“Spelling Sexuality:
An Ethnographic Study on Language and Queer Culture with UIUC Undergraduate Students”
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About the Author
I am a senior undergraduate student in the departments of Psychology and Spanish, Italian & Portuguese; I will receive my Bachelors of Science in Psychology and Bachelor of Arts in Spanish this current May. I am also a Counseling Center Paraprofessional (CCP) and work with the Counseling Center to facilitate workshops and conduct outreach on campus, with a special focus on marginalized populations like persons with disabilities and LGBTQ-identified individuals. As a CCP, I work with the Sexual Orientation Diversity Allies (SODA) committee at the Counseling Center, where I have facilitated Ally trainings and have co-facilitated a workshop on multisexuality. I identify as an LGBT- and Trans-Ally and special interests include mental health, social work, social justice, education, bilingualism and linguistics. This specificity of this research was sparked by my own personal experiences growing as an Ally, and the questions and even confusion I have perceived from my parents, other adults, and peers regarding the term “ queer.” In Cameron and Kulick’s 2003 work Language and Sexuality, the authors explain the interchangeable nature between “ sex,” “ gender,” and “ sexuality.” This may be because “some speakers still cling to traditional beliefs (e.g. that the way women or men behave socially and sexually is a direct expression of innate biological characteristics)” (p. 5). As time passes, how are these “traditional beliefs” changing? And how is that reflected by language?

Research Question

This research analyzes the use of language and how it may promote or neglect queer culture on the UIUC campus. It focuses on how undergraduate UIUC students use the term “ queer”, “homosexual”, “ gay”, etc. and the connotations attached to these words. Main research questions include:

· How do students use terms regarding sexuality (i.e. “homosexual” and “ queer”) on campus?
· What terms are being eliminated or replaced from popular vocabulary?
· How are students on the UIUC campus reclaiming certain words or terms regarding queer culture?
· How does this process neglect or promote queer culture on campus?
· What differences lie in the vocabularies among LGBTQ-identified and non-LGBTQ identified (straight) students?
Research Method

Interviews compose the majority of this research, supplemented with archival and general publication research. Participants for interviews were found largely via word-of-mouth, although information was also posted in various social networking sites, such as groups on Facebook pertaining to the UIUC student population. The interviews were structured, but with room for alterations to provide flexibility for each participant and their own backgrounds and experiences. The following questions were in the majority of the interviews:

· What words or terms do you often hear that describe an individual’s sexual orientation?
· In what contexts do you most often find yourself talking about sexual orientation?
· What words or terms do you hear most often regarding non-straight sexual orientation?
· How would you define the word “queer”?
· Have you ever used the word “queer”? How so, or in what context?
· If the answer is no to the above question, can you think of a reason why you may not use this term to describe yourself or others?
· What connotation does the term “queer” provide for you?
· How has your understanding of this word/term changed during the course of your time on the UIUC campus?
· How supportive do you feel the UIUC campus is regarding queer or LGBTQ culture (resources, visibility, etc.)?
· How often (per day, week, month) do you hear the word “queer”? “Homosexual”? What about phrases like “That’s gay” or “no homo”?

Participants

Five participants in total were interviewed. Five identified as white, two identified as female, two identified as male, and one identified as trans or gender-queer. In terms of sexual orientation, one participant identified as bisexual and/or queer, another identified as queer, and three identified as straight. Participants identified as the following: Five as white, two as female, two as male, and one trans/gender-queer. Originally, the target population was aimed to be a representative sample of students at the UIUC, with a range differing in gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc. However, the five interviews lacked any racial diversity, and 3 of 5 participants are straight-identified (for sexual orientation). Places of origin or particular background traits/upbringings were not discussed in a majority of the interviews. All interviews were conducted in either the participants’ respective homes or the home of the interviewer. Pseudonyms are used for all participants to retain confidentiality.
Background

