepted the idea that variant sexual desires *are* immoral, and believe that if they could prove that variant sexual desires are natural then being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender will cease to be a sinful choice and instead become a normal identity.

The fact that many gay rights groups ascribe to similar beliefs and use similar arguments as their opponents seems strange initially, until you consider that the strong desire for normalcy for some LGBT people may be a sign of a deeper desire to end prejudice, discrimination, and hate directed toward them. Warner (1999) posits that the campaign to have variant sexual desire perceived as “normal” is a function of the way gay, lesbian, and bisexual people feel regarding their sexual lives. Interestingly, the aforementioned video, “It’s Time,” does not show the gay couple having any sort of sexual relations beyond a quick kiss at one point. While some may claim that the video could not depict any sexual activity because it would make the video pornographic in nature, scholars such as Warner (1999) would most

likely argue that it relates more to the shame and stigma surrounding the gay rights movement, as “lesbians and gay men often find in practice that the stigma on identity and the shame of sexual activity are hard to separate” (p. 30).

This provides another compelling reason why gay marriage advocates want to assimilate rather than resist—if normalcy will end the stigma and shame they feel and normalcy can be achieved through equal rights such as marriage, then it seems the right to marry would be an important project for the LGBT community. Unfortunately, seeking rights through marriage equality further oppresses LGBT people as well as other marginalized groups that are struggling for equal rights and justice because the institution of marriage itself is problematic.

The Problem with Normalcy and the Institution of Marriage

Inherent in the arguments for the right to marry is the premise that, because LGBT people are “just like” heterosexual people, they should have the same rights—they should be included in the institution of marriage rather than excluded. However, Halberstam (2012) argues this desire for inclusion actually moves the LGBT community away from human rights and liberation:

The desire for marriage completes a long process by which LGBT people, having been separated out from normative society and called pathological, now are embraced and in turn embrace the very cultures that previously rejected them...the participation of LGBT couples in state-sanctioned marriages lends credibility to the very institution that has acquired meaning precisely through excluding gays and lesbians, among others, from marriage in the first place. (p. 100).

In other words, marriage is built on excluding rather than including people. Therefore, achieving the right for LGBT couples to marry would only expand and legitimize the

institution of marriage rather than changing or dismantling it as an oppressive societal structure.

Additionally, just because the law may give same-sex couples the right to marry does not mean all LGBT people would benefit equally. Some scholars have argued that the supposed LGBT rights movement should actually be called the gay rights movement because of whom it privileges. Sycamore (2008) laments, “LGBT usually means gay, with lesbian in parentheses, throw out the bisexuals, and put trans on for a little window dressing. Don’t even think about queers who don’t fit neatly into one of the prevailing categories!” (p. 2). Moreover, the institution of marriage has been heavily criticized as not only oppressive to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, but also to women, people of color, and lower-income people (Bailey, Kandaswamy, & Udora Richardson, 2008; Halberstam, 2012; Warner, 1999). Who would the “right to marry” really benefit then? Most likely it would benefit the gay men and lesbians who belong to other dominant groups—people who are also white, cisgender, and middle or upper class. Given that they already carry these “dominant” and “normal” identities, expanding the institution of marriage to include same-sex couples would only serve to further oppress those who belong to other marginalized groups—people who are poor, Black or Latino/a, and gender non-conforming/transgender people.

“We’re Normal—They’re the Real Deviants”

When considering groups that are excluded and oppressed by state sanctioned marriages, it is also important to recognize that one group in particular has been further marginalized during the struggle for the “right to marry”—transgender and gender non-conforming people. Regardless of whether the right to marry is achieved or not, transgender people have been left out, alienated, and cast as “the real deviants” during the fight for marriage

equality. Indeed, some gay men and lesbians in favor of marriage equality have gone as far to view transgender people as detrimental to their cause. Minter (2006) claims:

The mainstream gay rights movement defined itself and emerged as an organized political and legal movement by embracing an explicitly non-transgender, or gender normative, model for gay identity. Over time, the increasing hegemony of this gender-normative model has resulted in the increasing isolation of gender-variant lesbians and gay men within the mainstream movement and increasing tensions between gay and transgender people. (p. 150).

The desire for cisgender gay men and lesbians to move away from the transgender community is representative of the fact that gender variance is even more “abnormal” and “deviant” than sexual variance. Rotello (1996), a gay scholar and activist, posits:

Homophobes don't hate us for how we make love. They hate how we make love because it violates our expected gender roles...When I was 10 and was taunted for throwing the ball “like a girl,” I don't think those school yard bullies suspected me of actually sleeping with men...all gay and transgendered people occupy places on a continuum between the two main genders...the root of our difference is not merely how we make love but the larger fact that we exist between two genders in a variety of ways, some sexual and some not. (para 4)

By casting transgender people as “the real deviants,” gay and lesbian rights groups focused on marriage equality have only served to hurt and set back their own community. Transgender people are the primary victims of anti-gay and anti-lesbian discrimination and violence (Minter, 2006), but although they bear the brunt of prejudice and stigma, they are not the cause. The cause of LGBT oppression is the hegemonic abnormality of sexual variance, and even more so, the hegemonic abnormality of gender variance. Thus, trying to fit in, assimilate, and become

“normalized” will do very little to provide human rights to the LGBT community—it will only further support the dominant groups’ power.

