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### Policing Identity

I initially began this project wanting to see what role sexual orientation identity played in our ability to interact with other communities and groups on our campus. I combined this interest with my own personal experience of seeing how geographical location prior to entering the University also plays a role in the way in which we take in the world around us and interact with us. The reason why geography-where we are from-can be a very much salient piece of our identity because it is a difference which everyone must undoubtedly encounter upon relocating to the University. With that being said being from a place that is “kind of boring” (Lily) like the suburbs has to be worth looking into. Even if it doesn’t appear to produce the personalities that being from rural and urban areas. However, these suburban spaces produce ideologies nonetheless. With that being said, I also wanted to see how the suburban areas which reproduce the dominant dependence on the culture of the middle-class, heteronormative family was complicated by identities which did not fit into this stand hold.

My ethnography project is titled Policing Identity for many different reasons. Not only did my research explore the role that being identified as LGBTQ student played within the University, but it also examined how other facets of a person’s identity further complicate their association with this group on campus, as well as the U of I as a whole. Originally I was seeking to answer where queer women of color fit into the dialogue on queer rights. Even more specifically what does being from a place such as the suburbs do to complicate this issue? While I feel that much work can be done to examine this subgroup on campus, as there is very little information

out there as we sit here tonight, with further reflection and the different directions that my research took me I realized that I was attempting to label people and place them in boxes and quite frankly they can't be-not that easily. I ended up at an intersection of a multitude of identities which left me asking what voices have been silenced, which narratives are invalidated in the LGBTQ movement? Furthermore, what role does geography play in marginalization specifically, what role do the suburbs play in the representation and presentation?

With that I decided to interview students about their experiences on campus as a member of the LGBTQ community, with some of those students also being members of other marginalized communities on campus. I posted flyers in various businesses and buildings around campus, as well as posting the same flyer in various boards and on my own facebook page, while the postings on facebook yielded no responses my flyers brought me 4 interviews in addition to the 3 interviews that I had conducted through interest from word of mouth. I received responses that challenged both me and my research to ask what it meant to be self-identified as both an LGBTQ student and what it meant to different people to be a minority on this campus.

I chose, for the purpose of my study to break down the demographics, not by individual person, but rather, within the subgroups of gender identification, sexual orientation, age and class (in school) representation, race/ethnic background, and geographic representation. Other demographic qualities which came up in my interviews such as one interviewee having a disability and another interviewee being an undergraduate student, returning to school and being a step-mother. I would like to take this time out to point out that gender identification is referent to the gender that each member of my study identified with, which did not/does not always aligned with perceived biological sex assigned during birth. Upon analysis of my interviews I was able to break down the demographics of my study as such:

Gender Identity:

- 4 men
- 3 women

Sexual Orientation:

- 2 Gay
- 2 Lesbian
- 1-2 Bisexual\*
- 1-2 Asexual\*
- One participant in my study described their sexuality in flux between asexuality and bisexuality during different stages of their life.

Age Representation

- 19-32 yrs. Old
  - o Median Age: 23 yrs. Old

Class

- 6 Undergraduate
- 1 Graduate

Geographic Representation

- 4 Urban
  - o 1 North Side
  - o 3 South Side
- 1 Suburban
- 2 Small Town
  - o Both small towns outside of the state of Illinois

While looking into my interviews three interesting trends appeared in the majority of them, they were:

### **No Presentation Other Than Heteronormativity in the Suburbs**

When discussing with interviewees the presence of queer life and queer culture in suburban spaces no one recalled seeing anything worth remembering outside of being straight in these areas. As one person recalled, “No, but I do know who live in these suburban areas that are [gay], but no you don’t really see it.” An even more revealing component about the suburbs was that a suburban areas proximity to Chicago-an urban area-the less likely it is that one would see queer representation or people of color as was said in my interview with Adriana:

“Um, depending on where we were, like the closer to the city suburbs, like I would be in Dalton or Harvey stuff like that and of course they were more black or if you go to places like I don’t know Lansing or Bolingbrook stuff like that, a lot of the people are white, or like non-minorities.”

