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# America's Closet Door

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## An Investigation of Television and Its Effects on Perceptions of Homosexuality

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Departmental Thesis

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## **Preface**

The 2013 “American Time Use Survey” conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics calculated that, “watching TV was the leisure activity that occupied the most time..., accounting for more than half of leisure time” for Americans 15 years old and over. Of the 647 actors that are series regulars on the five television broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, The CW, Fox, and NBC) 2.9% were LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) in the 2011-2012 season (GLAAD). This is up from 1.1% in 2007 (GLAAD). These statistics indicate that representations of homosexuality on television have increased in the past 7 years alone, and that American television viewers are more likely to encounter a homosexual character while spending a majority of their leisure time in front of the television screen. The increased prevalence of homosexuality on television represents an increasing immersion of homosexuality into mainstream culture; and the increasing immersion correlates to an ideological shift surrounding homosexuality. This ideological shift is evident when analyzing the ways in which homosexual representations have shifted qualitatively. Representations of homosexuality have not only increased, but have continuously shifted away from stereotypical representations. Each shift in representations constitutes as a discursive shift that affects ideology. Thus, by analyzing representations of homosexuality on television, and viewer reactions to these representations, this study will map the discursive and ideological shifts that occurred throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, consider Ellen DeGeneres. She became popular in the 1990’s and is still popular today—making her the ideal temporal

comparison because it is comparison against herself. Thus, if she has not changed, then the world around her must have.

Today, Ellen DeGeneres is a household name due to the success of her talk-show *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. She is one of America's most widely known female comedians, and she is a self-identified lesbian. Her sexual orientation does not appear to be jeopardizing her career today, given the 15 Emmy Awards the show has won; however, this was not always the case (IMBD). In 1994, after a decade on the comedic circuit generating popularity, Ellen DeGeneres caught her first role as a main character on the show "These Friends of Mine." Following the first season, the show changed its name to "Ellen," serving as evidence to DeGeneres' success. "Ellen" was a comedy that followed Ellen Morgan—played by Ellen DeGeneres—as she ran her bookstore and interacted with her friends. The show received high ratings until its fourth season, in which Ellen Morgan came out as a lesbian in "The Puppy Episode". This episode aired in 1997 and mirrored Ellen DeGeneres—as an actress and woman—coming out to the public as a lesbian. Following "The Puppy Episode," ABC began to display a parental advisory warning before every episode, and in the following season the show was cancelled due to a decline in ratings. Ellen would try again with her 2001 show *The Ellen Show*, but remained unsuccessful until the previously mentioned 2003 arrival of *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

Ellen DeGeneres has not changed her persona since her coming out in 1997, so increased acceptance of Ellen today indicates a shift in the surrounding world. Ellen as Ellen Morgan in 1997 was presumed a heterosexual female. She was witty,

attractive, and won over American viewers. Ellen's coming out was almost a betrayal, a lie that had been carried out for four seasons. It also occurred at a time when American viewers did not accept homosexuality on a large scale. The most important contributing factor to the differences between reactions to Ellen in 1997 and reactions to Ellen today is timing. American viewers were not prepared for a homosexual main character to out themselves in the fourth season of a show, but American viewers are prepared today for an openly lesbian talk show host. With that being said, Ellen's talk show does not concern itself with Ellen's sexuality. She is Ellen DeGeneres, the talk show host, who happens to be gay. This study will investigate representations of homosexuality from Ellen's coming out in 1997 to the 2014 representations of today in order to illustrate how and why television is a correlational factor in perpetuating this shift. Utilizing cognitive and social psychology, this study will rhetorically analyze the television shows *Will&Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Modern Family* as representations of a discursive shift toward a lessening of social restrictions on gender and sexuality.

### **Historical Context**

In order to understand how advanced representations of homosexuality are today, it is necessary to explain where homosexuality has been. In Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* he outlines to mechanisms that contributed to the pejoration of homosexuality beginning in the Victorian Age. Foucault describes a sexual repression during the Victorian Age that incited sexual discourse. The dominating Christian traditions of the time encouraged this incitement of sexual discourse through the act

of confession: “Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse” (Foucault 21).

Christian ideology denounced homosexuality as a sin, and then encouraged it into discourse through confession. Along with the dominance of Christian ideology came the importance of empiricism. Empiricism increased the importance of “truth;” it required evidentiary support for any claim in order to prove it was “true” or “right.” This focus on empirical data drove attention to nature as a basis for civil law, because that which was natural became that with the most “truth.” Since homosexuality was not only a sin but went against nature itself because homosexual relations had no reproductive value; homosexuality became a criminal offense.

Thus far in Foucault’s outline of the history of sexuality it is clear to see the impact ideology has had on the understanding of homosexuality. Christian ideology condemned homosexuality as a sin and empiricism claimed it defaced nature, the very basis of order within the world. Next came medicine and psychiatry which “wrapped the sexual body in its embrace” (Foucault 44). Psychiatry continued its fascination with homosexuality and entered it into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM)<sup>1</sup> in 1952 as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” (DSM-1). This time period highlighted the family’s role in sexuality, as Foucault explains, “to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support” (Foucault 108). Thus, in the 1950’s, homosexuality is deemed a psychological illness and American ideology centered around the ideal heterosexual family such as is depicted in the popular television

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<sup>1</sup> The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* is used by psychiatry for diagnosing and treated patients with mental illness.

show *Leave It To Beaver*. The 1950's was also the time period in which broadcast television began to emerge as an American staple. Anne McCarthy states in her book *The Citizen Machine*, "it is worth paying attention to the moments when the powerful and privileged, bent on reinventing government and redefining citizenship, turn to the medium (television) as a tool for reaching those people they thought of as the masses" (McCarthy 3). McCarthy explains that the 1950s also saw the emergence of Communism as a threat to the American way of life, thus, the hegemonic powers utilized television as a means of shaping American viewers into good citizens. McCarthy's explanation of television's usefulness in perpetuating hegemonic ideology—which was heterosexual and patriarchal—offers credence to the correlational importance of television as a discursive platform for ideology. McCarthy illustrates further that,

Often closely linked to each other, these domains for constructing civic identities and defining interests, aligning individuals with each other and with broader forms of political authority, could only be enhanced by television's highly regarded capacity to disperse ideas and automate perception and cognition, enabling, on a massive scale and at a suitably removed distance, the shaping of conduct and attitudes. (3)

It is important to note that in television's beginnings hegemonic powers intended to utilize it to spread ideology and affect the ways in which American viewers understand the world. It helps to solidify television as a factor in perpetuating shifts in homosexual representations.

Television's ability and usefulness for spreading ideology became inherent within the medium. Consider the prevalence of commercials on television. Commercials were created with the sole purpose of propaganda in order to persuade viewers to purchase commodities. Television's ability to persuade—exemplified by commercials—can be generalized to all programs aired on television. From entertainment programs to news programs, the content on television—whether intentional or not—have the effect of persuading audience members. Take for example, within the realm of discourse on homosexuality, the media coverage of Stonewall. June 27, 1969 is argued as the beginning of the LGBT movement when a group of homosexual bar patrons fought back against New York police oppression at a local gay bar called Stonewall. Stonewall served as a “moment in time when gays and lesbians recognized all at once their mistreatment and their solidarity” (Duberman xv). This unification of the LGBT community was enough for homosexuals to find the strength to fight for their rights over the next decade. Television's coverage of Stonewall not only spread the LGBT's rebellion within the LGBT community—serving as a unifying mechanism—but it also demonstrated the presence of this group and their frustrations to the nation as a whole regardless of sexual orientation. Though homosexuality was not portrayed in a positive light, television demonstrated to the nation that homosexuals exist and will continue to exist no matter how much they are oppressed.

Following Stonewall, the LGBT community entered into a phase Eric Marcus calls “coming of age” in his text *Making Gay History*. From 1973-1981 (as defined

by Marcus), the LGBT community won a series of small victories. These victories included: the addition of “sexual orientation” to anti-discrimination laws, “combating police harassment, overturning state sodomy laws, and increasing visibility in the media” (Marcus 187). However “to most Americans homosexuals were still sick, sinful, or criminal—hardly deserving of legal protection” (Marcus 188).

The 1980s AIDS epidemic brought homosexuality and television together once again as media coverage concerning homosexuality skyrocketed as the AIDS epidemic became more and more associated with homosexual males. In fact, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) first encountered the disease, they did not know what it was; however, the first victims of the disease were homosexual males. For this reason, the CDC stated, “the fact that these patients were all homosexuals suggests an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle” (CDC). The Kaiser Family Foundation’s 2006 “Evolution of an Epidemic: 25 Years of HIV/AIDS Media Campaigns in the U.S.” explains that, “labeled initially a ‘gay disease,’ the new illness seemed to be a concern for scientists and the gay community, but not for ‘mainstream’ America” (Kaiser Family Foundation 7). First, the labeling of AIDS as a “gay disease” had the effect of lexically associating homosexuality with illness; homosexuality and homosexual intercourse denoted death. Second, because of the disease’s association with the gay community exclusively—keeping in mind the mindset of Americans towards homosexuality—government responses were not as strong as they would be otherwise. This sparked a resurgence in LGBT activism in response to the gaps in information and services that

the government did not provide. For example, “The Gay Men’s Health Crisis, the first community-based AIDS service provider in the U.S., was established in New York City in 1982” (Kaiser 7). The media coverage of the AIDS epidemic brought homosexuality into public discourse; however, since it was through the association with homosexuality to this new, deadly disease, it served only to perpetuate the pejoration of homosexuality. In one respect, the lack of information and services provided by the government forced homosexuals to join together, and in this light, the media coverage of the AIDS epidemic was a catalyst for homosexual community building. The movement that had died out towards the late 1970’s regained its fervor in the 1980s in response to utter outrage. Increased media coverage and the expanding movement forced Americans to acknowledge homosexuality on its soil and contributed to the continued success of the LGBT movement. Such successes throughout the late 1980’s and early 1990’s include: the election or re-election of 50 openly gay public officials, protection of gay rights legislation, rise in homosexual visibility, awareness, unity, and the desire for a marginalized group to stand for their rights.