The development of language, especially pertaining to sexuality, has been a topic of much discussion. Cameron and Kulick (2003) state in Language and Sexuality, “...if we are interested in the linguistic behavior of a group of people defined by their sexual identity, it is surely important to investigate how that identity is or is not made relevant across a range of situations, from the rituals in which it is most likely to be salient (e.g. placing or a personal ad or participating in a drag performance) to the most mundane encounters of everyday life” (p. 135). It is with this idea in mind that these interviews were conducted – what language is used today to describe sexual orientation – particularly on a college campus, like the University of Illinois? What terms do students use to describe their behaviors? Are these terms different from how they describe their overall identities? How do these identity formations then influence the use of certain language? As Cameron and Kulick state, “Everyone may have sexuality, but not everyone defines their identity around their sexuality” and “sexuality does not include only those preferences and practices that people explicitly identify as fundamental to their understanding of who they are” (p. 8). Terms describing sexual orientation, for either oneself or others, has dramatically changed - “…the very possibility of making statements like ‘I am a heterosexual / a homosexual / a lesbian / gay / queer / bi...’ (which is to say, explaining who one is in sexual terms) has not existed throughout history, and it still does not exist in all societies” (p. 8). Stereotypes and stigmas have always existed for many identities, including non-straight identities: “Homosexuality...did come to be associated with specific linguistic traits. A lisp in a man, for example, has for a long time been widely imagined to be, if not a dead giveaway, then at least a strong clue that he may or may not be heterosexual. If that lisping man should mention hair or flowers or poodles, then the game is all but up. And if he should happen to employ a qualifier like ‘lovely’, ‘adorable’ or ‘fabulous’ while chatting about a hairdo, a hyacinth or Fifi, then the prosecution can rest its case. The man is a fag” (p. 76). Today, and especially on a college campus, the variety of behaviors may be different, but there are still varying beliefs on what it means to be “gay” or “queer” in this environment.

Archival Research

One primary source is a document describing the University of Illinois’ Gay Liberation Front (GLF), “an organization devoted to the advancement and defence of the rights of both male and female homosexuals through education of the general public, social organization of the homosexual community, and protest actions when necessary.” According to the archive database of Student Life, 1970-1979 (http://www.library.illinois.edu/archives/slc/researchguides/timeline/decades/1970.php) the GLF at UIUC was organized in 1970; however, according to a different source, the University of Illinois’ Archives Timeline and the Urbana-Champaign IndyMedia Center Women’s History Timeline (http://www.bonniefortune.info/MG/timeline.html), in 1971, “The first known gay group on campus organizes the Gay Liberation Front (a branch of the New York originated group.) It remains closeted until 1973.” Therefore, this document may not have been produced until 1973 or later. The document describing the GLF, as well as advertising for a “free coffee hour” on campus predominantly uses the term “homosexual.” Currently,
the term “homosexual” may still be used, but its connotation has become more negative, as many associate the term with a time when being identified as non-straight meant to have a mental illness, as diagnosed in the DSM. This clearly shows how one term regarding LGBTQ life has changed on the UIUC campus.