### **Lack of Connectedness Within the LGBTQ Community**

Even within the LGBTQ community there was a dominance of gay presentation over lesbian and bisexual presentation. All of these identities, extremely exceeded transgender identification on campus. As a far as queer as a label of sexual orientation on this campus, In all of my interviews I asked, “When I say the word queer what is the first thing that comes to mind?” all of my interviews elicited different answers that did not always align with what is taught as any sexual identification that lies outside of heterosexual identification:

- “Somebody who is of the LGBTQ community. Somebody who uh partakes in those activities. Somebody who has those urges to be with someone of the same sex gender. You know that’s all that’s all.”
- “Queer? I think of, the best definition I can think of is weird. Um not normative. Uh so anything that’s not normal that’s not in the sexual binary of straight, well uh actually it’s not really a binary, of straight gay, but uh it’s pretty much, queer is anything that is not straight. Uh anything, if you have any type of curiosity, transgenders, um all things that fall in that category that doesn’t appeal to man, woman, heterosexual. “  
“Um, yea, yea, good question, {pause} yea queer I guess includes all sorts of identities that um, I think queer often uh can encompass gender and sexual minorities so lesbian, gay, intersex, uh gender queer, it would fall under, uh asexual, so anything uh that would subvert or doesn’t fit neatly into heteronormativity. Um, yeah anything that doesn’t um, doesn’t fit neatly in the gender binary, male/female. Or within heterosexuality as well.”
- “Um a gay, person. I guess more specifically a gay male, or gay white male. [pause] yeah”
- “Uh queer? Hmm queer? Let’s see queer is like Jack from Will and Grace, very flamboyant, and...musical {laughs}”
- “I think it’s like the catch all term for everyone else who’s a member of the rainbow community who can’t find a better place to fit. For a while, I used that label and I’m trying to transition to one which is more definitive. Simply because I think it requires so much explanation that I’m not sure it does much as far as a label. If that makes any sense?”

Something worth noting was that all of the women had a more negative, stereotypical connotation with the word queer than all of the men that I interviewed. This idea of flamboyance as well as Whiteness was apparent as queerness was compared to a character named “Jack” from the hit television series “Will and Grace”. One of the men in my study commented that he thought the word queer was a word that was that, “I think it’s not that I think the label is bad, I think it’s a very necessary label. I think people who are outside of the LGBTQ community are not understanding of what that label means yet. That it can have these different functions that it can mean this umbrella of things, and so I think that we as members of the community need to work toward defining what that’s going to mean for us, or what different possibilities of meaning that has for us that we want to be communicating with that term. This lack of connectedness with representation and defining of terms within the community sheds light on the fact that some people do not feel as integrated within the LGBTQ community as others. After mentioning the fact that quad day was the only time which Bryan saw the community and after that “things just don’t work out” making it harder for him to reach out to the community, this was also conjunct with the fact that he felt even more out of sorts within the University setting because “it’s already hard being Black...I’m Black so that’s a small group on campus, and then I’m gay as well so it’s an even smaller group of gay Blacks on campus, so it’s very hard for me to reach out.”

### **Policing Identity**

Before the ethnographic part of my study even began I was forced to confront what was the difference between a climate of tolerance and one of acceptance at the University of Illinois. As noted earlier, I posted flyers around various businesses and buildings on campus, only to discover that they had been removed from quite a few buildings and the majority of the businesses which I had posted in, that I would like to note did not come close to equaling the