Following this period of unification, Marcus claims 1992-2001 forced homosexuality into the nation’s public eye; homosexuality could no longer be ignored as an issue in America. It was within this period that the LGBT community was finally recognized within society and when it finally began to take hold, making significant headway in the fight for equal rights by winning political, legislative, legal, and organizational battles. These successes and forceful entrance into the public

eye can be exemplified by the LGBT community's "appropriation of the old insult 'queer' and its transformation in their hands into a badge of pride and anger" (outhistory.org). The gay community took a term that was once used to marginalize them and transformed it into an umbrella term to encompass all who were marginalized.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed several victories for the LGBT community including the repealing of Prop 8, the Defense of Marriage Act, and Don't Ask Don't Tell. These can be seen as victories because they each furthered the oppression of homosexuals; thus, their removal is a removal of oppressive restrictions placed upon homosexuals. Both media and civil laws serve as a reflection of societal ideology. When the mindset of citizens change, the laws and discourse within media change as well; therefore, coinciding with the changes in civil law came changes of representations in media. For example, an unprecedented number of celebrities and public officials have identified themselves as homosexual—creating a sense of visibility and normality for homosexuals in American society. The act of celebrities—people that exist for most Americans solely on the television screen—identifying themselves as homosexual *people* connects the screen to the outside world. Additionally, in the strongest act of acknowledgement of legitimization, several states have legalized gay marriage. Yes, there is still homophobia and discrimination against homosexuals today. There is no arguing against this fact; however, when viewing backwards, the strides that have been made since 1969 are monumental. Gay

is everywhere. Social movements such as “Don’t Say Gay”<sup>2</sup> and “It Gets Better”<sup>3</sup> have laid the foundation for future generations of homosexuals to not feel alienated, dysfunctional, or marginalized. The 2014 Superbowl, arguably one of the most viewed and most American media spectacles, included representations of homosexual families in their commercials. This demonstrates a sense of normalization and integration for homosexuality. Whereas 20 years prior, a Super bowl commercial depicting a healthy homosexual American family would have caused an outrage amongst citizens. It is the purpose of this study to attempt to explain television’s role as a contributing factor in this ideological shift.

### **How and Why**

As previously stated, television is a discursive platform for ideological power plays. This is largely due to its ability to transmit identical information to a large population. In regards to homosexuality specifically, television has the ability to play an important role because it is a visual medium and humans are observational social learners. Social psychologist Bandura conducted a study in 1961 and 1963 wherein he studied the effects of observational learning on children. He had children watch as an adult behaved violently toward an inflatable Bobo clown doll. Whereas prior to observing the adult, the children did not display aggressive behavior, following the children punched and kicked the doll. Bandura’s experiment highlights the human

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<sup>2</sup> "Think before You Speak. Don't Say 'That's So Gay.'" *Think B4 You Speak!* Web. 25 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com/>>.

<sup>3</sup> "It Gets Better Project | Give Hope to LGBT Youth." *It Gets Better*. Web. 25 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>>.

tendency for learning social behavior through observation. Thus, as television is a visual medium, social learning can take place through observing television content. Edward Schiappa's "The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis" questions the very notion that social learning can occur through the television screen. Schiappa is adding to Gordon W. Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), in which Allport asserted that interpersonal contact between minority and majority groups members is effective in altering prejudice. Schiappa and team, "contend that parasocial contact can provide the...experience that can reduce prejudice" (TPCH Schiappa 97). An example of parasocial contact is the relationship created between a television character and viewer. Though they do not interact in the physical world, the act of the viewer watching a character on screen can mirror the experience of meeting that character in real life. Within the realm of homosexuality, The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis postulates that watching a homosexual character on the screen has a similar effect on prejudice that meeting a homosexual person in life would. To test his hypothesis, Schiappa investigated the effects shows *Will&Grace* and *Six Feet Under* had on their viewers' prejudices. In both studies, there was a significant correlation between watching these shows (which both include homosexual characters) and the reduction of prejudices amongst viewers—especially those that did not have many prior interactions with homosexuals. This effect was found through comparing participant responses to a questionnaire (meant to measure prejudice) before and after watching the television shows. These findings create a correlational relationship between television and its ability to alter perceptions of homosexuality; thus, it establishes the

relationship between representations of television and the ideological shift in perceptions of homosexuality that this study will demonstrate. Given that Schiappa and team demonstrated the ability for television to alter perceptions, this study aims to hypothesize why television content alters perceptions.

Foucault's *History of Sexuality* depicted the relationship between hegemonic ideologies and viewpoints of homosexuality. This relationship can be beneficial or detrimental to viewpoints of homosexuality depending on the cultural ideology of the time. As television is a platform for discourse, various ideologies can assert their power to a nationwide audience. As varying ideologies express their discursive power, it effects change within the ideologies of American viewers. Christopher Pullen's *Gay Identity, Storytelling, and the Media* asserts that new homosexual storytelling, "is grounded in the performative opportunity of radio, television, film and new media" (Pullen 15), and that "new storytellers for gay and lesbian identity reinvent the discursive myth. This occurs in the production of new narratives, and the establishment of pathways towards legitimization" (Pullen 20). He asserts that as myths surrounding homosexuality are reinvented on the television screen and "in this way, public figures provide a means for the individual to negotiate and explore their own personal identity, including the stimulation of political and personal ideologies...offer[ing] a point of reference for the creation of new stories, extending from the self" (Pullen 20-21). In other words, representations of homosexuality on television continuously reinvent the myths surrounding homosexuality and inspire others to continue to reinvent the myths in the direction of legitimization. The process

of reinvention concerns the lens through which people come to understand their social world. New stories create new associations with homosexuality which alters perceptual lenses. Linguistically, this perceptual shift is as simple as associating homosexuality with new words that have differing connotations. Kenneth Burke explains the effects of different connotative associations through his theory of terministic screens.

Within his works *Language as Symbolic Action*, *Grammar of Motives*, and *Rhetoric of Motives* Kenneth Burke explains the importance of symbolism within the understanding of reality because of the ways in which symbols create denotations and connotations within the social world. His ideas help to explain the origins of the categorical and/or binary thinking that would inhibit a marginalized group from legitimization within society. When Burk explains, “the power of language to define and describe may be viewed as...an instrument developed through its use in the social process” (LASA Burke 44), he is illustrating that categorization—the process of defining and describing—is arbitrarily created by social life. When terms are used to describe and define they naturally constrict that which they define. For example, when an object is described as green, the possibility for that object to be any other color is eliminated. The object is then grouped together with other green objects through the process of categorization. The qualities—descriptions and definitions—used to group terms together are arbitrarily conscribed. That same green object could also be hard and therefore grouped with objects that have a similar hardness. Or, if a person has an aversion towards the color green, that object could be grouped into the

category of that which is bad. That object is not inherently bad, but the connotations the person has with the color green creates a negative association with the object based on color alone. Hegemonic ideologies that dictate social life are *developed* through human interaction. They are not innate or factual; they are created by man for man. These linguistic categorizations created through social interactions are used to develop man's terministic screens. Similar to the effect of varying filters applied to an image, terministic screens apply a filter to a person's understanding of social life. These terministic screens, developed through social interactions, create the hegemonic categorization process for individuals. For example, consider a biscuit. If you are from Southern America, a biscuit is categorized by a flaky, savory dough, often paired with gravy. However, if you were raised in England, a biscuit is categorized by a sweet, non-processed cookie. A person from Southern America and a person from England would have different characteristics for a food product to qualify as a biscuit. Similarly, for humans, there are characteristics necessary in order to qualify as a "one," and these characteristics are determined by the terministic screens surrounding a human's environment. Consider, for example, the cultural differences surrounding being tan. In America, if you are Caucasian and tan that is a positive thing. However, in other countries, Thailand for example, tan skin means that you are poor and is a negative attribute. Growing up, in order to qualify as a "one," individuals adopt the terministic screens of their environment: "The human animal, as we know it, *emerges into personality by first mastering whatever tribal speech happens to be its particular symbolic environment*" (LASA Burke 53). An example

of the limitations of man's use of terministic screens occur within the "representative anecdote". Burke explains that the representative anecdote is the basis for understanding. For example, if an individual's representative anecdote of homosexuals is a sinful and sick individual suffering from the temptations of the devil, their entire understanding of homosexuality will follow that same line of thinking because this image has become the base for their terministic screens. "If the originating anecdote is not representative, a vocabulary developed in strict conformity with it will not be representative" (GOR Burke 59); thus, representations of homosexuality on television that are more humanizing and legitimizing serve as a representative anecdote that will create a more human and legitimate terministic screen. It is important to study the representations of homosexuality in television because they become a part of the base for America's overall understanding of homosexuals. With every new and/or different ideology expressed on television—usually exhibited through social behavior—the terministic screens of viewers are altered. This is crucial because there is not an essential homosexual. That is to say, there is not a "true" homosexual to exemplify for Americans or to strive for as a homosexual. Rather, the perceptions surrounding homosexuality have to be socially constructed due to this lack of an essential homosexual. Queer theory best explains how anti-essentialism requires socially created structures to categorize, organize, and understand social life.

The discursive platform of television serves as a playing field for opposing ideologies. For the purpose of this study, heterosexual ideology and queer ideology

will be competing for power on television. Heterosexual ideology consists of binary constructions of understanding the world, i.e. male-female, heterosexual-homosexual. Within these binaries, the former is usually more dominant than the latter. Consider an ideology similar to that of the 1950's *Leave It To Beaver*—of course with exceptions in trends due to time period; however, the family structure is very much so constructed based upon heterosexual constructions. For example, the 1950's mother was a housewife while the father worked. Conversely, queer ideology, “challenges...essentialist notions of homosexuality and heterosexuality within the mainstream discourse,” and in place of these notions, “posits an understanding of sexuality that emphasizes shifting boundaries, ambivalences, and cultural constructions that change depending on historical and cultural context.” (Queer Theory). In other words, queer ideology concerns traversing categorical restrictions in an attempt to include marginalized groups into social legitimization by allowing for a breadth of gender and sexual expression.

Judith Butler's theory surrounding gender will be useful in distinguishing between heterosexual ideology and queer ideology. Gender, in Butler's argument, is not a natural categorization of human beings. Rather, gender is a system based on overarching ideology concribing social norms; gender is an act, a method of behaving in order to assimilate into society. This is not to say that gendering is a choice, but rather a social conscription of appropriate behavioral tendencies: “this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a ‘one,’ to become viable as a ‘one’” (CQ Butler 23). For example, a baby shower is organized based

upon the gender of the soon to come child—given that the gender of the child is known. For a girl, there will be pink decorations and dolls, but for a boy there will be blue decorations and sports paraphernalia. Before the child has been born, it has already been gendered in coherence with the social constructions ascribed to its biological sex. As that child grows up, it will learn which behaviors and qualities are acceptable for the gender ascribed to them. They will also learn that they must adhere to those conscriptions if they wish to “fit in,” which is synonymous with being considered a “one.” Thus, if a male child, gendered as a boy, chooses to play dress-up and house as opposed to football and basketball, he will be ostracized by his social community. It is this reaction by our social world that Butler is discussing, because these societal reactions require that the boy adhere to the norms of his gender if he wishes to end his ostracizing. In heterosexual ideology there are strict rules for appearance, behavior, and personality qualities for each gender. Males are muscular, strong, and aggressive; whereas, females are gentle, emotional, and sexual-objects. These conscriptions are arbitrarily constructed as evidenced by the changes made to them depending on historical and cultural context. For example, the preference for males in the 1970’s was to be hairy, but today in 2014, males are preferred hairless. Or, consider the body types for females over the years. It was once preferred that a woman had weight and curves, but today society calls for thinness. The shifts in gender norms throughout history demonstrate the role of social construction within gendering. Butler’s gender theory will be useful throughout this study to assess the “queerness” of each show. That is, if gender norms are adhered to, then the show is

demonstrating a more heterosexual construction; but, if gender restrictions are ignored, then the show depicts a queer understanding of social life. This will be useful in examining the representational shifts within these shows parting from heterosexual ideology and heading towards a queer ideology.