A second primary source is a newspaper article from the Parkland Prospectus, dated Wednesday, October 11, 1978, which is titled “Student says best discos are gay.” The author is unknown – an editor’s note states: “The following is an opinion from a person who wishes to remain anonymous because of the social attitudes still predominant today.” The predominant term regarding sexual orientation in the article is “gay” – perhaps more telling is that, despite an article praising “gay-oriented” discos, the editor’s note reinforces the rarity at which non-straight sexual orientation, or establishments considered “gay friendly” are discussed. The Parkland Prospectus, according to its website (http://www.prospectusnews.com) has been produced by students of Parkland College, in Champaign, IL, since 1969, and is still in operation. Despite the fact that the article is in fact not discussing the UIUC campus specifically, it does discuss discos in Urbana and in “downtown Champaign” - areas relevant to and frequented by UIUC students. Another article, also published by the Parkland Prospectus on Wednesday, October 18, 1978, is a direct response from a reader (although writer’s name is “withheld”) regarding the article described above. The article is titled, “One student does not want gay bars to turn into ‘freak shows’.” The author writes, “A lot of gays feel that straights go in [the discos] to make them into a freak show…I agree that straights will stereotype gays along with the many other prejudices. Why can’t we all be people, instead of intruders.” The dichotomy between “gays” and “straights” illustrates a clear segregation of sexual orientation. Like the first article, it is not the language that was the most striking feature but the overall sentiment regarding attitudes towards non-straight individuals – the anonymity, as well as blatant expressions of fear (“…when they see two men who look gay, they make jokes and sometimes violently beat them”). During the interviews, interviewees were asked how they feel that the campus climate is regarding LGBTQ students; most feel that it is overall fairly positive.

These primary documents and prompted questions for further research. Why were these documents created? It seems that they were meant to raise awareness or a sense of “visibility” to the gay community during a time when being gay may have been equated to being a “freak.” However, the specific language is still questionable – obviously, the term “homosexual” was (and still is by most) thought to be a “politically correct” term. So what negative terms were used at that time? What terms did students of the GLF use? What on-campus bars (or “discos”, if you will), if any, were “gay-oriented”? Which ones were especially violent?

**Interviews**

Interviews consisted of asking questions regarding sexual orientation, particularly non-straight identities. Specific words were discussed, such as “gay”, “homosexual” and most importantly, “queer.” We also discussed certain colloquial phrases such as “that’s gay” or “no homo” – terms often used casually by the student population but can also be viewed as derogatory terms towards those who might identify as gay or a non-straight sexual or gender identity.
Not surprising was the ride range of answered received when asked about the definition of the word “queer.” For example, some still retained the negative connotation of the word as a slur – many participants reflected back upon their parents’ views or uses of the word “queer” as an insult. Another student, Jamie, a senior in Computer Science Engineering, felt rather ambiguous about the word – “Generally, just...when someone uses the word queer, I just think...a gay person. I don’t really use it or hear it.” Jamie, like many others, only see “queer” as pertaining to sexual orientation. Similarly, Andrew, a senior in General Engineering, when asked how he would define “queer,” responded:

“Queer can mean, one: Curious. Which I have used, and have known people that use it in such a way, and two: The second meaning of queer being sexual orientation towards one of the same gender.” He continues, “I guess if that if it came up in conversation, I would probably use either gay, or lesbian, or homosexual, if that... I don’t know. I guess “queer” just seems like an odd word to me, I guess. I prefer the curious meaning (laughing) rather than the sexual orientation meaning.”

Others, on the other hand, like Rebecca - a straight-identified Anthropology major, with experience in some Gender and Women’s Studies curriculum – sees it to be “…something that covers a broad range of gender identity, sexual identity, and... can be used very positively.”

Similarly, the word “homosexual” sparked differing opinions. “Sam” – a queer-identified Anthropology and GWS major – expressed distaste for the word: “I hate it. It sounds so clinical” and referred to the historical context that “homosexuality” was diagnosed as a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until as late as 1974. Homosexuality was also usually a criminal offense from the late 1920s to the 1940s (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 75). In contrast, other students like Andrew stated that “homosexual” or “homosexuality” is his “go-to word when describing sexuality.” This illustrates a very common belief that “homosexual” is still the most agreeable or politically correct term to use. Outside of Gender & Women’s Studies curriculum, it is very rare to find students who understand the historical context of that word, and how it may actually cause negative feelings for some individuals, like Sam.

