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Media's Portrayal of Homosexuality as a Reflection of Cultural Acceptance

Will & Grace stands as a representation of when homosexual relationships portrayed by mass media- radio, television, and movies- began to be broadly accepted within society. From the breakthrough *Will & Grace* helped establish, homosexuality is slowly finding accurate representation within mass media today. Shows such as *As the World Turns, Grey's Anatomy, Greek, Ugly Betty, Modern Family* and *One Life to Live* depict homosexual characters that are actively engaged in onscreen relationships that very closely reflect the heterosexual relationships with which they share the screen. The Contact Hypothesis, along with the Para-social Interaction Hypothesis, allows us to examine these progressive movements within media and their application to culture's growing perception and acceptance of homosexuality.

In order to parallel the onscreen evolution of homosexuality and the application of the change that is occurring within culture, I will use the Contact Hypothesis as well as several theories that have developed upon the foundation that the Contact Hypothesis established. The Contact Hypothesis (also known as the Intergroup Contact Theory) was originally developed by Gordan W. Allport in 1954 and published in *The Nature of Prejudice*. Although the theory is over five decades old, it is still considered to be "one of the most influential and often-cited publications in the entire field of intergroup relations" (Katz 125) and to have current application especially when bridging prejudices that arise towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community (Herek 1987).

According to the American Psychological Association, the Contact Hypothesis is the "most often used theoretical framework for understanding approaches that emphasize attention to categories…In this framework, people make sense of their social world by creating categories of the individuals around them, which includes separating the categories into in–groups and out–groups." In other words, the contact theory predicts that members of a majority who have contact with a member of a minority will be more inclined to accept this minority as a whole (Allport, 1954).

Two years after Allport released his contact theory, Horton and Wohl (1956) released a study that built upon Allport's findings, entitled *Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction*. In this article, Horton and Wohl propose that because of the recent influx and continual growth of media, "one of the striking characteristics of the new mass media- radio, television, and the movies, is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationships with the performer." Further, Horton and Wohl "propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship*" (251).

Others who have also developed on the grounds Allport's theory created are Herek and Glunt. As authors of the *Interpersonal Contact and Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Gay Men: Results from a National Survey* that they conducted in 1993, they stated, "many heterosexuals in this country now express accepting and supportive attitudes toward gay people." They directly associate this progress with the application of the contact hypothesis, stating "heterosexual men and women who report knowing someone who is gay express generally more positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men then do heterosexuals who lack contact experiences" (239).

This progression towards acceptance can be seen by specifically analyzing popular shows within today's culture. A perfect example is *Will & Grace*, a primetime television show that lasted from 1998-2006 and entered syndication in 2002, as well as primetime shows such as *Grey's Anatomy, Greek, Ugly Betty,* and *Modern Family* and daytime shows such as *As the World Turns* and *One Life to Live.* Even though the viewership of these daytime shows is primarily female (leading some to believe they are not an accurate depiction of what is being accepted in society), they are still valid representations of the onscreen evolution of homosexuality.

In discussing *Will & Grace*, recognition must be given to one of its greatest predecessors. Ellen DeGeneres's critically acclaimed role in *Ellen* is generally regarded by most as a breakthrough within media and culture. *Ellen* presented audiences with the realization that homosexuality was very much a part of culture, which may have opened the door for the reception of *Will & Grace*. However, *Ellen* did not have the varied viewership or prestigious recognition that was garnered by *Will & Grace* (Schiappa et al 15). Furthermore, *Ellen* is generally regarded for the breakthroughs it established in culture for lesbians, not specifically gay males (which this paper focuses on).