### **The Current Study**

Blackman and Hornstein (1977) stated, “people function as social actuaries, relying upon the information they receive from the mass media and other sources...to make generalized inferences about human nature” (303). This quotation pinpoints the purpose of this study: to analyze four television shows with representations of homosexuality in order to demonstrate what these representations are teaching viewers. This study does not claim that any group, individual, or organization orchestrated the shift in representations of homosexuality. Rather, this study merely investigates the data within the television shows *Will&Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Modern Family*. The rhetorical analysis, in association with social and cognitive psychology principles, highlights the mechanisms that encouraged the shift. Within this study, television is viewed as a reflection of ideologies—because it is a discursive platform—and also a mechanism to affect change in ideologies. The author has utilized social and cognitive psychology in organizing, defining, and describing how and why this shift occurred. This is not to say that television is a causal factor, or the only factor within this shift; rather, this study aims to explain how and why television specifically reflected and perpetuated change. The author created three stages for the purpose of the organization. These stages are inspired by social and

cognitive psychology, but do not stem directly from any school of thought or theorist. The characteristics of each stage were also inspired by social and cognitive psychology, but were based upon information gathered within the television shows and were defined by the author. They were created based upon observation. These stages are: The Priming Stage, The Developmental Stage, and the Integration Stage.

The Priming Stage concerns preparing audiences for a more in depth discourse on homosexuality; it brings the topic into the spotlight, but only to a superficial level. Within cognitive psychology, priming is a mechanism used to prepare the participants' access to information. When a concept is primed, the brain can more easily retrieve it. In other words, "priming is a nonconscious form of human memory concerned with perceptual identification of words and objects. It refers to activating particular representations or associations in memory just before carrying out an action or task" (Priming). The Priming Stage within television concerns introducing American audiences to homosexuals as people. Though America knew about homosexuality prior to this stage, homosexuality was not depicted in the same manner as it is here. The Priming Stage prepares audience members to associate homosexuals as human beings—as the same as everyone else. Media have the ability to function similarly to priming, as explained by *Perspectives on Media Effects* which asserts that "the influence of mass communication is due in large part to the activation of concepts and propositions semantically related to the event depicted;" (PME 61) thus, television has the same effect on cognition as priming. The Priming Stage is the essential first stage in altering hegemonic ideologies in a manner to

encourage the legitimization of marginalized groups. That is to say, the Priming Stage represents a period of understanding homosexuality with binary thinking that leaves homosexuals marginalized. For example, the lack of homosexual affection marginalizes homosexuals by acknowledging their existence while denying their sexual behavior—which is the basis for the label homosexual. Homosexuality is acknowledged, but only insofar as it maintains stereotypes; this can be seen through traditional masculine-feminine constructions, wherein, for example, male homosexuals are given more feminine qualities. The Priming Stage is the essential first stage for gaining knowledge that upsets traditional heterosexual constructions, because it allows for homosexuality to remain within categorical restrictions it does not truly fit. The television show that represents this stage is *Will&Grace*. When looking at the title, traditional binary thinking of male-female is apparent. *Will&Grace* also adheres to stereotypical representations of homosexuality because humanizing aspects of homosexuality were not within the discursive realm yet. Another component of The Priming Stage is the short-lived effects of priming: “the thoughts activated by the communication often do not persist, and its impact typically declines with the passage of time. Priming effects usually subside as the initiating stimulus recedes into the past” (PME 62). Thus, in order for the priming effects to be useful, they need to be reinforced, which means that the Priming Stage—because it initiates new associations and new social behavior but is temporary—is logically the first stage of a shift in homosexual representations.

The next stage is the Developmental Stage. As its name would suggest, this stage represents a period of generating knowledge about homosexuals. It is characterized by a more queer understanding of categorization (upsetting traditional binary thinking), humanizing or normalizing homosexuality, and an increase in homosexual physical affection. Logically, the Developmental period of understanding must follow the Priming Stage. The knowledge that was lacking in the Priming Stage is discovered in the Developmental Stage. As opposed to the Priming Stage, which occurred within the heteronormative<sup>4</sup> realm, the Developmental Stage removes itself into a homonormative world. Within a homonormative<sup>5</sup> world, with queer thinking, homosexuality is allowed to explore its own categorization and understanding of social life without the heteronormative restrictions that keep homosexuals marginalized. *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* represent another shift in discourse. Both television shows removed themselves from heterosexual restrictions, quite literally, by airing on the cable network Showtime. That is to say—when considering Foucault’s repressive hypothesis and his argument that what is repressed becomes incited into discourse—since homosexuality was not allowed to be fully portrayed on basic cable networks (i.e. homosexual intercourse) the community was incited to portray that which was repressed elsewhere. Because Showtime is not a member of the basic cable team, its restrictions are much more lenient; thus, creating the ideal atmosphere for a marginalized group to create their own categorization of social life.

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<sup>4</sup> Heteronormative refers to the social norms created with heterosexuality as its basis.

<sup>5</sup> Homonormative was a term created by the author. It functions similarly to heteronormativity, but has its basis as homosexuality.

Again, the titles alone—*Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*—immediately limit content to homosexuals—with queer referring to a name for gay males and lesbian being the L word eluded to. In these shows, homosexual traditions, sex lives, and gender expressions are discussed. For this reason, these shows are the essential next shift in discourse because heteronormative American society cannot understand homosexuality if homosexuals do not themselves generate the necessary knowledge.

The Integration Stage incorporates understanding of homosexuality developed in the second stage into heteronormative society. It is referred to as the Integration Stage. In this stage there is an attempt to include the marginalized group into the hegemonic categorical thinking, thus, changing hegemonic standards. There is an increase in humanization and normalization of homosexuality when compared to the Priming Stage. This humanization is achieved through increased explanation, by answering previously unanswered questions with the knowledge gained in the Developmental Stage. For example, it addresses the question of who proposes when the traditional gender rules cannot apply; i.e. traditionally the man proposes to the woman, so who proposes when both partners are male or both are female. When compared to the Developmental Stage, the Integration Stage has significantly less homosexual physical affection. This fact reiterates the notion that the Integration Stage represents a period of adapting. That is to say, there is an effort made to understand and incorporate homosexuality into social understanding, but it has not reached a level of normalcy necessary to casually display homosexual physical affection. When looking at the title of this final show, the difference between

*Will&Grace* and *Modern Family* is blatant. Whereas *Will&Grace*, as previously stated, demonstrates the binary restrictions typical for its time period through its male-female construction, *Modern Family* immediately incorporates homosexuality into the “new” categorization of social life. By including a homosexual family into the category of the “modern family” homosexuality is normalized, and legitimized, right from the start.

### **Chapter 1: The Priming Stage**

The shift in discourse concerning homosexuality is similar to learning a new word. When incorporating a new word into a vernacular, it is first defined by pre-existing terms; however, those pre-existing terms do not correctly define the new term. The Priming Stage coincides with this first step. Since homosexuality had not been investigated extensively during this point in time (late 1990’s and early 2000s), the television show *Will&Grace* uses pre-existing terminology to represent homosexuality. This pre-existing terminology is based upon heteronormative understanding of social life. The use of heteronormative constructions has a priming effect on American viewers’ cognitions; that is, an aspect of social life that viewers were uncomfortable with at that time it portrayed within a framework that is comfortable. For example, Bargh and Pietromonaco (1982) demonstrate the power of priming effects on social perceptions. Bargh and Pietromonaco (1982) conducted a study in which participants were exposed to a series of stimuli meant to prime hostility. Then, the participants were asked to give their impression of a stimulus person. Bargh and Pietromonaco (1982) found, “that the impression subjects formed

of the stimulus person was directly related to the amount of hostile information to which they had been exposed” (Bargh and Pietromonaco 446). Bargh and Pietromonaco (1982) explain that, “category accessibilities are critical to the outcome of social perceptions because a considerable percentage of social information is at least somewhat ambiguous,” and “will tend to be ‘captured’ by the most accessible category for which it is relevant” (Bargh and Pietromonaco 437). Therefore, since *Will&Grace* creates a humorous environment using heteronormative constructions, it primes American audiences to alter their once pejorative associations with more positive ones by offering a different category in which to place homosexuality. It is logically the first shift in discourse, and serves to prepare—through new categorical associations—American viewers for a more in depth exploration of homosexuality that will, eventually, reduce the need for heteronormative constructions for understanding homosexuality.

*Will&Grace* utilized heteronormative constructions for depicting homosexuality. For this reason, their depictions were not accurate. That is to say, their representations did not offer a breadth of gender and sexual expression, but constricted homosexual representations to the heteronormative categories available. It is for this reason that many queer theorist denounce *Will&Grace* because of their continuation of misrepresenting homosexuality. However, *Will&Grace* also offers some humanizing/normalizing aspects of homosexuality. It is limited in its ability to do so for many reasons: restrictive qualities of the heteronormative framework, ill-preparedness of American viewer’s to explore an in-depth representation of

homosexuality, and the lack of information about homosexuality as a whole. It is important to note that though *Will&Grace* adheres to heteronormative constructions that marginalize homosexuality, it also offers humanizing/normalizing depictions of homosexuality as well—within the constraints of heteronormativity.

*Will&Grace* aired in 1998—in the following television season after *Ellen*'s cancellation in 1998. It follows Will Truman, an attractive Manhattan lawyer, and his best friend Grace, a self-employed interior decorator. Will and Grace dated in college, but after Will came out they changed their relationship to a platonic friendship. These main characters are supported by their cooky counter-parts Jack and Karen. Jack is a flamboyantly gay man who bounces from job to job as an actor/dancer, while Karen is a straight, ridiculously wealthy, woman who is Grace's assistant—an occupation she acquired only to ward off boredom. *Will&Grace* follows the four character's lives in New York. It began in 1998 and ended in 2006 giving the situational-comedy 8 seasons on NBC. *Will&Grace* has won several awards including: a People's Choice Award, a Golden Globe nomination, an American Comedy Award, two GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards, a Founders Award, and 3 Emmy Awards. Due to its appearance on NBC, a basic cable television network, *Will&Grace* reached a wide variety of American audiences, gay and straight alike. Also, due to its various awards, it is fair to say that a significant portion of American audience members watched *Will&Grace* throughout its 8 seasons.