amount of inquiries about interviewing that I received. While I completely disclosed the purpose of my studies to all managers of the businesses and received their permission to post in their businesses they were none the less removed from the bulletin boards. So while the businesses tolerated this study I was forced to come to the conclusion that my study was not necessarily accepted by all. This caused me to ask was this differentiation between tolerance and acceptance going to appear in the interviews that I conducted. When participants disclosed information about their social lives this same trend took place. While the classrooms have become spaces where conducive discussion can take place on the complications and differences in identity, this is not as of yet translating outside of it. Bryan also recalled about his experience on this campus that, "It's been mixed, I would have to say, both good and bad. I've had extremes of both. Um, good mostly because I appear masculine or heterosexual on the surface, of at first glance to most people. So I really don't get the looks that my other flamboyant gay counterparts would get. No one's really yelling out of cars calling me a fag, but I have seen it happen here." What Bryan is able to inherently do through his gender presentation of dressing and enjoying traditionally male activities is identified as a process called covering by theorist Kenji Yoshino. This is defined as a process through which as person is able to hide the characteristic that would stigmatize them from the rest of society, this is not be confused with passing which implies that people are unaware that the stigmatizing characteristic even exists, but rather it is just toning down the quality for the benefit of others. This concept of covering was also exemplified in Adriana's story that she would not bring her partners back to her dorm so that others around her would not feel uncomfortable although she often calls when she had to witness the opposite-the presentation of straight sexuality- without any since of covering. Lily also mentioned the fact that she thinks she may not get it as bad as others on campus is because she has traditionally

feminine features and would not be associated with being a “butch.” Leading to a perceived ideology of carving out what spaces were allowed to be queer here in a visible way. This ideology was most salient within the bar culture. In every interview where bars came up as a part of someone’s social life in the interview, the bar C-Street came up as a comfortable place to hang out.

C-Street is the name of a bar on Chester Street in downtown Champaign near the terminal. I think that is worth noting that this bar is not on campus however, many of the students on this campus see this as a safe haven because, “It’s a gay bar so that thing is supposed to happen there. Like a comfortable atmosphere.” In my interviews it was expressed that people felt uncomfortable expressing “that thing”, as in their affection or sexuality towards a person because their sexual orientation. This was even more so true when I interviewed people that were also members of other marginalized groups, especially those of race. As there are bars that do allot a space for gay expression such as “Thursgays” at Murphy’s Bar on Green St, only one person of color that I interviewed even knew of it’s existence and they had never been. This has caused to ponder on who is allowed to be queer where? In two of my interviews, it was brought up the scenario of LGBTQ couples kissing at campus bars. When the participants were White and male, although people did look, it was soon ignored, being assimilated into the bar culture that night, the interviewee expressed a great sense of pride in this moment. However, in another interview, when both participants were minorities, and women, they were harassed to a point that they had to leave the bar and they asked for the police to get involved, by which the officer responded by telling them to just break apart instead of reporting as a hate crime as the girls had wanted. This interviewee responded by saying that at this moment “I feel it wouldn’t have gotten as violent, but even still, I feel as if the cops would have protected the white girls more, than they did my

friends.” It is at this moment that it can be seen how LGBTQ problems in our society as far as acceptance goes can heavily exacerbated by other qualities which stigmatize people in our society.

One part of this study which I wished to be able to do more in depth analysis would have been the archival research which I put together. I came across a lot of interesting photographs that tracked the LGBTQ movement on this campus. There was very little representation of race outside of White on campus, and when it did happen it was an occasional Black man. There were pamphlets from seminars where issues in the LGBTQ community were discussed. There was some mention of the intersectionality of race and sexuality. There was no mention of issues within the community of those with disabilities. This may have much to do with the fact that those who do not have disabilities do not see those that do as sexual beings when in fact they are and “ interestingly I lived next to, well I actually think he was a door away from me or two to the left, but anyway, he was also gay. And so I found it interesting that we could never connect in that way because it just wasn’t as important.” (Kevin) There is much work to be done to address disability within the LGBTQ community here on campus.

This study most certainly opened my eyes to a lot of hidden aspects of campus here. The students that I did interview did describe themselves as well adjusted to the campus and generally happy with their time here. In addition to that when it was it was mentioned in my interviews, people were particularly content with the resources provided by the LGBT center and the counseling programs. However, there is much work to be done that addresses why this climate in the professional settings is not translating to the social sphere. As a campus we have become more tolerant here, but as far as true expression of non-normative lifestyles, we have a long way to go.

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