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Gay Subculture Identification: Training Counselors to Work With Gay Men

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Abstract

Providing counseling services to gay men is considered an ethical practice in professional counseling. With the recent changes in the Defense of Marriage Act and legalization of gay marriage nationwide, it is safe to say that many Americans are more accepting of same-sex relationships than in the past. However, although societal attitudes are shifting towards affirmation of gay rights, division and discrimination, masculinity shaming, and within-group labeling between gay men has become more prevalent. To this point, gay men have been viewed as a homogeneous population, when the reality is that there are a variety of gay subcultures and significant differences between them. Knowledge of these subcultures benefits those in and out-of-group when they are recognized and understood. With an increase in gay men identifying with a subculture within the gay community, counselors need to be cognizant of these subcultures in their efforts to help gay men self-identify. An explanation of various gay male subcultures is provided for counselors, counseling supervisors, and counselor educators.

Keywords: gay men, subculture, within-group discrimination, masculinity, labeling

Providing professional counseling services and educating counselors-in-training to work with gay men is a fundamental responsibility of the counseling profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). Although not all gay men utilizing counseling services are seeking services for problems relating to their sexual orientation identification (Liszc & Yarhouse, 2005), it is important that counselors are educated on the ways in which gay men identify themselves and other gay men within their own community. To provide competent and non-discriminatory counseling services to the LGBTQ community in general, it is recommended that counselors have a relevant knowledge base about the terms, labels, and experiences encountered by these clients (Palma & Stanley, 2002).

As a profession, counselors need to be trained and stay informed of the legal and societal changes affecting gay men to best serve and advocate for them. The profession has made significant progress in helping gay men; however, some clinicians have not stopped utilizing harmful sexual reorientation therapies on their clients (Dziengel, 2015; Palma & Stanley, 2002; Rosik & Popper, 2014). These practices are no longer endorsed or supported by ACA or the profession, but counselors need to understand that it was not long ago that homosexuality was included as a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and counselors were and still are performing reparative therapies to change the sexual orientation of their LGBTQ clients.

The 2014 ACA *Code of Ethics* states that counselor educators are expected to train students to have knowledge and skills in working with multicultural clients, including gay men. However, while counselor educators are expected to stay abreast of trends and best practices for helping their clients, it can be difficult to recognize the constant changes occurring within the gay community (Lee, Ylioja, & Lackey, 2016). This may be linked to a paucity of counseling research pertaining to gay subcultures and how they are identified within the gay community. Without at least a minimal understanding of these subcultures, gay men may feel misunderstood by their counselor and unable to resolve issues of self-identification and acceptance. Gay men may not identify themselves as a member of a gay subculture; however, members of the gay community may label and attach a subculture to an individual involuntarily (Groves & Smith, 2014). In contrast, men who may want to identify within a specific subculture may be rejected by the subculture's norms and expectations for belonging (Graves, 2007).

The 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) emphasizes the importance of multicultural competency in training professional counselors (CACREP, 2009, Section 2 G.2.), and promotes strategies for eliminating intentional and unintentional acts of harm and discrimination. Counselors should not rely on their clients to explain their identity or label, as it can be viewed by the client as an unintentional form of discrimination if not broached appropriately. Counselors need to evaluate their own cultural awareness and understanding of sexual identification so they can properly advocate and seek social justice for their clients (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010), as well as gain trust in building a strong therapeutic relationship.

In order to provide competent counseling services to gay men, counselors need to be aware of their own sexual identity development. Knowledge about a specific multicultural group is not sufficient for best practice, as counselors need to explore their own sexual orientation and values (Kocarek & Pelling, 2003) to practice most effectively. Counselors engaging in multicultural counseling practices need to have a genuine interest in diversity, be comfortable with their similarities and differences to multicultural populations, and have direct experiences with a variety of diverse sociocultural groups (Stracuzzi, Mohr, & Fuertes, 2011). Direct experience with every gay subculture is not realistic or expected of counselors, but knowledge that subcultures exist will help counselors better understand their clients' labels. It is important for counselors to understand and be aware of the in-group diversity and differences within the gay male community (Cohler & Hammack, 2007).