Will & Grace is viewed by both men and women of all orientations, age groups, and ethnicities. During its peak, it averaged 17.3 million viewers a week (Schiappa et al 15), and even in its final season, it saw an average of 8 million viewers (USA Today). *Will & Grace* is one of the first primetime shows in which two of the four main characters are definitively gay. The show's namesake Will Truman, a gay attorney, lives with his best friend Grace Alder, an interior designer. Beyond Will's coiffed appearance, his orientation is not at first made aware to the viewer. Jack McFarland, however, fills the shoes of the exaggerated, stereotypical

homosexual male. Besides being self-confident, proud, and secure with his identity, Jack embodies the "flamboyantly gay, continually unemployed, self-described actor/dancer/ choreographer" (Schiappa et al 15). His heterosexual counterpart is Karen Walker, who makes up the last of the four main characters. She is married, works for Grace, and is known for her disregard of money that is made apparent through her "socialite and alcoholic" ways (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 88). Together, Jack and Karen rely heavily on their exaggerated characters to make the show's comedic relief, whereas Will and Grace are the balanced, somewhat normal characters.

Over its eight-year run, *Will & Grace* received much critical acclaim earning sixteen Emmy Awards and eighty-three nominations. To quote the *New York* magazine, "*Will & Grace* may have helped establish the vain, uptight, loveless gay male stereotype." This exploitation of stereotypes is the main criticism *Will & Grace* has received over the past decade. However, the advancements the show has made for the LGBT community– culture's changing perception of homosexuality– can be seen through applying the aforementioned theories.

By applying the Psychology's Contact Hypothesis and Mass Communication's Para-social Contact Hypothesis analysis to *Will & Grace*, support is seen for the sociopolitical events that were occurring as the show aired. Just prior to the start of *Will & Grace*, and possibly spurred by the controversy *Ellen* created, gay marriage legislation reached the pinnacle of scrutiny with the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. Although the show had plenty of entendre-laden dialogue and two openly-gay main characters, *Will & Grace* took controversial issues a step farther. In the eighth season of *Will & Grace*, America watched as Will married Vince (his longtime on-again off-again love affair) and the two raised a son together. This not only contradicts the heterosexual idea of marriage and The Defense of Marriage Act, but also the

common perception that a same-sex couple cannot properly raise a child. Furthermore, this union is an example of just one instance of the egalitarian ground *Will & Grace* established for LGBT community.

Will & Grace is known for opening the door for many other homosexual-friendly primetime shows to follow (Schiappa et al 15). Homosexuality as depicted in the media has evolved from the supposed heterosexual living situation of Will and Grace, to Noah and Luke consummating their relationship on *As the World Turns*. This progression shows that slowly but surely homosexual relationships are becoming more and more common onscreen.

Surprisingly and in contrast to *Will & Grace*, *As the World Turns* has been boycotted by many gays for not being "gay enough." This is due to the fact that Luke and Noah's characters are not stereotypical gays. However, this shortcoming may speak volumes about the change in mindset on equality that is taking place within culture and represented by media. For instance, Noah and Luke's characters do not embody culture's stereotypical perception of the gay male as seen in the character of Jack McFarland from *Will & Grace*. Forbes March, who recently played the character of Mason, a "gay indie moviemaker" who is Noah's professor on *ATWT*, made this statement about the characters of Luke and Noah:

> Their gay characters aren't very gay! [Laughs]. If someone turned on the soap for the first time, I think it would take them a while to figure out Mason was gay. Let's face it — Luke and Noah are two J. Crew guys, two of the nicest and most wholesome gay boys you'll ever meet. (AfterElton)

As the World Turns represents just one instance by media of homosexuality being depicted in a "normal" light that has generally only been reserved for heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, by erring on the side of normalcy, representation and depiction of homosexual

characters does not try to exaggerate or play upon perceived homosexual stereotypes. An example of this can be seen in the portrayal and dialogue used by the characters of Kyle and Oliver in *One Life to Life*. Phrases in Kyle and Oliver's dialogue such as "I am not a home-wrecker," and even "I love you," all express a perception that a homosexual relationship functions no differently than a heterosexual relationship. The casting of the characters of Kyle (a police officer) and Oliver (a convict), neither of which express outward signs of homosexuality such as being overtly feminine, make it possible to conceive that homosexuality is no different than heterosexuality. From this balanced perception of homosexuals that does not monopolize on stereotypical gay qualities, an individual's orientation becomes only one facet of their character instead of the complete definer.