*Will&Grace* served as an influential show for generating associations with homosexuality. Since it reached an average American audience, it became the first

representations of homosexuality that some viewers had. On the other hand, since it reached an average American audience shortly after *Ellen*'s introduction of homosexual main characters—indicating that American viewers were still not prepared—*Will&Grace*'s adherence to heteronormative constructions of social life was necessary in order to frame this new social realm within known binary categorizations. Other critics, such as Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow (2002), assert that *Will&Grace*'s use of a heteronormative framework only served to perpetuate heterosexism and heteronormative dominance. Battles and Hilton-Morrow's assertion is limited in its view because it does not incorporate the cognitive and social aspects of homosexuality as a new construct within American viewer's lives. For this reason, Chapter One will utilize Battles and Hilton-Morrow as a foil—comparing similarities between their viewpoints and this study's and also highlighting differences in understanding homosexuality as a cognitive construction and social movement requiring a slow progression over time.

Battles and Hilton-Morrow's (2002) article "Gay characters in conventional spaces: Will and Grace and the situation comedy genre" criticizes *Will&Grace* because it "reinforc[es] heterosexism and, thus, can be seen as heteronormative," and because it "positions gayness in opposition to masculinity, pairs its characters in familiar opposite-sex dyads, defuses...threats to heteronormativity, and emphasizes interpersonal relationships at the expense of gay politics" (Battles 89). This study agrees with Battles and Hilton-Morrow's (2002) claim that *Will&Grace* "makes the topic of homosexuality more palatable to a large, mainstream television audience by

situating it within safe and familiar popular culture conventions” (Battles 89) but sees this increased palatability not only as unavoidable given the position of *Will&Grace* temporally within the shift of homosexual discourse, but also beneficial to the overall LGBT movement. Whereas Battles and Hilton-Morrow criticize the use of “familiar televisual frames” (Battles 89), this study understands its necessity for priming American audiences to continue further in their understanding and exploration of homosexuality through the television screen. Chapter one of this study will analyze important episodes throughout *Will&Grace*’s 8 season run to highlight issues of heteronormativity, gender, and The Priming Stage’s semi-humanization/normalization tendency. These particular episodes will illustrate how Battles and Hilton-Morrow were correct in their analysis of *Will&Grace* but incorrect in assuming these heteronormative constructions would hinder homosexual understanding on a larger scale. Rather, this study will illustrate how *Will&Grace*’s use of heteronormative constructions and familiar frames contributed to further understanding homosexuality and more accurate representations of homosexuality because of its priming effect on American viewers.

How does, as Battles and Hilton-Morrow claim, *Will&Grace* uphold negative and/or inaccurate views of homosexuality in their representations? First of all, the title of the show reinforces the heteronormative tendency for male-female binary constructions. By focusing on a male-female pair, *Will&Grace* places their narrative within traditional, heteronormative, binary constructions of social life. This construction, though detrimental to homosexuality as it marginalizes those who do

not adhere to the social guidelines, would logically be the framework for *Will&Grace* as no other hegemonic social construction was available during the time the show aired. American viewers understood their social world through this heteronormative framework; thus, it would be the logical choice for framing homosexuality at this time. *Will&Grace* asserts this male-female binary construction within the opening scene of the pilot episode, but also introduces the twist: that Will Truman is a homosexual male. The first scene of the series depicts a phone conversation between Will and Grace. At this point, the audience knows little to nothing about the characters or the show itself. The camera shows two scenes, switching back and forth between the two: one is of Will in his apartment and the other is Grace in her own apartment. Their phone conversation is as follows:

Will: What're you doing?

Grace: Hanging out.

Will: Come over.

Grace: Will, I can't.

Will: Come on, Grace. You know you want to.

Grace: Of course I want to, but...

Will: It's gonna be a good one. I can feel it.

Grace: It's always good, so...

Will: Well, if you're not gonna come over, you want me to um... talk you through it?

\*audience laughter\*

The audience laughter is in response to the sexual innuendo permeating the conversation. Having no other context or information other than the aforementioned dialogue, one could logically conclude that a male and female were having a sexualized, flirty conversation. These elements, such as previously described, assert the heteronormative framework in which *Will&Grace* are placed. It even alludes to the sexual relationship that is assumed to occur within a male and female pairing of this kind. Thus, at this point, the audience is given a social situation it is used to and aware of. American audience members would recognize and feel comfortable with this pairing of a male and female in a sexual relationship. However, as the conversation continues following the audience laughter, Will and Grace provide more information about their relationship that does not adhere to hegemonic binary pairings. Will and Grace begin discussing the attractiveness level of George Clooney when Grace says, "He doesn't bat for your team." To which Will responds, "He hasn't seen me pitch." Laughter ensues from the audience as they learn of Will's sexual orientation. Instances such as this coincide with Battles and Hilton-Morrow's claim that *Will&Grace* "defuses...threats to heteronormativity" (89 Battles) in that Will's reference to his sexuality is muddled within a humorous dialogue. It is not out rightly stated, nor is it brought forth with a tone of seriousness. It is twisted into a humorous dialogue, filled with sexual innuendo, and hidden behind a punch line. As previously stated, Battles and Hilton-Morrow believed this tactic to be detrimental to the LGBT cause; however, it is the stance of this study that *Will&Grace*'s use of humor defuses tensions brought forth from the issue of homosexuality and eases the

subject into view rather than being disruptive of hegemonic social norms. Therefore, yes, *Will&Grace* does adhere to heteronormative conceptions and almost diminishes the seriousness of Will's sexuality, but, in doing so, *Will&Grace* can be more effective in changing American viewers' understanding of homosexuality. By presenting a taboo subject within a normalized frame and with a trivial tone it encourages viewer engagement because the viewer is made more comfortable with an uncomfortable subject. With that being said, the issues surrounding homosexuality appear to stem more from gender constructions rather than from the physical sexual act. It is less an issue of two males engaging in sexual intercourse, and more of an issue of the societal conceptions assigned to males—a conception that does not allow for feminine qualities.

In season one, episode two "A New Lease on Life" Will and Grace move in together. Their moving into the same space encourages the heteronormative framework, and highlights issues of gender roles. Will explains that they should move in together because she "just left the man [she] was going to marry and [he] just got out of a seven year relationship." This again supports heteronormativity, but more so asserts Will and Grace's relationship as a sexless marriage. Their friendship mirrors that of a heterosexual married couple, only without the sex. Given that they no longer have romantic relations with which to organize their lives, they will serve as a pseudo-partner for the other. On the other hand, would the same reading of a sexless marriage sprout forth if either character were of a different gender? That is to say, if Will were a heterosexual (or even homosexual) female, would their friendship appear

as a pseudo-relationship or merely as a pairing of two individuals who care deeply about one another? *Will&Grace* demonstrates the societal gender roles ascribed when Karen asks, “How’s she ever gonna get married if she’s playing house with a gay guy?” Karen’s question highlights the real issue here. It is not with Will’s sexuality, per se, but more so that societal gender roles restrict male and female pairing to romantic relationships. Two persons of the same gender in a platonic relationship could easily move in together without question, but when persons of opposite genders join together it is restricted to romance due to gender restrictions. *Will&Grace* continues to address this notion that their male-female platonic relationship will only serve as a detriment to each in their romantic relationships. In season two, episode twenty-one, Will and Grace visit an old college professor. This professor is an older gay gentleman whose best friend is an older heterosexual female—mirroring the relationship that Will and Grace have themselves. Throughout the episode, the professor and his friend bicker and argue. They seem to despise each other. Will and Grace become fearful that they are looking into their own future, not only because the older friends appear to despise each other, but because neither is married. Their fear then becomes that by being so close with one another, they will never find love themselves. However, by the end of the episode, Will and Grace reject the possibility of a loveless future and choose to continue their friendship as before. Though, in both episodes, heteronormative, binary, male-female relationships are reinforced, they are also disrupted. The audience sees the male-female pairing that they are accustomed to; however, this pairing is entirely platonic, thus disrupting hegemonic organizations that

require male-female pairings to be romantic. *Will&Grace* utilizes a comfortable conceptual framework which allows for slight deviations from the norm. American audiences enter into a comfortable framework, but are primed for an organization that disrupts what they knew: i.e. Will and Grace have a platonic relationship.

*Will&Grace* continues to disrupt hegemonic gender characteristics within the dichotomous relationship between Will and Jack. While Will adheres to hegemonic gender roles—behaving in a socially more masculine way—to the extent that he could pass for straight, Jack does not. Jack displays more feminine qualities that are seen as flamboyant for a homosexual male. Will goes to the gym, likes sports, and is a successful and masculine lawyer. Will's more hegemonic gender representation serves to make him more relatable to the general American audience. While his counterpart, Jack, disrupts traditional gender roles and adheres to more stereotypical representations of homosexuality. Critics such as Battles and Hilton-Morrow view these representations of homosexuality as limited: Will is too straight and Jack is too gay; while GLAAD praised *Will&Grace* for its diverse representations of homosexuality. In “Will Works Out” season one, episode nineteen, Will and Jack address this issue themselves in a manner that adds humanizing characteristics to their character development. That is to say, specifically, Will and Jack address the issue of Jack's flamboyancy and Will's passably straight appearance. Their discussion highlights Jack's acceptance of his sexuality and Will's shame; thus, by incorporating their insights into their own sexualities and gender expressions, Will and Jack offer a human perspective of homosexuality by homosexuals. This offers American viewers

a peek into the minds of homosexuals with the effect of humanizing them because audience members can empathize with Will and Jack's human emotions.