Need to Belong

Although research suggests it is basic human nature to have a desire to belong to a group (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004), identifying with a minority group can cause gay men to be hesitant to come out and identify within and outside the LGBTQ community. Dziengel (2015) explained that identifying with a sexual orientation other than straight is still viewed less favorably by many persons and can be considered by some to be a choice or moral failing, even when some argue that society and people are accepting. Considering Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and his suggestion that having social connections and belonging is more important than our own primitive needs (food, shelter, sex), counselors need to understand how important it is for gay clients to feel they belong to a group. This can be difficult for many clients because Western culture promotes the idea that living as an individual and developing a sense of autonomy is highly desirable, yet it is not acceptable by society in general to belong to a minority group (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Clients may seek belonging within the LGBTQ community, but then feel discriminated against by the dominant culture.

Identity development can be especially difficult for gay men when they do not feel a sense of belonging in the straight world and also struggle to identify with the stereotypes and societal perceptions of the gay community. Because heterosexuality makes up the majority sexual orientation, and because people are willing to compromise their values and beliefs to identify with a preferred group (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004), gay clients may not be willing to come out and embrace their true identity. However, as acceptance of non-straight sexual orientations continues to grow, gay men are becoming more aware of the discrepancies they see between their own identity and the misperceptions and stereotypes society has attributed to them. The development of subcultures within the gay community allows gay men the opportunity to identify with a group of other gay men that are most similar to themselves (McGrady, 2016).

When gay men are able to come together as a community, they are able to support and advocate for one another through the distress they experience as a group (Savage, Harley, & Nowak, 2005). According to Baumeister and Vohs (2007), "When members perceive active competition with another group, they become more aware of members' similarity within their group and see their group as a means to overcome the external threat or competition they are facing" (p. 387). However, when they do not face a common external threat, division and discrimination within the group can occur. These outcomes happen because the group no longer experiences the common external threat they need to come together to contest. Without external threats to the community, hostility and division can occur within a group (Barclay & Benard, 2013). The Supreme Court's ruling to legalize gay marriage on June 26, 2015, is an example of recent victories for the LGBTQ community. While the elimination and reduction in external threats are celebrated within the community, the risk for division and conflict within the LGBTQ community itself rises.

It is critical that counselors help their LGBTQ clients understand and remember the history and successes they have had in advocating and supporting one another within their own community. This can help clients understand that identifying with a specific subculture can be beneficial, but it is also important to appreciate the victories and progress the community has had as a whole. Counselors can help clients find belonging

in a subculture and also recognize the similarities between other subcultures and the community overall.

Language and Labeling

The coming out process involves the identification and acceptance of a label other than straight (Dziengel, 2015). While identifying with a label other than straight is looked upon as unfavorable by many persons in society, failure to come out is also sometimes seen as a form of resistance or implies the individual has other negative psychological phenomenon (Groves, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006). Broad terms with strong negative stereotypes, such as “gay” or “homosexual” can understandably cause gay men to be resistant in accepting and identifying with these labels. Challenging misconceptions and stereotypes of these labels and redefining them for the client allows counselors to understand their true meaning and helps clients better relate and identify with them.

In the process of identifying a client’s preferred label, it is recommended that counselors ask the client if they identify with a specific subculture or preferred label within the LGBTQ community (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). Labeling in the LGBTQ community can be difficult and complicated because new labels are added and removed constantly from within the community. Counselors need to understand that a client’s sexual orientation identity may be different than their actual sexual orientation when identifying a label with a client. The client’s sexual orientation identity refers to their conscious identification or label they prefer to be called, even if it does not match their true sexual orientation (Gray & Desmarais, 2014). For example, a client may label their sexual orientation identity as bisexual, but their sexual orientation might truly be gay. Their sexual orientation is their actual physical attraction predisposition (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). Counselors help clients explore their sexual orientation in a safe and affirming manner so they can authentically label their true sexual orientation identity.

Depending on a client’s ability to self-accept, labeling can help them find value in identifying with a term, but it can also cause the client to realize that the term represents a minority group and is not preferred by the dominant culture (Savage et al., 2005). Helping clients understand what it means to belong to a minority group, but still find acceptance and belonging, is a responsibility counselors need to take seriously. It is imperative that counselors understand the concept of gay male subcultures and how they allow members to identify with a label that best represents them and provides a sense of belonging.

Importance of Masculinity in Relation to Gay Subcultures

Contrary to stereotypes that gay men are more effeminate than straight men, some gay subcultures embrace masculinity as a feature to which they are most attracted (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher, 2007). Levels of hairiness, physical strength, and body size are examples of the ways masculinity can be defined by these groups (Moskowitz, Turrubiates, Lozano, & Hajek, 2013). If gay men are attracted to men, it makes sense that they are attracted to traditional masculine traits. However, that is not the case for all gay men, as some are attracted to more effeminate men.

