

Is This Who I Am?—Fitting into the Stereotype by Nicholas Pierpont Corbell

My name is Nick Corbell, and I'm a male college student who happens to be gay. Now, I'm not an "oh-my-God!" gay, nor am I an "uh uh, honey, that top is all wrong" gay, but for some reason that image gets stuck in people's heads when I tell them that I am indeed gay. In many ways, coming out was one of the most liberating experiences of my life. I'm free to do whatever I want under the banner of homosexuality: I can wear skimpy, too-tight clothing that doesn't suit me, put on makeup, act effeminate and cutesy, or cry at the drop of a hat, without society so much as batting an eye. It's a pain in the ass.

The gay stereotype is that we're *all* promiscuous, shallow individuals who act extremely feminine and obsess over fashion. The problem is that there are more young gays who don't fit the stereotype than those who do. In his 2005 *Time* cover story titled "The Battle Over Gay Teens," John Cloud quotes one-time *Young Gay America Magazine* editor-in-chief Michael Glatze as saying, "Today so many kids who are gay, they don't like Cher. They aren't part of the whole subculture. ... I don't think the gay movement understands the extent to which the next generation just wants to be normal kids."

There seems to be a constant pressure to "act gay" from others in the gay and straight communities. Look at the news media, which constantly focuses on extreme examples like gays marching down the street with pink lip gloss and Prada bags, shouting gay pride. Look at shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* which similarly depict the fluff and flutter of the brightly colored, empty-headed peacock that is the gay male. These portrayals make people expect that sort of behavior from gay men, almost demand it. From other gays, my speech is now open to unwarranted sexual innuendo. I can't notice a cool pair of sunglasses a guy wears without "Ooh? So you think he's cute?" popping up. I wasn't looking; I just thought the sunglasses were cool... that's not so unusual, right? It's the automatic assumption that everything I do is based on my sexuality that's frustrating. The smallest flick of the wrist speaks volumes about how much of a homosexual I really am.

But why cling to the stereotype if you're gay? Is it so that members of the gay community, who went through their own ordeals and have experienced the same feelings, will recognize you and say, "You're like us" and "Welcome"? Hooray! Rainbows galore! But that's not who everyone wants to be, and it's certainly not what every gay guy aspires to. What about being the garbage man, the postal worker, or the fellow behind the counter at the convenience store, laid back in his chair smoking a Camel and flipping through old news articles? There's a difference between the average gay guy, the one the media portrays, the one people think of when the word "gay" is uttered, and the gay average guy who's just an everyday person.

A year out of the closet I noticed that if I didn't say I was gay, if I didn't give any signals through my behavior or appearance, if I acted as normally as I could, people would treat me the same as any other friend or acquaintance. I could be their "friend," as opposed to their "gay friend." Maybe it's just a touch of unintentional heterosexism, which is when people assume that everyone is straight. From a feminist view, heterosexism is an enduring means of ensuring male dominance over women, because it perpetuates the "need" for women to be paired up with men and thus to be controlled (cited in Szymanski and Carr 40). I don't know if that's the case these days, but what I do know is that I can't count how many times people have said to me something like, "Bet your girlfriend really appreciates you, eh?" Until I tell them I'm gay. Then, the most common look I get is one where it seems like their brains are shifting gears. I can almost see how they go over me and their memories of me, trying to pick out anything that "gave me away." "Yeah, he was always so quiet in school." "Oh, that's proly 'cause he was in the closet, you think?"

In that limbo of thought, when they're shifting gears, there's frequently a play of expressions on their faces; it's a deer-caught-in-the-headlights look, a look of puzzlement, embarrassment, and even

hurt or betrayal. Even if my being gay doesn't matter to them after I've been resituated in their minds, that look, fleeting as it may be, always feels like a branding iron. It seems like they believe I have lied to them. *You think because I'm unshaven, because I'm wearing something other than up-to-date fashion, that I deceived you?* Like everyone else, and especially like most teens and young adults, I just want to be myself and to act normally. Dr. Ritch Savin-Williams, the Director of the Department of Developmental Psychology at Cornell University, who has interviewed hundreds of teens with same-sex attractions, explains the situation perfectly: "Increasingly, these kids are like straight kids. Straight kids don't define themselves by sexuality, even though sexuality is a huge part of who they are" (qtd. in Cloud). And then there's me: once out of the closet, yes, I *could* be as gay as I wanted, but now I couldn't act like myself.

I suppose it's understandable that people feel disconcerted by those who don't fit the expected gay archetype, because as I said before, our culture propagates the stereotypes that people feel they know. In his story "I Like Guys," David Sedaris describes a scene where his seventh-grade math teacher pranced about the room, acting what would then have been called "faggoty," and Sedaris thinks, "*That's me he's talking about*" (82-83). As if that's the way we should all act. It's like a huge sign with bright neon lights spelling out "HOMOSEXUAL" should hang over our heads so people can avoid it, brace for it, or seek it out. Having the sign appear out of nowhere can be sudden, and not the most comfortable experience, including for those who are afraid that same sign might come crashing down on their own heads.

A guy doesn't just wake up homosexual and automatically slip into it—*oh well, just born that way I guess!* More often than not, it's a struggle to accept being gay, when as a little boy you assumed you would eventually like girls, go on dates, and maybe eventually marry and have kids of your own. It's the happy ending, the fairy tale where you can pretend to be a shining knight for the beautiful damsel. You expect it, and you feel secure in your internalized heterosexism. And then you confront your own homosexuality, with its apparent "non-maleness" contradicting traditional male behavioral norms like avoidance of femininity and excessive emotionality. The result of this gender role conflict, at least according to a 2008 *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* journal article, is most often "depression, anxiety, emotional distress, loneliness, anger, conduct problems, substance abuse, and family and interpersonal problems" (Szymanski and Carr 41).

For me, it wasn't nearly so clinical. It was like having the rug pulled out from under me, the world turned upside down, and I couldn't tell anyone. I didn't want that big sign over my head, and even as I looked at other guys, everything I knew I was supposed to be screamed at me that it was disgusting. I *knew*, I felt, I was wrong, and weird, and it made my skin crawl. But at the same time, it felt perfectly natural, as seamlessly a part of me as my hands—I could *survive* without them, but I'd never be entirely whole. I'd be permanently, irrevocably crippled.

I said coming out was liberating, and that's true. I can call someone "fag" or "queer," or even sling "bitch" around in casual circumstances. I can, and did for a while, dress up, or in more explicit terms, dress for sex. I wasn't actually looking to hook up with anyone, but I wore stuff I thought was stylish and that would be attractive to other guys, advertising "I'm here and I'm queer," to steal a phrase. But the point is this: gays stereotype themselves—ourselves—and are stereotyped because it's somehow a validation: "*If you don't act the right way, you aren't gay, dear.*" This is what previous generations of gays in society have mandated by their actions, deliberately or not.

"Just because they're gay," says Savin-Williams, "they don't have to march in a parade. Part of it is political. Part is personal" (qtd. in Cloud). I decided being me was more important. It was why I decided to come out in the first place. I wanted to share all of myself with the people I love and respect, and not live a lie anymore. Going from one lie to another is just switching cages, from in-the-closet to multi-colored bars. I think I'll forego the rainbows and pink triangles, wear the worn-out sneakers and rumpled shirts grabbed out of the laundry, and just be who I am, like any other college student...who happens to be gay.

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