"Will Works Out" follows the tensions placed on Will and Jack's friendship when Jack joins Will's gym. It starts adding tension immediately when Jack immediately being his flamboyant self proclaiming, "Look! There's a guy over there that can bench press 300 pounds, and I'd like to be 160 of them. Hello! Press this!" Will is embarrassed by Jack's comment. He wants Jack to tone it down, mainly because Will has clients that attend the same gym and he is concerned with his reputation. Later in the episode Will returns to the gym with Grace. They discuss Will's previous experience with Jack. While Grace understands the situation as "Jack just being Jack," Will becomes increasingly more upset until he bursts out with, "Sometimes he's just such a...fag!" Will's use of derogative language highlights his adherence to hegemonic gender roles. While Will's character is the most comfortable for the audience, this scene demonstrates to audience members that Will's adherence to heteronormative constructions is due to fear of being ostracized and shame for his own sexuality. Whereas Jack, generally seen as the most stereotypical representation of homosexuality due to his more feminine gender expression and flamboyant portrayal of homosexuality, is merely willing to express himself. Will and Jack address their tension when they return to the gym together. Jack, having heard Will call him a fag, shows up to the gym in a basketball jersey and backwards baseball hat. Jack struts in with a more masculine, even macho, strut and approaches Will. They begin to argue and Jack explains that "[he]'d rather be a fag than afraid." There is a

strength in Jack that Will does not have. He is a flamboyantly gay man because he is a flamboyantly gay man. His character is not stereotypical; he is courageous. This episode in particular disrupts notions surrounding homosexuality and gender roles. Will's adherence to hegemonic gender roles leaves him appearing weak rather than strong, while Jack's stereotypical portrayals display a sense of strength. This relays to the audience that: one, gender representations can vary, two, Jack is more than just a gay man, and three, that adhering to societal restrictions to make others more comfortable is to deny one's true self. This serves to humanize Jack, relating to audience members that people that are obviously homosexual have more to them than their sexuality—just as obvious straight people are more than just straight. It also demonstrates to audiences the internal struggles homosexuals undergo due to societal restrictions. Audience members are primed to understand the consequences of homophobic actions, both in how they react to persons like Jack who refuse to adhere to societal restrictions, and how homophobic or heterocentric thinking could perpetuate cycles that made Will feel as though he needed to adhere to a certain standard of behavior within society. The latter is really highlighted within a conversation between Will and Grace. Will states, "Maybe I don't wear my sexuality like a sash and tiara the way Jack does, but I am willing to put my gayness up against anybody's." To which Grace responds, "Sometimes the things we don't like in others is really what we don't like in ourselves." Later in the series, Will's character development mirrors that of a real homosexual male when coming to terms with his homosexuality. That is not to say that there is a "real" or essential homosexual and

homosexual process; rather, Will's transformation mirrors the process of accepting one's own sexuality that many homosexuals in reality undergo. In contrast to how Will reacted in "Will Works Out" in season three, episode fourteen "Brothers, A Love Story" Will stands up for himself in a relationship. At the time, Will is dating Matt, a television news reporter. Matt is unwilling to refer to Will as his boyfriend when in the company of his boss and instead proclaims Will to be his brother. Later in the episode, Matt and Will are on a date and Matt's boss comes into the scene. Matt's boss says to Matt, "there's a rumor going around that you might be gay." Matt responds by shaking his head and making a pejorative remark about homosexuality. Will refuses to stand the lie any longer and proclaims, "Well, I'm gay." Will's refusal to adhere to hegemonic social restrictions in this episode demonstrates how far his character has come since the first season. It relays to the audience that coming out and accepting one's own sexuality is a process, and is a process mainly due to societal restriction placed upon homosexual individuals. This serves to further humanize Will to audience members, and also ropes audience members into supporting Will's acceptance of his sexuality. Because of the way this situation is orientated, audience members are inclined to support Will in his endeavor to stand-up for his sexuality rather than to support Matt's boss in his homophobia. This creates new associations for audience members. That is to say, especially after building a relationship with Will for three seasons, audience member are now more likely to associate themselves with Will's understanding of homosexuality over the previously hegemonic homophobic viewpoint of Matt's boss. In one respect, because Will is depicted

throughout the series in a more acceptable, masculine, and heterosexual tone and audiences member can relate to him more because of this, then as Will goes through the process of understanding and accepting his own sexuality, so do audience members. It primes audiences for more complex, more humanized, and more normalized representations of homosexuality that will be explored within the Developmental Stage.

## **Chapter 2: The Developmental Stage**

As discussed in the Priming Stage, homosexuality was depicted through the heteronormative lens. However, heteronormative constructions restrict gender and sexual expression in a manner that continues the marginalization of homosexuality. What is preferred is a vocabulary that allows for a breadth of gender and sexual expression with the effect of legitimizing homosexuality (representative of an accurate portrayal of homosexuality). The Developmental Stage is a period within the discursive shift investigated in which homosexuals define themselves. Consider the new word analogy presented within the Priming Stage. Whereas the Priming Stage used pre-existing terms to define homosexuality, the Developmental Stage creates a new vocabulary developed by that which it defines—homosexuals themselves. This process of creating a new identity by and for homosexuals is important, as Richard Rorty explains, because the pre-existing definitions were insufficient. Richard Rorty explains that language is created by humans in order to describe the world around them. However, the language created by humans does not denote truth because it is arbitrarily created. Rather, language constantly changes in order to better reflect the

human world. He explains that when, “two or more of our vocabularies are interfering with each other” (like heteronormative vocabulary and the existence of homosexuality) it is necessary to “invent a new vocabulary to replace both” (Rorty 76). This process is a “gradual trial-and-error creation of a new, third, vocabulary,” and is not “a discovery about how old vocabularies fit together” (Rorty 76). He explains that “it cannot be reached by an inferential process, by starting with the premises formulated in the old vocabularies;” rather, “the proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools” (Rorty 76). In order for the creation of a third vocabulary, homosexual must join together to define themselves. Nancy Fraser explains that “it is not possible to insulate special discursive arenas from the effects of societal inequality,” because “where societal inequality persists, deliberative processes in public spheres will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates” (Fraser 66). In other words, homosexuals must remove themselves from the hegemonic “public sphere” when defining themselves in order to avoid sources that continue their oppression. Fraser then explains that it is necessary to enter into what she calls “*subaltern counterpublics*” which “parallel discursive arenas” (Fraser 67). Within a *subaltern counterpublic* “members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 67). In other words, homosexuals must remove themselves from heteronormative restrictions in order to define themselves for themselves. This process is evident within the Developmental Stage through the

discourses seen within *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. What Fraser calls a *subaltern counterpublic* this study will call a homonormative space. In this homonormative space, the hegemonic societal norms are removed—to the extent that is possible—in order for homosexuals to explore their own identities and create a third vocabulary that will be used to create a more representative definition of the new term: homosexual.

The shows that occurred during The Developmental Stage are *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. As their titles suggest, *Queer as Folk* concerned homosexual males and *The L Word* focused primarily on lesbians. These shows did not concern themselves so much with homosexuality within the world, but rather homosexuality within the homosexual community.

*Queer as Folk* depicts five homosexual males residing in Pittsburg as they simply live their lives: Brian Kinney, Justin Taylor, Ted Schmidt, Emmet Honeycutt, and Michael Novotny. It aired on Showtime in 2000 and had 5 seasons, ending in 2005. *The L Word* also aired on Showtime, beginning in 2004 and ending in 2009 for a 6 season run. Similarly, *The L Word* follows a group of lesbians in L.A.: Jenny Schecter, Bette Porter, Tina Kennard, Alice Pieszecki, Dana Fairbanks, and Shane McCutcheon. Evidence supporting the differences in homosexual representations within The Developmental Stage is apparent. To begin, note that either title focuses solely on each group, gays (homosexual males) and lesbians, as opposed to The Integration Stage's *Will&Grace* which focused on a male-female pairing of particular characters, or The Integration Stage's *Modern Family* which includes homosexuality

within the heteronormative institution of the family. In this way, *The Developmental Stage* creates a homonormative space<sup>6</sup>—which is divided by gender—because a large majority of the characters are homosexual thereby normalizing it within the space of the show. The creation of this homonormative space can be explained by Foucault. In his “The Repressive Hypothesis,” Foucault explains that which is repressed is incited into discourse. In this way, the creation of a homonormative space was incited due to the repression of homosexuality within mainstream television. That is to say, national broadcasting networks/basic cable networks cannot portray homosexual intercourse on their channels. Consider the parental advisory warning added to *Ellen* once she came out. The inability for these networks to portray homosexual intercourse in effect represses this area of homosexual expression; thus, it is incited into discourse and manifests itself wherever allows it do so. Here, the network that allowed for the portrayal of homosexual desire is Showtime—a cable network removed from the constraints of the national broadcasting networks. The removal from the arguably more public sphere of the national broadcasting networks reinforces this notion of a homonormative space. With that being said, each show catered to a specific group within the homosexual community. *Queer as Folk* concerns homosexual males, and *The L Word* depicted primarily lesbians. It is important to note the audiences for these shows as it contributes to the homonormative space. On screen and off screen—meaning the viewers of the screen—shared the same commonality: they are marginalized, under-represented, alienated, and unaware of how to define themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> Homonormative space is a term created by the author to denote a sphere in which homosexuality is the norm and heteronormative constructions are eliminated as much as possible.

Having a homonormative space in which to explore homosexuality is important for homosexual viewers to have. Homosexuals grow up in the same heteronormative environment as heterosexuals; therefore, they share the same lack of terminology and understanding as heterosexuals. For some homosexual viewers, the representations of homosexuals within this stage may be the most interaction they have with homosexuality. It creates an environment where homosexuals can learn more about their own community and themselves outside of the heteronormative restrictions and stereotypes. It is a space for depicting homosexuality as normal and homosexuals as human with the effect of showing homosexual viewers that they too are normal and human. This creates a sense of unity and strength within the community that is important for gaining discursive power and affecting change. Without joining together in The Developmental Stage, the homosexual community would not have the discursive power or the terminology to change perceptions of homosexuality within the hegemonic world. This notion is supported by Nancy Fraser—cited earlier—who explains that without removing yourself (as a subordinate group) from the public sphere, the societal inequalities will continue its oppression and limit the groups' ability to reach an understanding of itself.

The Developmental Stage also retains aspects of heteronormativity. For example, The Developmental Stage concerns two shows rather than one because the shows are divided based on gender. The female homosexuals have their own show and so do the male homosexuals. They are united by their sexuality, but still divided by their gender. This division based on gender is a concept transferred over from

hegemonic heteronormativity. As mentioned earlier, homosexuals are raised within the same heteronormative environment as heterosexuals; thus, heteronormative constructions are the only constructions available for homosexuals to understand their social world. Even though it is a construction in which they do not fit, it is the hegemonic structure of social life available; thus, certain concepts found within heteronormativity will be utilized by homosexuals. Gender, throughout this study, appears to be the most difficult construction to eradicate because of its role as a basis for other social constructions and for understanding the self. This chapter will discuss the ways in which *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* both disturb and uphold heteronormativity. Using specific examples from each show, this chapter will compare and contrast representations of homosexuality both between the stages and within *The Developmental Stage* itself. This analysis will highlight gender differences within sexual expression, the differences in representations of homosexuality as compared to the other stages, and the effects of hegemonic heteronormative constructions on the cognitions of those whom it marginalizes in order to demonstrate the strength of heteronormative constructions within understanding social life.

