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ENGL 1121

18 September 2022

### LGBTQ Stereotypes are Destructive and Divisive

We've all met someone or seen someone on TV who is just "stereotypically gay." They might be a feminine gay man who has a gay lisp or a lesbian with a short haircut who wears masculine clothes. Many people imagine all queer people as these stereotypes. Some people believe it's obvious when people are gay just like in movies and TV shows. These appear to be harmless generalizations but don't paint the whole picture of the negative stereotypes and misconceptions about queer people. One negative stereotype is that queer people are attention seeking and there are people "pretending" to be gay for that attention. Another is the belief that being queer is a phase, or on the contrary, queer people come out only once and don't change their minds. Some people hold a belief that queer people are trying to push their identities onto people, sometimes called the "gay agenda". Even in the queer community, it is enjoyable to poke fun at these stereotypes. In reality, the LGBTQ community is far more diverse than people may think, and the misconceptions and stereotypes are extremely damaging to queer people. As a non-binary and gay person, I have always been hyper-aware of queer stereotypes. I tried my hardest not to become one out of fear of hatred. These stereotypes and misconceptions are often used to excuse homophobia. They cause queer people to be insecure about their identity and

struggle to accept themselves. Stereotypes and misconceptions even cause division and hatred inside the queer community by leading queer people to cast judgment on other queer people.

A shockingly common belief is that people come out as gay or transgender just for attention. Coming out and existing as a queer person is difficult and potentially dangerous, so it's hard to imagine someone doing so for attention. When I was in high school, a classmate came out as transgender. He came to school one day with a new haircut, a new name, and new pronouns. A few days later, I was walking to class with my friend. We started talking about this classmate. Not knowing that he had come out as transgender, my friend referred to him by his old name. I corrected her and told her about his new gender identity. I then told her that I didn't expect that from him, and I thought he was "faking it" for attention. To this day I still feel guilty and embarrassed for saying that, especially considering that I was struggling with my own gender identity at the time I said it. How could I accuse someone of seeking attention when I was going through the same struggles myself? How could I think that someone would do something so brave that brings them hatred and discrimination for no reason but for attention? Later on, when my sister came out as bisexual, I accused her of the same thing. Once again, I invalidated someone's identity because I believed the same homophobic misconceptions that I have heard bigots say. This stereotype was yet another belief that held me back from accepting my identity as a non-binary person. Through my criticism of others, I refused to accept my own identity. I felt that if I were to express who I was, I would be seen as just another fake-queer person asking for attention.

There's another misconception that queer people are "pushing" their identities onto people. This is something said by people who are upset about the acceptance and existence of

queer people in public. They may be so deeply homophobic that they find the normalization and acceptance of queer people repulsive. Hearing this belief kept me from coming out for years. I realized I wasn't a cis woman or straight in late middle school/early high school. I cut my hair short and experimented with wearing men's clothing and discovered I felt more comfortable expressing myself that way. I remember one night I was sitting with my mom, and she asked me if I wanted to be a boy. I was shocked and embarrassed that she was aware of my struggle with gender identity. I told her no, I wanted to be a girl, which I knew was a huge lie. I never wanted to come out, I felt that it would be a burden for the people in my life to have to accept me. Even though I wished society was more accepting, I still felt like it would be asking for too much if I were to expect people to use a different name and pronouns for me. Still to this day, I feel embarrassed sharing my pronouns or asking people to not use my birth name. It really shouldn't be this way, no matter people's religious and personal beliefs about homosexuality and gender, they must learn to respect others. Queer people should not have to feel like their existence is a burden on others.

Another common and harmful misconception is that being queer is just a phase some people go through. This goes along with another misconception among queer people that you can only come out once and you can't change your mind later. My whole life I heard stories of other queer kids coming out just to be met with dismissal and being told they would change their minds or regret becoming someone else. Because of the stereotype that younger people will change their minds, queer people feel pressure to be completely certain before coming out. They fear having to come out a second time and have people judge them for changing their minds. As I stated earlier, my journey of discovering my identity began in late middle school, and ever since then I was always struggling to figure out who I was. I went through dozens of different

gender and sexuality identities throughout the years without ever coming out. I was too scared to ever tell anyone. I realized I wanted to go by a different name and picked out Charlie four years ago. It took me nearly four years to finally decide to come out and tell people I would rather go by that name. Despite being sure about my identity for a long time, I was terrified I would be making a mistake by coming out. I was convinced that I couldn't change my mind if I were to come out. I didn't want to face the embarrassment of having to come out a second time, especially after knowing that some people thought being transgender or gay is just a phase.

Stereotypes and misconceptions such as the ones I have described above are extremely damaging to LGBTQ individuals and the community itself. They cause individuals to struggle to accept who they are and judge others in the queer community. Recently, one of my friends, a transwoman, told me that her best friend's boyfriend said he only tolerates her because she "isn't like the faggots on TikTok." This made me realize that a lot of these stereotypes are used as an excuse to hate queer people. This man blamed his homophobia on a generalization of queer people he's seen on TikTok. I also realized how every single stereotype I've seen in the media or heard someone talk about has held me back in my search for my identity because I feared falling into the stereotypes. I thought avoiding becoming like stereotypes would protect me from homophobia. It led me to be hyper-critical of myself and other queer people. I was judgmental towards people who fell into some of these stereotypes because of the homophobia it attracted. This was at the expense of my happiness; I spent years allowing people to refer to me by a name and pronouns that made me uncomfortable. I avoided conversations about gender and sexuality because I was judgmental of other people's pride and my own pride. I have even been biphobic and transphobic in the past because of misconceptions passed on by homophobic people creating excuses for hating queer people. Misconceptions and stereotypes are incredibly destructive for

the queer community. You can't have a group of people united by their pride for their identities but are judgmental of others under the same LGBTQ umbrella. The most important thing I've learned and am still learning to this day is that it's okay to be like the stereotypes. For queer people, accepting yourself means allowing yourself to be your authentic self despite what other people believe.