If Becoming Normal Isn't the Answer—What Is?

While there are many ways the LGBT community can refocus and reclaim their quest for human/group rights without trying to assimilate into mainstream culture or to gain recognition from the dominant group that they are “normal,” I will focus on two possible strategies. First, the LGBT community should quit viewing gender-variant individuals as the problem (and an impediment to marriage equality) and recognize that gender variance is stigmatized by dominant groups—a stigma that extends to gay and lesbian people even if they are cisgender. Obtaining the right to marry a same-sex partner will not change this view, because it is due to the dominant groups’ connection between prescribed gender roles and expected sex preferences. Rotello (1996) asks the LGBT community:

If the ultimate cause of our oppression is gender transgression, then shouldn't it also be the focus of our identities and our movement? Shouldn't we stop being the les-bi-gay-trans-whatever movement, with a new syllable added every few years, and simply become the trans movement? (para 6)

Thus, refocusing on issues related to gender variance as well as sexual variance can move LGBT rights forward as a more cohesive, solidified community without attempting to assimilate to heterosexual, cisgender norms.

An additional strategy is to dismantle, rather than extend, the institution of marriage. Inclusion of gay men and lesbians in the institution of marriage will not be a victory for many people in the LGBT community. People with other marginalized identities will continue to be oppressed by marriage, while only white, cisgender, middle and upper middle class gay and

lesbian people will enjoy its theoretical benefits—benefits that actually could be independent of marriage (Halberstam, 2012). As Sycamore (2008) notes:

The ultimate irony of gay liberation is that it has made it possible for straight people to create more fluid gender, sexual, and social identities, while mainstream gay people salivate over state-sanctioned Tiffany wedding bands and participatory patriarchy. If gay assimilationists wanted actual progress, they'd start by fighting for the abolition of marriage (duh), and universal access to the services that marriage can sometimes help procure: housing, healthcare, citizenship, tax breaks, and inheritance rights. (p. 3)

Therefore, extending the institution of marriage to gay men and lesbian women will not change it—it will only serve to maintain the status quo. The LGBT community would be better served if we dismantled the institution of marriage and fought for rights (such as housing, healthcare, citizenship, tax breaks, and inheritance rights) that are given regardless of one's relationship status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

The Cycle Continues...and Final Thoughts

While I have used the gay marriage debate as a case study to explore the issues in establishing normalcy as a strategy for achieving group rights, it is important to recognize this problem is not only in the LGBT community but is widespread among many oppressed groups. As previously mentioned, the marriage equality movement has further marginalized transgender people. However, at the same time, the transgender community has been fighting to have Gender Identity Disorder removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Rather than troubling the DSM and the profession of psychiatry as oppressive to many groups of people, the transgender community has instead used the argument that they are not “mentally unstable” or “mentally ill.” In other words, they are “normal”—unlike the people with “real” mental illness. Meanwhile, people with mental illness

have founded the Mad Pride movement. While some associate with the disability rights movement, others insist that their movement is separate and that their mental illness is not a disability—thereby furthering the view that disability is a tragic, undesirable state. While I could continue, these examples demonstrate that the quest for normalcy and assimilation politics has shaped many movements centered on group rights while simultaneously harming others.

While I provided solutions in this essay specific to the issue of gay marriage within the LGBT community, I end this essay by calling for further exploration of this issue in other groups. If we are to achieve group rights, we must constantly (re)envision strategies to seek group rights in a way that considers *all* people rather than just some. Furthermore, these strategies should acknowledge that the problem is not other marginalized groups “ruining it for the rest of us” but rather the hegemonic concepts of normalcy/deviance established by dominant groups. Intergroup justice is possible—but we must work together rather than against each other.

References

- Bailey, M. M., Kandaswamy, P., & Urdora Richardson, M. (2008). Is gay marriage racist? . In P. Currah, R. M. Juang, & S. P. Minter (Eds.), *Transgender Rights* (113-119). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Halberstam, J. J. (2012). *Gaga feminism: Sex, gender and the end of normal*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hall, S. (1977). *Culture, media, and the "ideological effect"*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hawkins, R. Z. (1998). Intergroup justice: Taking responsibility for intraspecific and interspecific oppressions. *Ethics and the Environment*, 3(1), 1-40.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Routledge.
- Ingram, D. (2011). Group rights: A defense. In T. Cushman (Ed.), *Routledge International Handbooks: Handbook of Human Rights*, (277-290). Florence, KY: Routledge.
- Magolda, P. M., & Ebben, K. (2007). Students serving Christ: Understanding the role of student subcultures on a college campus. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 38(2), 138-158.
- Minter, S. P. (2006). Do transsexuals dream of gay rights? Getting real about transgender inclusion. In P. Currah, R. M. Juang, & S. P. Minter (Eds.), *Transgender Rights* (141-170). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rotello, G. (1996). Transgendered like me. *Advocate*. Retrieved from: http://www.gabrielrotello.com/transgendered_like_me.htm.
- Sycamore, M. B. (Ed.) (2008). *That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*. New York, NY: Soft Skull Press.
- Warner, M. (1999). *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.