There are also very popular phrases like “no homo” or “that’s gay” – both often used to describe something other than sexual orientation, but that do provide quite a bit of controversy. For example, “no homo” is often used by individuals when saying something affectionate or complimentary to someone of the same gender-identity, but they do not wish their comment to be perceived as a come-on or for them to be seen as non-straight (sexually or romantically). While some students like Andrew had never even heard the term “…until you [the interviewer] just said it!” and was clearly confused when the phrase was mentioned, others have heard it used quite frequently, and it has apparently been becoming more commonly used on campus. Like many other words and phrases, there are mixed feelings – some people like Jamie do not see the phrase as being negative and does not even necessarily associate the phrase “no homo” with sexuality. For example, Jamie states:

“No homo”? Um... I think that’s very similar. Again, I try not to use it, I have used it before, but I mean, yeah. For me, again, it’s all about connotation, and you know, with that phrase, saying something is gay, I don’t necessarily like, associate that with.... You know, with gay people. It doesn’t mean it’s associated
with gay people, at all. It’s a… for me, it’s more like a slang term, like if you call somebody an asshole or something. If you take it literally, then… we don’t really know what that means. But, and again, if you say “that’s gay” or you call somebody gay, like, those are two totally different meanings. And, you know, if you call something gay, that doesn’t mean that you’re saying being gay or something is a bad thing, but… that’s just my personal interpretation of it.

Others like Rebecca see the phrase “no homo” as being blatantly homophobic — “…no one cares, you don’t have to justify [your sexual orientation]…”

Another common term is “that’s gay” — often used to describe something disagreeable, negative, or stupid. Rebecca speaks about the phrase “that’s gay”:

“…it’s sidelining people who identify as gay, being gay is not a bad thing, and you are making it into this negative, bad thing when you are using that phrase. Because it’s never used in a positive context, it’s not like, “Oh, I really like you’re shirt, that’s gay!” It’s more like, “Oh, I hate this homework, it’s gay.”

Though still heard, it may be that the usage of the term is waning; when asked about how often he hears the term, “That’s gay” or something similar, Andrew responds:

“Um… not very often anymore. I would say, since I came to college, far less — I would say, in high school, it was a kind of thing where I expected to hear it… probably ten times a day, and then, now that I’m on campus and actually… I think the awareness is much higher here, and especially with the group of friends I’m in, it’s much more common knowledge of its derogatory meaning and the understanding of it, so… today, I probably only hear it when I’m outside of my normal group of friends. So maybe… twice a month?”

When asked about his opinion, Jamie responded, “‘For me, again, it’s all about connotation, and you know, with that phrase, saying something is gay, I don’t necessarily like, associate that with…. You know, with gay people.” Others like Sam, who self-identify as gay or queer, use it themselves, although ironically. It may be that “recent/current understandings of homosexuality and its relationship to language…are framed and dominated by the concept of identity” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, 75); and those who identify as “gay” or “queer” may have a very different understanding of these terms as opposed to straight-identified individuals who do not have the same feelings of marginalization or “otherness.”

Findings

Main observations were a wide variety of definitions for one word, like “queer.” There was also slight evidence of a reclamation process, such as Sam and Elizabeth using the term queer to describe themselves, or jokingly saying something is “gay.” The term “queer” overall is slowly spreading, academically to socially. Overall, Sam has a good conclusion:

“The important thing about “queer” is that it allows for… you gotta have the ability to self-identify as whatever you want… you know? Trans masculine, gender queers… it’s nice to be able say “I’m
queer.” Not everybody likes having to explain themselves. It’s an important use. There’s not an alternative to “queer” – I think it’s a really important word in that sense.”

This research also prompted further questions:

· What other factors relate to students’ vocabularies regarding sexual orientation and queer culture—race, class, field of study?

· How does “in-group” language become shared with others?

· What differences lie in the vocabularies among students in different colleges (i.e. LAS vs. Engineering vs. Business)

Further research would include separate periods of observation to study students and their use of language, paying special attention to terms regarding queer culture. Another focus on social media, such as social networking sites, would offer interesting insight into how language used via internet may differ from face-to-face language.

References