Men advertising themselves on dating apps or Web sites often refer to themselves as “straight-acting” with the intention of conveying they are more masculine or butch

(Payne, 2007). Others will say they are “straight-acting,” but are comfortable with their sexuality or being out. Counselors should ask clients to clarify and define a self-label of “straight-acting,” as it could be an indication of resistance to come out or live authentically. It is also an opportunity for counselors to educate their clients on the gay subcultures that are viewed as more masculine in nature.

Gay men self-label within their own community based on their anal penetrative roles. Men that identify as having a preference for insertion only are labeled as tops. Men preferring exclusively receptive roles are labeled as bottoms. For men with a desire to perform in both receptive and insertion roles, they are labeled as versatile. Finally, men who are versatile may identify as a versatile top or versatile bottom if they have a preference for insertion or receptive roles. Masculinity and penis size are significant variables in regard to enacted anal penetrative roles (Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). Further research is needed to understand the variables that determine one’s anal penetrative role and if this role changes depending on sexual partner or is a predisposition of their sexual role.

With changes in laws marking more equality for gay men and media slowly incorporating more gay symbolism and imagery, many in society are becoming more tolerant of gay men (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). However, there is still a preference for gay men to be masculine and exhibit more traditional roles (Poole, 2014). Media has portrayed sexual orientation through a straight lens and affected the ways gay men think they should behave. After the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, gay men identifying themselves as masculine embraced traditional masculinity and were recognized in the media for their non-traditional gay appearance (Poole, 2014). Gay sports leagues were created and gay men started to create their own subcultures within the gay community.

Masculinity is a feature that plays a role in defining gay subcultures. With Western culture favoring masculinity over femininity, those subcultures exhibiting and valuing more traditional masculine traits can be viewed as having more power or preference (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005). Gay men identifying as more traditionally masculine can find acceptance within a subculture valuing traditional masculinity, and exhibit discrimination and intolerance against other subcultures that tend to be more effeminate. Within-group discrimination can occur because although the subcultures are fundamentally different, they share the same general label of belonging to the gay community.

Gay Subcultures

The more we have in common with someone or with a group, the more we are able to identify with them. Sexual orientation as a category or classification is very broad and not individualistic, so it makes sense that there is a large variety of types of gay men and subcultures, each with unique individuals making up the group. In a recent study by Lyons and Hosking (2014), 44% of the surveyed population in their research study of gay men identified as being part of a gay subculture. Gay men seeking identification with a subculture can go online and fill out the Gay Cliques Census and enter their age, height, weight, waist size, and hairiness, and the census will classify them into a group (Hafertepen, 2011).

These subcultures are categorized mainly by physical appearance but also sometimes refer to a gay man's level of masculinity and sexual desire (Prestage et al., 2015). For unknown reasons, many subcultures have adopted labels that are synonymous with animal species. The most commonly found subcultures in media and through interactions with members of the gay male community are explored in the following section.

There are benefits for researchers, policymakers, and healthcare providers when groups of people are more clearly defined. To this point, gay men have been viewed as a homogeneous population, when the reality is that there are differences between the subcultures. Although bringing division into an already suppressed minority group is not encouraged, there can be benefits for both in and out-of-group members. The differences in sexual behaviors between the various subcultures tell us there are different physical and mental health concerns between them (Lyons & Hosking, 2014).

Bears

The Bear community is a subculture that has been researched since the 1980s when it was established by gay men that wanted to exclude themselves from the gay male community as a whole (Graves, 2007). Bears are gay men that exhibit more of a traditional "masculine" demeanor. They value heaviness, hairiness, and masculinity (Gough & Flanders, 2009). The Bear community was established during the times of the AIDS crisis (Manley et al., 2007), while other gay men sought to represent themselves as clean and well-shaven.

There are a variety of subgroups within the Bear community itself—

Grizzly Bears (White, hairy, heavier men), *Cubs* (younger hairy men), *Polar Bears* (older men with greying or white hair), *Big Teddy Bears* (men who are hairy, yet heavier than *Grizzly Bears*), *Otters* (men who are hairy but thin), and other classifications encompassing ethnic variations such as *Black Bears* (hairy men of color) or *Panda Bears* (hairy Asian or Pacific Islander men). (Moskowitz et al., 2013 p. 776)

Bears reject the image often associated with members of the gay male community; hairless, thin, fashionable, and feminine (McGrady, 2016). While sexual orientation is referred to as our biological attraction to a particular sex, it should be noted that social and environmental factors such as politics and media can have an impact on the physical and personality characteristics to which we are attracted. Bears tend to be attracted to other Bears and engage in more sexually deviant or socially unacceptable behaviors, such as voyeurism, fisting, urination, etc. (Moskowitz et al., 2013).