### **Homonormative Space and Foucault**

*Queer As Folk* and *The L Word* create a homonormative space with the effect of promoting unity not only among the characters in each individual show, but among the viewers as well. It has the effect of joining the viewers not only with the characters of the shows, but also amongst themselves as viewers. This creates a sense

of community within the discursive realm of television in the unique manner of joining people both on and off screen. The effects of creating this homonormative space are best outlined by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. Specifically, in Part Four, Chapter Two “Method” Foucault outlines the ways in which power interplays with discourse. Throughout this study, the realm of television is understood as a discursive platform in which the “multiplicity of force relations” (Foucault 92) operate. He explains that “power is exercised from innumerable points” (Foucault 94), meaning, television is not the only source for power relations. This is important to remember when considering the difficulty surrounding exercising power for a specific purpose. Foucault explains that power is exercised by means of “manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery” (Foucault 94). These manifold relationships of force “are the bases for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole” (Foucault 94). “These then form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together” (94 Foucault). In this way, The Developmental Stage can be seen as a manifold relationship of force joining together with the effect of creating change within the social body. That is to say, homosexuals join together within these shows and exercise power by redefining what it means to be a homosexual. This creation of a third vocabulary has the effect of altering the viewpoints of viewers, because it is offering a different and *new* portrayal of homosexuality. Foucault continues with an explanation of the method with which power is exercised. It begins with “‘local-centers’ of power-knowledge” (Foucault 98). In this respect, the shows *Queer as Folk*

and *The L Word* can be seen as “local-centers” of power-knowledge because they offer representations of homosexuality—which can be seen as knowledge—within the discursive realm, the power matrix, of television. In this respect, The Developmental Stage exercises its power by offering a spectrum of representations of homosexuality which is a modification from the limited representations of homosexuality seen within The Priming Stage. The Developmental Stage represents a spectrum of sexual and gender expression because of its creation of a homonormative space. Within this homonormative space, the restrictive constructions within heteronormativity can be traversed. Foucault continues to explain that the modifications that represent an exertion of power are unable to exist unless the ‘local-center’ “eventually enter[s] into an over-all strategy,” and also, “gain[s] support from precise and tenuous relations serving...as its prop and anchor” (Foucault 99). That is to say, creating a homonormative space allowed for the creation of an alternate point-of-view, an assertion of a spectrum of humanity, which serves as The Developmental Stage’s strategy; then, through the unifying effect of creating a homonormative space, The Developmental Stage gained support for its assertion of a spectrum of humanity through viewership. Thus, this relationship between the television shows and its viewers can be seen as unification under the proposition that there is a spectrum of representations of homosexuality with the effect of modifying social structures. In other words, because these television shows offer a spectrum of representations of homosexuality, homosexual viewers can incorporate themselves within this spectrum—as it allows for a variety of gender and sexual expressions—creating a

sense of legitimization and belonging. This offers a space for marginalized individuals to feel as though they are not marginalized, but merely on the spectrum of human expressions

The shows within the Developmental Stage assert their homonormative space from the beginning. Both shows begin with a character entering the homosexual community from the heteronormative world that surrounds: Justin (*Queer as Folk*) and Jenny (*The L Word*). Both Jenny and Justin serve as a mechanism for the audience to also enter into the homonormative space. Audience members align themselves with these characters: previously on the outside, but entering into the homonormative space. Jenny better exemplifies this notion of aligning the viewer with a character than Justin does; however, Justin more so highlights the cultural differences between heterosexual communities and homosexual communities. Justin's entrance into the homosexual community lexically highlights the cultural differences between the heterosexual world and the homosexual community. That is to say, the homosexual community has created lexical descriptors for various subgroups within the homosexual community. These lexical descriptors highlight cultural differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality in that these descriptors utilize a vocabulary that is exclusive to the homosexual community. It is arguably the same as analyzing the lexical differences between American English and British English.

In the pilot episode of *The L Word* the audience is introduced to Jenny. She is the girlfriend of Tim; thus, she enters into the show from the heterosexual world. Jenny moved to Los Angeles to move in with Tim. Tim lives next door to Bette and

Tina, a lesbian couple of seven years. Bette and Tina serve as the audience's introduction into the homonormative sphere. It is important to note Bette and Tina's physical location in relation to Jenny's; again, they live next door to each other. Their physical relation becomes pertinent to Jenny's entrance (and the audience's entrance) into the homonormative world. This occurs when Jenny is outside of her home after just arriving in L.A.. Jenny's yard and Bette and Tina's yard is separated by a fence. This fence is symbolic of the divide between the heterosexual world and the homosexual world. Jenny hears voices on the other side of the fence and peers through the fence, the cultural divide, to investigate. Jenny sees two women stripping their clothes and entering into the pool in the backyard of Bette and Tina's house. Symbolically speaking, the pool could be seen as a representation of the fluidity of homosexuality as the lesbians enter into this fluid space. Jenny continues to watch as the two, now naked, women begin having sex in the pool. Thus, Jenny has officially discovered the homosexual world on the other side of the divide. The viewer, as they are aligned with Jenny, also discovers the homosexual world. This scene within the pilot episode serves as the entrance into the homonormative space for both Jenny and the viewer. Throughout the episode, Jenny continues her immersion by having her own physical lesbian experience. As previously stated, Jenny's entrance into the homonormative space is more symbolic for the viewer in recognizing that there is a divide between the heteronormative realm and the homonormative realm; however, it does not necessarily highlight the differences between these realms, rather, it acknowledges the presence of the divide. Justin's entrance into the homonormative

sphere more illuminates the cultural differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

In the pilot episode of *Queer as Folk* Justin appears on camera as a youthful, nervous young man standing in the middle of the street where all the gay bars are located. Looking around, he clearly does not seem to know what he is doing, so he goes up to a random guy and asks, “Could you tell me, like, a good place to go?” And the response from the gentlemen highlights the cultural differences between sexual orientations as he explains, “Depends on what you’re looking for. You want twinkies? Go to Boy Toy. You want leather? Go to Meat Hook. You want snotty, conceded assholes who think they’re better than anyone else? Try Pistol.” These lexical codifications could be argued as an extension of heteronormative categorization. That is, since homosexual grew up in the same categorically organized social environment as the rest of the population, their need to create categories in order to organize social life would still be present. As homosexuals cannot utilize the pre-existing heteronormative categories—because the heteronormative categories are largely based on gender and homosexual communities are largely divided by gender; meaning, homosexual cannot use male-female categorical organizations when their group is composed of mainly males or females. Thus, these lexical descriptors which codify the homosexual community from within could be seen as an extension of the heteronormative use of categorization for organization. On the other hand, these lexical devices used to categorize the variety of homosexual expressions indicate the divide between heteronormative culture and homosexual culture. The homosexual

world has a vocabulary of its own used to define themselves from within. Thus, it introduces the idea of a homonormative space—a space with its own language, culture, traditions apart from the heteronormative world surrounding.

These shows continuously reinforce the homonormative sphere they create by depicting primarily homosexual characters. Each show concerns a group of homosexual friends as they interact with the homosexual community in which they immersed. The effect of focusing on characters with the same sexual orientation is to normalize it. For example, there are significantly less instances of gay jokes within either show. Their sexuality is not highlighted as a difference, not even in jest, because within their communities it is not a difference. When everyone in your community is of the same sexual orientation as you are, there is a normalizing effect as it is no longer classified as a difference, it is a commonality. In doing so, *The Developmental Stage* can explore the differences within homosexuality. By removing homosexuality as a division, *The Developmental Stage* has room to explore divisions *within* homosexuality. Specifically, it explores a more fluid spectrum of gender expressions.

### **Gender Expression and Butler**

Within the homonormative space created by *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk* is a spectrum of gender expressions. To an extent, the *Developmental Stage* explores more fluid gender expressions not tied to the sex of an individual. It also, to an extent, subverts heteronormative tendencies to classify homosexuals as inversely gendered. That is to say, that male homosexuals are more feminine and female homosexuals are

more masculine. Instead, it offers a breadth of gender expressions. This breadth of gender expression disrupts the heteronormative construction of gender wherein there are strict characteristics for males and females based upon their biological sex. In the heteronormative constructions, males and females more so align with *Leave It To Beaver*. Note the differences, for example, between *Cosmo* and *Men's Health* within physical characteristics alone. Males are supposed to be muscular, strong, and powerful; whereas, women are supposed to be skinny, sexual objects. Judith Butler explains that constructions of gender based upon biological sex are socially constructed. Therefore, by representing a breadth of gender expressions, the Developmental Stage illustrates a cultural ideology that differs from heteronormative cultural ideology. The theory of Butler's that is most productive for this study is within her theory of gender, which defines gender as culturally constructed. In "Critically Queer" Butler explains that gender is performative; which means that gender expressions are continuously performed in adherence to the hegemonic ideology. She explains that the performativity of gender is, "less an 'act,' singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power" (Butler 225). With this respect, the ways in which gender is performed is a representation of the discourse, the ideology, which a person adheres to; thus, offering a breadth of gender expressions is a way to adhere to an ideology that differs from the strict heteronormative ideology. It is a way in which The Developmental Stage can express its alternative ideology which accepts a spectrum of expressions over a strict construction. Butler continues to explain that the strict

heteronormative constructions of gender prevail because of people's adherence to the ideology that requires this strict organization of gender based upon biological sex. She argues that there is no essential self; therefore, there is no essential man or woman. This means that the characteristics ascribed to each biological sex are determined by ideology permeated through discourse. Then, because the ideology, the constructions, are hegemonic people come to understand their own identify in adherence to these constructions. Therefore, a girl performs "girl-ness" in order to classify as a girl. For example, in Western culture, the epitome of femininity would be exemplified by beauty pageants. In order for a girl to qualify as a girl, she must express some—if not all—of the qualities depicted in beauty pageants. She must be beautiful, sweet and polite. She must be modest, but still serve as a sexual-object. Take, for example, the ease with which people could classify a girl with short hair as a boy from behind. That is, if a girl is wearing clothing that masks her sexual organs and has short hair, people will question whether she classifies as a girl. In other words, "this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a 'one,' to become viable as a 'one,' where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms" (Butler 232). However, this is where the effects of gender expression become very complicated. For example, Bette and Tina both appear feminine; that is to say, they, as a couple, do not adhere to the heteronormative pairing of a more feminine lesbian with a more masculine lesbian. This refers to the heteronormative understanding of "couples" as a paring of a man and woman; thus, this gender pairing is then applied to homosexual couples in which it is required—by

social conceptions—that one person is more masculine and one person is more feminine, so that they adhere to the heteronormative construction of a “couple” and society can understand them as a “couple.” In this way, Bette and Tina subvert heteronormativity. On the other hand, individually they each adhere to the gender constructions ascribed to females: wearing high heels, feminine clothing, the use of make-up, highly emotional, etc. Thus, within their individual gender expressions, they still adhere to heteronormative constructions of gender—meaning, most people would recognize them as women. Another example is within the character Shane in *The L Word*. She is a lesbian that identifies as a female but expresses masculine qualities more so than feminine. She has short hair, is rarely seen wearing a bra, always wearing sneakers, pants, and either a t-shirt or button down; thus, she does not adhere to the heteronormative construction of the female gender. However, she does adhere to the heteronormative idea that homosexuals are inverted in their gender. In addition, Shane’s more masculine qualities appear to coincide with promiscuity. Whereas the other lesbian characters of the show, which are closer to the feminine end of the spectrum of gender expression, do not demonstrate the level of promiscuity that Shane does. Her promiscuity is correlated to her masculine qualities. She is described in the show as having the 4 F’s: “Finds them. Feels them. Fucks them. Forgets them.” Since Shane’s promiscuity is correlated to her masculine gender expression, it can be read as an adherence to heteronormativity as well as not. She is a female performing more male characteristics, and in this way she does not adhere to heteronormativity; however, her masculine expression adheres to the heteronormative

construction of masculinity. Thus, in a variety of ways, Shane upholds and denies heteronormative constructions. These complexities with heteronormativity and gender expression highlight the pervasiveness of heteronormative ideology, insofar as even within a homonormative space, heteronormativity still makes an appearance. The prevalence of heteronormativity within an attempted homonormative space is exemplified by the gender differences in sexual expression. Since The Developmental Stage divides homosexuality by gender, it is easier to compare and contrast the ways in which each gender expresses their sexuality in a manner that adheres to heteronormative constructions.