One organization that has recently seen much success in the cultural progression towards equality is the Human Rights Campaign:

> The Human Rights Campaign is America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all. (Human Rights Campaign)

Most recently, the Human Rights Campaign worked alongside the National Equality March (NEM) which took place on Sunday, October 12, 2009. At this march, hundreds of thousands turn up to show support in Washington, D.C. and according to NEM, "The NEM put queer issues back on the national agenda after years of both parties trying to keep all of them [with the exception of] same sex marriage from being addressed in any way at all in Congress and the media." Furthermore, this march helped create the newly formed Equality Across America,

which "exists to support grassroots organizing in all 435 Congressional Districts to achieve full equality."

These efforts in politics reflect the onscreen proliferation of homosexual characters in almost all major networks. One example is the America's Broadcasting Channel (ABC), who has been instrumental in promoting "a new kind of family." The channel hosts numerous LGBT friendly shows in its primetime line-up, including *Grey's Anatomy*, *Greek*, *Ugly Betty*, and *Modern Family*.

Grey's Anatomy, a show as diverse as its viewing audience, has depicted an onscreen lesbian relationship between characters Callie Torres and Erica Hahn (*Grey's Anatomy*: "Piece of My Heart"). It has also presented a controversial episode that questioned the Army's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy (which, according to *The Washington Post*, remains in effect until President Obama plans to address it in 2010), where two gay soldiers' relationship was exposed (*Grey's Anatomy:* "The Becoming").

Greek, as its name implies, follows the lives of college students in sororities and fraternities. A blooming interracial, gay relationship between fraternity boys Calvin and Grant is very much a part of its developing storyline in the third season (*Greek:* "The Day After"). The gradual onscreen development of Calvin and Grant's relationship shows how a same-sex couple faces the same struggles as an opposite sex couple (*Greek:* "The Half Naked Gun").

Similarly, *Ugly Betty* and *Modern Family* both have main characters in gay relationships. *Ugly Betty* depicts the flamboyant, fashion savvy character of Marc St. James who falls for a very unlikely candidate represented by the unkempt, fashion ignorant character of Cliff. This odd coupling supports the typically heterosexual idea that opposites really do attract. In addition,

Modern Family, ABC's newest comedy about families, portrays characters Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker, boyfriends of five years, and their adopted a Vietnamese daughter named Lily. *Modern Family* addresses how culture defines who can be a family and plays off culture's stereotypical impressions of same-sex couples through skillfully crafted humor.

In retrospect, these shows represent just a slice of the LGBT movement that is unfolding on television. *Will & Grace*, through humorous overtones, kept the need for equality in the public's eye. Furthermore, it helped introduce audience members to believable gay characters. *Will & Grace* also helped enable shows like *As the World Turns, One Life to Live, Grey's Anatomy, Greek, Ugly Betty,* and *Modern Family* to evolve from the stereotypical characters that were ideally homosexual, to characters whose orientation is just one dimension of who they are. In other words, the separation of those who identify with the LGBT community and those who identify with heterosexuality is gradually becoming less of an issue. Legislation promoting equality is more than ever a focus of the government. For example, same-sex marriage is now accepted in five out of the fifty states.

The evolution of homosexual characters in media and the resulting broader acceptance of the LGBT community within culture give credence to the ideas presented in Allport's Contact Hypothesis and in Horton and Wohl's Para-social Hypothesis. Although the acceptance and rights of the LGBT community still has ground to gain, the media's more accurate portrayal of homosexual characters leads the way. By depicting homosexuals as in-depth, multi-faceted human beings, no different from their heterosexual counterparts, media speaks to the equality we can hope to see championed within our very diverse society.

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