Bears are an organized and well-established subculture. They have their own retreats, conventions, bars, and even *Bear* magazine (Manley et al., 2007). In a study by Lyons and Hosking (2014), the Bear community reported the highest level of discrimination at 56% and the lowest level of self-rated health.

Cubs

Cubs are a subcategory of the Bear subculture. They identify as being younger, hairier men (Moskowitz et al., 2013). From a social standpoint, Cubs can be viewed as being new or inexperienced in the Bear community, but that is not always the case. Typically, they are labeled as Cubs because of their age. They may even act as an

apprentice to a Bear (Hollywood, 2016), learning the ins and outs of the organized Bear community (Manley et al., 2007). There are two subcategories of Cubs; Sugar Cubs (more feminine) and Muscle Cubs (more muscular).

Otters

Otters are often considered to be another subcategory of the overall Bear community. Many phone apps, such as Grindr, a phone application for gay men to hook-up (Heineman, 2016), and gay dating Web sites include Otter as a tribe or option to belong to or to describe oneself. Otters are typically much thinner than a bear, but still value the traditional masculine ideals (Sullivan, 2003). Otters are not divided by age like the Bears and Cubs. Otters are hairy and often have facial hair, but it is not required. Otters are welcomed by the Bear community both for their physically “masculine” traits and their non-stereotypical gay behaviors. (Gremore, 2015).

Wolves

The final subcategory of the Bear community is the Wolf. Much like the Otter, Wolves are considered to be part of the overall Bear community but have unique characteristics that set them apart. Physically, a Wolf is lean, muscular, and hairy (Hollywood, 2016). That is contrary to Bears and Cubs because they are overweight or obese in comparison to a Wolf. Bears and Cubs are susceptible to low self-esteem, whereas Wolves are typically attractive and physically more accepted by society’s perception of male attractiveness. Sexually, Wolves are perceived as being more aggressive than Bears or other members of the Bear community and could be considered the most sexually aggressive of any subculture (Gremore, 2015).

Twinks

Twinks are perceived in the gay community as being lean, young, and usually clean-shaven or hairless (Lyons & Hosking, 2014). The term Twink does not fit within the typical animal-referenced labels, but some members of the community will refer to a Twink as a Chicken (“The Gay Animal Kingdom,” 2011). However, research articles and social media use the word Twink more often than Chicken. When groups of Twinks or Chickens spend time together, they are referred to as a Chicken Coop. Another uncommon term used in the gay community is Giraffe. The term Giraffe refers to gay men that are exceptionally tall—6’5” or taller (“The Gay Animal Kingdom,” 2011).

Unlike Bears, Twinks do not have their own conventions, bars, or societies. There is not a well-established organization that represents Twinks at this time. Twinks are representative of most of the stereotypes surrounding gay men, and for that they are easily labeled or outed by members in and out-of-group. The Twink subculture became idealized in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the preferred subculture by Western gay men (Filiault & Drummond, 2007). Twinks are regarded as being open to hairstyles and fashion trends that are viewed as non-traditional or even feminine. In regards to their personality, Twinks express themselves in traditionally more feminine hobbies and interests. They are known to have limp wrists, higher voices, and seek friendships with females. Twinks can be viewed as self-obsessed and often embrace their sexuality openly.

Twinks can typically identify as non-straight at a younger age based on their interests, and it also makes them more susceptible to discrimination at a younger age. Some Twinks report being outed before they really understood what gay meant. According to Lyons and Hosking (2014), men identifying as Twinks reported higher rates of smoking tobacco and alcohol consumption than men identifying with other gay subcultures. In the same study, Twinks reported the highest level of satisfaction in connectedness to the gay community, in comparison to other subcultures and gay men that did not identify with a subculture. Reasons for their higher level of satisfaction could be that they are more willing to express themselves within and out of the gay community. It is important to note that although Twinks represent the stereotypical impressions society has of gay men, Twinks report less discrimination than those of the Bear community (Lyons & Hosking, 2014).

Twunks and Pups

Twunks are a subcategory of the Twink subculture. Similar to Twinks, Twunks are more muscular and are considered to be less feminine. Although there is no specific age range for a Twink, a Twunk tends to be older (in their mid-20s) and represents fewer gay male stereotypes. The term pup refers to a gay male that is new to the gay community. They are given this label because they can be viewed as a member that is unfamiliar with the subcultures and may come into the community with excitement and be naive. They are known to have body types similar to either a Twink or Twunk and are typically in their mid-20s or younger (Hollywood, 2016).