### **Sexual Expression and Gender**

The pervasiveness of heteronormative ideology and the complexities surrounding homosexuality in relation to this ideology are highlighted within the gender differences of sexual expression represented in The Developmental Stage. Both *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk* contain a lot of sexually explicit material. For the audience, viewing physical relations between homosexuals is a way to legitimize the homosexual act. Whereas in other stages, which do not exist within a self-created homonormative realm, physical homosexual acts are rarely, if ever, depicted. The Priming Stage's lack of physical homosexual acts within television shows attempts to deny the legitimization of homosexual intercourse. It also represents of the differences in audiences. The Priming Stage had a heteronormative structure with a primarily heterosexual audience that was not prepared for depictions of homosexual intercourse. Conversely, The Developmental Stage's audience consists primarily of

homosexuals or homosexual supporters who are better equipped for depictions of homosexual intercourse. Of course, there is also the factor that Showtime, being a cable network, is allowed to show more explicit materials in their shows. However, though the depictions of homosexual intercourse serve as a legitimizing mechanism for homosexuality, they also uphold aspects of heteronormativity. This seems counterintuitive that homosexual intercourse would uphold heteronormative ideology, but it is for this reason that *The Developmental Stage* is so complex.

As previously stated, both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* contain almost ridiculous amounts of sexually explicit material; however, the ways in which sexually explicit material is portrayed differs between each show. For example, Shane, as previously stated, is the most promiscuous in the show. That is not to say that the other characters in *The L Word* do not engage in sexual activity, rather, they usually engage in intercourse with one other person for a variable period of time. Depictions of their intercourse tend to adhere to a heteronormative understanding of female sexuality. That is to say, emotions play an important role, as does sensuality. Sex in *The L Word* is more feminine. There is a build-up of tension through subtleties and foreplay. Caresses are generally gentle and soft as opposed to rough, raw sexual attraction. Additionally, these scenes tend to focus more on the women's faces. For example, in a scene building-up sexual tension between Jenny and Marina (a minor lesbian character in the show), the camera shows a conversation between them. Their voices become more soft and sensual, and dramatic, sensual music plays in the background. Throughout the conversation, as tension builds, the camera zooms in on

the faces and particular facial characteristics by panning from the eyes to lips and back again. This focus, physically, on attributes of the face rather than the body also upholds heteronormative constructs in a complicated way. In heteronormativity, the male sexually objectifies the female; thus, within an all female sexual relation, neither would sexually objectify the other because males are the persons whom objectify females. This is supported by a scene in *Queer as Folk* between Justin and Brian. Whereas Jenny and Marina were having a conversation and the tension would slowly build into a softer portrayal of intercourse, Justin and Brian enter Brian's home with little to no talking. They are not yet engaging in physical activities, they are just not intellectually adding sexual tension. Instead, Brian goes into the kitchen, grabs a bottle of water, removes his shirt, and proceeds to pour the water over his head and body. This scene is shot in slow motion with close-up pans over Brian's very muscular torso. Brian's water scene mirrors similar scenes within heteronormativity; for example, the wet t-shirt contest or in the iconic water scene in *Flashdance* wherein the main character pulls a chain during her dance routine and a bucket of water pours on top of her. Thus, this scene upholds heteronormativity in that it is the male doing the act of objectifying; however, it is destabilizing in that he is objectifying another male.

Overall, the sex scenes within *The L Word* and *Queer As Folk* are markedly different and in accordance to their gender's heteronormative characteristics, but applied to homosexuality. The complexities surrounding these seemingly contradictory overhauls and upheavals of heteronormativity highlight the strength and

pervasiveness of heteronormative ideology. Since homosexuals grow up with the same heteronormative, hegemonic ideology as heterosexuals, the same constructions and bases for understanding social life are available. Even though heteronormative ideology marginalizes homosexuality, there is no other ideology available with which to understand social life. Therefore, homosexuals, in a sense, are forced to marginalize themselves by perpetuating heteronormative ideology because of the lack of an alternative. There is no ideology available that completely dismisses heteronormativity, thus, fluidity within identity construction is the most viable option for including all people. It is this spectrum and the understanding that an alternative construction of social life is unavailable which is perpetuated within The Developmental Stage. These notions of compromise—the understanding that an alternative ideology is yet unavailable and heterosexuals and homosexual alike must compromise their definitions in order to understand these newer expressions—and fluidity within expression offer new homosexual associations for viewers. Rather than believing they must fit into a box, a spectrum is offered wherein they can situate themselves. This alters the terministic screens and understandings of homosexuality in a manner that leaves open spaces for compromise, growth, and understanding. It is this open space that is created within The Developmental Stage and continued into The Integration Stage; wherein, there is an attempt to utilize this open space in the mutual growth and compromising between homosexuals and heterosexuals alike.

### **Chapter Three: The Integration Stage**

The Integration Stage followed a period of unification and self-exploration for the LGBT community. In the previous Developmental Stage, the LGBT community took control over their own narratives, redefining the pre-existing notions surrounding homosexuality in a manner that reduced restrictions within portrayals of homosexuality. This period of rewriting homosexual narratives occurred in a homonormative space. That is to say, it occurred within the community it concerned. The Integration Stage, however, incorporates this new storytelling into the hegemonic, largely heteronormative, space. It is a period of mutual education, wherein homosexuals and heterosexuals alike learn how to incorporate both parties into hegemonic social categorization. Since homosexual relations do not fit into the pre-existing gender roles used to define social life, new lines of separation are necessary. It is within The Integration Stage that the process of re-categorizing social life begins. For example, continuing with the new word analogy present throughout this study, the Integration Stage takes the third vocabulary created within the Developmental Stage and integrates into the pre-existing vernacular. Since this new word is now defined by new terminology, the process of integration requires a compromise on either side—that is, a compromise by both the new definition and the vernacular in which it is trying to join. Cognitively speaking, it concerns incorporating the new associations created surrounding homosexuality into the social structures used for understanding social life. Whereas homosexuality began with pejorative associations, it now has, here in the Integration Stage, new, positive, normalizing, and humanizing associations that will restructure social life. However,

this restructuring must be understood as a process, since it involves continuously altering cognition. This study will demonstrate examples of this incorporation of new homosexual storytelling into hegemonic social structures by examining the homosexual representations found in the television show *Modern Family*.

Similar to *Will&Grace*, *Modern Family* airs on a public broadcasting network, meaning American citizens are more likely to come across the show because it does not air on a cable network. That is to say, the message of the medium will reach a large and diverse audience, which is an important factor in re-categorizing social constructions of America. Airing on ABC also means that the hegemonic structures organizing society are more likely to dictate the show's content. Since it reaches the average American audience, public broadcasting tends to adhere to the societal rules that are in place. For this reason, the very fact that *Modern Family* is broadcast on ABC means that it is incorporated into those hegemonic constructions. This point, also, contributes to the effectiveness of *Modern Family* as a stimulus capable of altering viewers' terministic screens and understanding of social life.

*Modern Family* began airing on ABC in 2009 and is currently in its sixth season. It has received 220 nominations, with 94 awards won, including: a Golden Globe Award, 5 Emmy Awards, and Screen Actors' Guild Awards. *Modern Family* has been at the top of the rankings since it aired and has not let up. The show uses a mockumentary style of filming—similar to that of *The Office*—wherein characters will have confessional interviews outside of the ongoing plot. It follows a large family living in suburban Los Angeles. For clarification, *Modern Family* follows

three families and their dynamics: Jay's family, Claire's family, and Mitchell's family. The patriarch of the family is Jay Pritchett, who remarried a younger Latino woman Gloria Pritchett, and gained his step-son Manny Delgado. Jay Pritchett has two children—Claire and Mitchell—who each have families of their own. Claire is married to Phil Dunphy, and they have three children: Haley, Alex, and Luke. Mitchell Pritchett—Claire's brother—has his homosexual partner Cameron Tucker and their adopted daughter Lily Tucker-Pritchett. *Modern Family* is entitled as such because it includes the various forms of family seen today. First, Jay is significantly older than his wife Gloria. This serves as an example of a new traditional family because of their significant age difference, their cultural differences (as Gloria is Columbian), and a different form of parent-child relations with Jay now the older step-father of Gloria's son. Claire's family appears to be more traditional: mother, father, three kids. However, the gender relations between Claire and Phil differ from that of *Leave It To Beaver*. Both parents bring in money and they appear to have a shared power dynamic as opposed to the patriarchal power structure of the past. Mitch and Cam are an obvious deviation from the norm as a homosexual couple with an adopted daughter. *Modern Family* has gained a lot of its attention, arguably, for their representation of Cam and Mitchell's homosexual relationship—a relationship which, as is the stance of this study, makes *Modern Family* the epitome of The Integration Stage—because, other than the obvious differences, Mitch and Cam's familial structure appears to be as normal as Claire and Phil's, if not more. Given the title and the inclusion of not only a homosexual couple, but a pair of homosexual

parents, *Modern Family* legitimizes the existence of nontraditional family structures: gay and straight alike.

