
Sociological Perspectives of Sexual Orientation and Inequality

The women's suffrage movement began in 1848 where the first women's rights convention was held. The goal was to gain support for equal rights and treatment for women and voting rights as well. The civil rights movement is rumored to have begun in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man after she had a long day at work and just wanted to sit. Although the civil rights movement actually began long before this incident and lasted until long after it the movements purpose was to gain equal rights for African American's across the country. In 1970 the first gay pride march took place in an effort to end discrimination towards the LGBT community and gain equal rights for all. Regardless of race or gender the gay community encapsulates many forms people. Below is a quote from Senator Tammy Baldwin. "All of us who are openly gay are living and writing the history of our movement. We are no more - and no less - heroic than the suffragists and abolitionists of the 19th century; and the labor organizers, Freedom Riders, Stonewall demonstrators, and environmentalists of the 20th century. We are ordinary people, living our lives, and trying as civil-rights activist Dorothy Cotton said, to 'fix what ain't right' in our society."

Although many efforts have been made to end prejudice and discrimination towards the LGBT community the fight still continues today. Examining the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist sociological perspectives helps provide an insight on what discriminations continue to persist against the gay community. When it comes to sexual orientation functionalist value monitoring sexual behavior to ensure traditional marital roles and family stability. Functionalist view family as the most important pillar in society and keep a strong emphasis on promoting family preservation through social arrangements that keep the family close to home. Functionalist force social norms surrounding the family because they believe this promotes healthy sexual activity that leads to traditional marriage. They believe social interactions that stray outside the family structure have a higher risk of engaging in premarital, extramarital, or homosexual activities. For functionalist the purpose of encouraging sexual activity in a traditional marriage is to ensure a bond between spouses and promote procreation in a legal stable relationship. Functionalist believe this provides children the best with the best example and resources to follow in the same footsteps. Although there are many statistics that debunk this theory functionalist believe homosexuality is not an acceptable substitute for heterosexuality. Functionalist believe is homosexuality were to become the norm that procreation will eventually become extinct and society would be viewed as dysfunctional and wrong. The conflict theory notes the functionalist beliefs and the conflict it creates in society and sheds light on many laws that have hindered gay rights and inequalities.

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The conflict perspective is observed by Gore Vidal. He makes a statement saying, "In order for a ruling class to rule, there must be arbitrary prohibitions. Of all prohibitions, sexual taboo is the most useful because sex involves everyone we have allowed our governors to divide the population into two teams. One team is good, godly, straight; the other is evil, sick and vicious". Vidal's statement focuses on how these perspectives create conflict within our society. The conflict is based on sexual orientation where straight heterosexuals have the advantage. It is mentioned that heterosexuals are granted privilege suggesting that being straight is what is normal which in turn promotes discrimination towards people who identify as homosexual. Privilege benefits include over 1,000 government benefits that are afforded to straight couple's vs gay couples. Amy Lind also observes how the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) contributes to the conflict perspective. The DOMA helped recognize heterosexism and the biases used to block future protective legislature for the LGBT community. She focuses mainly on the biases in the social welfare policy. She identifies three distinct policies that target the LGBT community as abnormal or deviant. The first bias can be found within the DOMA policies for healthy marriage promotion and fatherhood programs. The programs were promoted by President George W. Bush. The program funds education programs that support abstinence until marriage. However, Lind expresses concern for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students who do not have any access to sexual education that includes their sexual experience. This right is denied to the LGBT community in an effort to preserve the norms of a traditional family.

The second inequality aimed in favor of the heterosexual community creating a bias for homosexuals is found within the U.S. consensus and the definition used to define family and household. Lind identifies the U.S. consensus defines family as a group of two or more related by birth, marriage, adoption, or residing together and household consist of all people who occupy a housing unit. Under the U.S. consensus this identifies family vs nonfamily households. Family households are defined as "a household maintained by a householder who is in a family and includes any unrelated people who may be residing there," whereas a nonfamily household is "a householder living alone or where the householder shares a home exclusively with people to whom he/she is not related." Lind continues to argue that the definitions put forth by the US consensus create a favorable bias to marital unions over domestic partnerships and a higher status of traditional families over families of a different union. Lastly, the third bias sheds light on is the financial and health care status and stereotypes that pertain to the LGBT community despite the evidence that gay families have equal economic and medical needs as straight families. LGBT families are presumed to be childless having fewer family responsibilities and are viewed as having overall higher incomes dues to this false viewpoint. Therefore, making them unseen to poverty studies and policies.

Also, aside from providing care for HIV and AIDS the LGBT community is seen as not needing any economic, social, or health care services. The conflict theory highlights discrimination and biases from a legal civil rights point of view. The interactionist theory highlights biases on a

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social level. Previously stated in the conflict theory is a certain privilege provided to heterosexual individuals to legal rights provided by society. The interactionist theory mentions this same privilege from a social stand point. Imagine for a second people in society being outed for being straight or someone having to reveal or defend their gender to someone based on appearances or what color shirt they were wearing. Heterosexuals do not usually have this problem, the heterosexual lifestyle is supported and admired by society socially, culturally, and legally. Although homosexuality has been present in society for a well over 50 years now. Homosexuality has always been labeled with a negative connotation as abnormal, sinful, and inappropriate. This caused society to form a social prejudice against homosexuals called homophobia. Homophobia is defined as an irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuals and is mainly aimed towards gay men. Jonathan Kats observes the interactionist perspective and how sexual orientation has developed with a social significance. He states that the term heterosexual is a was invented by society and the term represents a word and a concept, a normality and a role, an individual and a group identity, a behavior and a feeling, and a sexual foundation dating back to the nineteenth century.

Of course, heterosexuality has been around long before it was actually defined or named. This definition created a staple for the expectation of men and their social existence. Interactionist also observe the development of gay identity and how the gay community discovers their gay identity. Coming out (being gay and disclosing it to others) has come to symbolize the pursuit of individual rights and self-identification (Chou 2001). Coming out implies not just the disclosure of a gay identity, but also the individual's positive attitude toward and commitment to that identity (Dubé 2000). The disclosure of a gay identity merges a private sexual identity with a public social identity (Cass 1979). To come out successfully, a gay individual needs social and institutional support, in the form of support from family and friends, legal protection from discrimination and violence, cultural acceptance, financial equality, and access to health services (D'Augelli 1998). The process of coming out to family members is particularly stressful for LGB youth. Fear of parental reactions has been identified as a major reason that LGB youth do not come out to their families (D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington 1998). Following disclosure, youth report verbal abuse and even physical attacks by family members. Youth who lived with their families and disclosed their sexual orientation were victimized by their families more often than were youth who had not disclosed (D'Augelli et al. 1998).

To avoid negative response from others, young lesbians and gay men hide their sexual orientation from family and friends (Rivers and Carragher 2003). Gay and lesbian youth may use one or more of the following concealment strategies: inhibiting behaviors and interests associated with homosexuality, limiting exposure to the opposite sex, avoiding exposure to information about homosexuality, assuming anti-gay positions, establishing heterosexual relationships, and avoiding homoerotic feelings through substance abuse (Radowsky and Siegel 1997).

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