Jocks, Gym Bunnies, Gym Rats, and Bulls

In this section Jocks, Gym Bunnies, Gym Rats, and Bulls are described. The reason these subcultures have been placed together is because they are terms that can also represent straight men, with the exception of the Bull. Bulls are gay men that have very little body fat, display an extremely muscular physique, and are often sexually dominant (Hollywood, 2016). Gym Rats are gay men that strive to become Bulls. Their primary focus is to gain muscle and become physically larger (Hollywood, 2016). Gym Bunnies are physically muscular men that actively go to the gym but are not obsessed with gaining excessive amounts of muscle. Finally, Jocks are athletic, muscular, and often attractive gay men, similar to those that identify as a Jock and are straight (Alvarez, 2008). Like Twinks, there is not an established organization or dedicated bars for members of these subcultures; however, members of these subcultures tend to spend time with others in their group in sports leagues, gyms, and sports bars. Environments such as the gym or membership on a sports team promote social connection for these subgroups.

Chubs and Chasers

Chubs are considered to be their own subculture within the gay community, and are not to be confused with Bears. Chubs do have their own convention, but do not have their own bars or well-defined parameters. Chubs are physically overweight or obese and there is not a specific personality type that defines them. Their subculture is defined primarily based on their physical size (Hollywood, 2016). The term Chaser is often associated with Chubs. A Chaser is a small-framed, typically lean gay man that is

romantically and sexually attracted to a Chub (Hollywood, 2016). Chubs and Chasers can find online support communities and events to connect with one another.

Geeks/Gaymers

The Geek or Gaymer subculture is included because it is a tribe and subculture with which members of the LGBTQ community can identify (Soller, 2014). Gay Geek conventions started back in 1988; the first being called the Gaylaxicon and is still running today. Geeks or Gaymers refer to not only gay men, but all members of the LGBTQ community (Shaw, 2012). Their interests are in science fiction and fantasy. In contrast to other subcultures, Geeks are not represented by their physical appearance or sexual preferences, but by their social interests.

Queens/Drag Queens

In educating counselors on the various subcultures, it is important to include Queens. It is difficult to describe the physical body type or personality of a Queen because they are typically in character when they present themselves. They fully embrace both physical and personality characteristics that are exclusively feminine; therefore, they are not typically included in gay male subculture groups. Nonetheless, Queens are gay men dressing in women's clothing for the purpose of entertainment (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, & Specht, 2014).

Discussion

It is clear the counseling profession needs to understand the differences among gay men and how they identify themselves within their community. Acknowledging and having a basic understanding that subcultures exist within the gay male culture can increase rapport with clients belonging to and identifying with a subculture. Counselors should ask their clients to define labels they use when describing themselves, but should also have a basic understanding of gay subcultures so that clients are not fully responsible for educating their counselor. Helping clients make sense of their identity as an individual within the LGBTQ community is a requirement for counselors seeking to provide competent services for their clients (Kocarek & Pelling, 2003). There is inconsistency among researchers when using labels to describe gay men (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Terms currently being used by researchers generalize the gay male community as a homogeneous group and neglect the subcultures and differences between gay men.

When counseling professionals have a better understanding of the differences between gay men and the subcultures they identify with, they are better prepared to understand the terminology and labels used by gay men in their community. It is imperative for counselors to know that not all gay men feel the need to either identify with a label other than gay or belong to a subculture. However, counselors can educate and provide information to their gay clients ambivalent to coming out about the variety of subcultures, as their clients may find acceptance and an ability to identify with a specific subculture rather than the general LGBTQ community. Counselors should not force a client to identify with a subculture or use a label they are not comfortable with or willing to accept.

With differences in physical body type and varying levels of discrimination and support within the different subcultures, research regarding mental health disparities needs to be assessed in future research. Future research exploring within group discrimination between gay subcultures both online and in-person would help counselors understand the experiences of their clients. Finally, more research needs to be done to explore the intersectionality of race and identification with subculture labels.

Gay identity models are in their infancy. Kenneady and Oswalt (2014) reported that more than 90% of those identifying as non-straight report feeling that society is accepting, but 40% report being rejected by a family member or friend. This is important to consider because although significant progress has been made in terms of societal acceptance and laws for equality, there is still much work that needs to be done. Counseling professionals need to stay abreast of legal changes and best practices in helping members of the gay male community to provide competent services to their clients.

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