As previously stated, The Integration Stage is a period of time in which the new understandings of homosexuality are incorporated into the pre-existing heteronormative societal construction. *Modern Family* appears to be aware of their placement in LGBT history by strategically handling issues social issues that arise because of homosexuality. That is to say, where television shows previously ignored social issues surrounding homosexuality or lightly addressed these issues (as within The Integration Stage), *Modern Family* does not. It not only acknowledges the presence of these issues, but also recognizes their own importance as a television show in addressing said issues. *Modern Family* approaches these social issues surrounding homosexuality as though they are questions. This chapter will analyze specific episodes of *Modern Family* that appear to intelligently address social issues surrounding homosexuality by offering answers to questions that arise when trying to incorporate homosexuality into the hegemony. Specifically, this chapter will examine how *Modern Family* answers the questions of: homosexual public displays of affection, who proposes in a homosexual relationship, who is the mother/father in a homosexual parenthood, and what would a homosexual wedding look like. This chapter will also argue the effects these answers could have on viewers' cognition and understanding of homosexuality—leading to more accurate understandings of homosexuality and re-organization of social constructions as to incorporate homosexuality into hegemonic social structures.

As seen within The Priming Stage, previous representations of homosexuality do not include homosexual public displays of affection. For example, *Will&Grace* rarely displayed physical affection between homosexual characters. This is a method of denying the legitimization of homosexual physical relations by denying its appearance on television and therefore denying its existence. Since the hegemonic framework has its basis within heteronormative constructions, same-sex physical relations disrupt the way in which people understand social life. It rejects the heteronormative constructs of male-female sexual relations. Mainly, American viewers have been, and arguably, still are unprepared for the sexual aspects of homosexuality. There is yet a hegemonic framework in place that incorporates homosexual physical relations; therefore, American viewers are ill-prepared to incorporate bodied, physical examples of homosexuality. As a society, America is still adjusting to the concept of homosexuality and the newfound gender constructions that are inherent within homosexuality. The lack of homosexual public displays of affection is a common critique among the LGBT community. The lack of homosexual PDA is seen as a continuation of the denial explained above. Whereas in the Developmental Stage, homosexual physical affection was incited into discourse—by the repression expressed within the Priming Stage—to the point of excess. Now, in the Integration Stage, the question of whether or not to portray homosexual physical affection is addressed. *Modern Family* even accrued criticism from its LGBT community viewers due to the lack of PDA between Cameron and Mitchell. LGBT viewers questioned why Cameron and Mitchell rarely, if at all, demonstrated any

physical affection towards one another; thus, *Modern Family* responded with season two, episode two's "The Kiss." However, whereas most shows would portray an obvious, spectacle-like moment between Cameron and Mitchell in order to appease their audience, *Modern Family*'s approach demonstrates the carefulness and intelligence the show applies to these issues.

"The Kiss" begins with Mitch and Cam shopping. Cam asks Mitch for his advice, but Mitch appears to grow more and more bored. Though Cam cannot decide which shirt to buy, Mitch assures him that he looks wonderful in both of them. Feeling warmed by this moment with his partner, Cam reaches in for a kiss, but Mitch pulls away. Later the show reveals that this is a common occurrence with Mitch. He disdains public displays of affection. Mitch and Cam argue about the incident. While Mitch believes Cam is being too needy, Cam believes Mitch "won't kiss [him] in front of people because [Mitch] is ashamed of who [he] is." It is important to highlight Cam's comment. Commonly behaviors of homosexuals are attributed to their homosexuality. That is to say, in this case specifically, if a homosexual male prefers not to show affection to his partner in public it is assumed to be caused by his sexuality. He is seen as exclusively homosexual; it becomes his identity rather than a portion of his identity. It is also important to note that Cam is the more flamboyantly gay male in the relationship—seemingly adhering to the heteronormative construction of a "couple" as a male-female pairing. His sexual orientation is more obvious than Mitch; therefore, it would be fair to conclude that Cameron is more comfortable with publically displaying his sexuality than Mitch is. Had a similar issue occurred during

The Priming Stage, it would be dubbed a case of homosexual self-shaming, followed by a moment of acceptance, and a hug. But, this is not The Priming Stage, and understanding and acceptance of homosexuality has grown since that time period. Thus, *Modern Family* offered another explanation for Mitch's aversion to public displays of affection. After Mitch and Cam talk about the shopping incident and come to a compromise wherein both parties are now happy, they meet up with the rest of the cast at Jay's home. However, for a second time, while at this party with their family, Cam goes in for a kiss and is rejected again by Mitch. In a more comical moment, when Mitch pulls away this time, Cam flips over the back of the couch, as he expected someone's face to prevent him from doing so. Because it was such a spectacle, the whole family becomes involved with the situation and they begin discussing Mitch's PDA issue. Gloria becomes the most vocal on the subject, quickly shifting the blame to Mitch's father Jay: "It's because of you that your son can not kiss his own lover!" Jay does not understand. They begin discussing Jay's relationship with his father and how his father never showed much affection either. Gloria learns that the last time Jay kissed his son Mitch was when he was twelve. Gloria blames this lack of affection between father and son for Mitch's inability to be publically affectionate with his partner; or, as Gloria put it: "Jay's dad doesn't kiss Jay. Jay doesn't kiss Mitch. Mitch is uptight." At this point, the decision has been made that Jay must kiss Mitch in order to restore balance to their relationship. In reference to Cam's comment previously discussed, this newfound explanation for Mitch's behavior is humanizing. Rather than Mitch's problems centering around his

sexuality, it had to do with his upbringing, his relationship with his father, his personality. The issue was within *him as a human* rather than him as a homosexual. The scene continues as Jay realizes that there is no way to avoid this situation, so he agrees. It is a huge spectacle, everyone in the family circled up to watch Mitch and Jay kiss, and they do. This is the episode's big kiss scene between two men: one between a father and his son. Afterwards, in the background of the excitement, you see Mitch sit on the arm of Cam's chair and give him a little kiss. It was no big deal, subtle; you could even miss it if you were not paying attention. *Modern Family's* handling of the kissing situation normalized gay affection. Instead of making it the big spectacle in the episode, it was casual. It was just a couple of five years kissing. Nothing more. That seemed like a carefully thought out move on behalf of *Modern Family*, a way to try and stop making homosexuality a spectacle like in *Will&Grace*. The way in which *Modern Family* answered the question of PDA normalized and humanized homosexuality. Mitch became more than his sexuality, and in that way, he became more human, more complete. It also foiled two male on male kisses in an interesting way. By having the big male-on-male kiss between a father and son, *Modern Family* almost highlights the absurdity of finding same sex affection aversive. When the kiss is between two males that are father and son—done with the same point: as a demonstration of love—the affection is not subversive or disgusting as some would view a homosexual kiss. In addition, *Modern Family* made more strides for homosexuality with this kiss scene than it receives credit for. It demonstrated to audiences what is rarely demonstrated for marginalized groups: it

was not a show. By having Mitch and Cam share a private, affectionate moment in the background of this scene, they showed audiences that two males kissing is no more interesting than a man and woman kissing. It is not a homosexual kiss. It is a kiss. In this way, *Modern Family* demonstrated to its audience that homosexuality was normal. There is no reason that Cam and Mitch should be front and center because they are not doing anything of interest. They are just kissing, and that is what couples in love do, regardless of sexual orientation.

During this time period, in California, gay marriage became legal. With the legalization of gay marriage come logistical questions. They are not necessary homosexually centered issues, more so issues of gender roles, but questions without answers nonetheless. For example, if both parties are of the same gender, who proposes? Traditionally, the male in the relationship bends down on one knee and asks the female for her hand in marriage. But what are the rules when both parties are male, or if neither is? Humans prefer to have an organization to their social life; thus, some sort of system must be created that is not based upon gender in order to organize deviations from pre-existing social understanding. Jay and Manny, his stepson, highlight this need for a new understanding. In a scene with just Jay and Manny, it becomes apparent to the audience the effects of their generation gap. Jay's understanding of social life stems from a *Leave It To Beaver* education. In other words, Jay understands the world through a heteronormative terministic screen. He demonstrates this when Jay and Manny go to the courthouse to acquire a copy of Manny's birth certificate. Since gay marriage was just legalized, there are many

homosexual couples in line to get married. Jay points out that they are getting their “gay marriage license.” Manny, being a member of a newer generation that was too young to watch *Will&Grace* and are growing up on *Glee*, responds to his step-father with, “I think it’s just a marriage license.” This interaction between father and son demonstrates not only the effect that has already started taking place within the younger generations, but also demonstrates to audience members that the qualifier “gay” is unnecessary. This distinction serves to further normalize homosexuality for audience members. On the other hand, it is not always a generational issue. *Modern Family* reiterates their previous point when Mitch corrects Claire’s question, “are we gonna hear big gay wedding bells soon?” with “Well, just wedding bells.” There are logistical questions that follow the legalization of gay marriage, simply because the hegemonic structures based upon gender do not account for same-sex situations. Therefore, in season five, episode one “Suddenly Last Summer” *Modern Family* attempts to answer the question of who proposes.

Cam and Mitch already have a home and daughter together. They have been a couple for five years, and would have already gotten married had the laws permitted them to do so. Thus, it was no surprise that they wanted to get married, but who would propose? The show recognizes this question when Gloria asks Cam outright: “Who proposes to whom?” *Modern Family* also recognizes the answer to this question: there is no answer to this question. Hetero and homosexuals alike utilize the same gender-based, hegemonic understanding of social life. Homosexuality does not come with an alternative set of rules to follow, and no one has figured out what that

set of rules would look like. Thus, *Modern Family* explains to audience members the complexities and ambiguities surrounding homosexuality by demonstrating that not even homosexuals have the answer. And since homosexuals also do not know who should propose, both Mitch and Cam decide to propose to each other. The episode follows a comical series of events in which both Cam and Mitch are trying to plan a surprise proposal for the other, and each plan disrupts the plans of the other. It is chaos. In all fairness, however, when dealing with social issues that have yet to be structured—and maybe never will—all that is left is chaos. Eventually, Cam and Mitch end up on the side of the road with a flat tire. Neither has been able to fulfill their plan. Cam looks out over the city lights and says, “you know, it’s a different world down there than it was 24 hours ago.” They share this moment, then both drop down to change the tire. The audience is shown Mitch and Cam on either side of the flat tire, both on one knee. They see Mitch and Cam realize themselves that they are both on one knee, looking up at each other, smiling. Then, the couple says “yes” at the same time. In this moment, though scripted and highly romanticized, *Modern Family* explains to audiences that there are not answers to structural questions surrounding homosexuality. It is the job of homosexuals and heterosexuals as humans to answer these questions to the best of their ability. Without structure, there is chaos, as the show concedes; however, chaos is not a legitimate basis for denying one of the most basic of human instincts: to love. And love, a partnership between two people, is socially recognized through the institution of marriage. Mitch and Cam have all that is required for marriage: a mutual desire to join in matrimony. *Modern Family*’s

answer to the proposal question unites homo and heterosexuals first in mutual confusion and again through a shared understanding of love. It portrays homosexuals to audience members as normal and human, just as they are.

*Modern Family* continuously addresses questions surrounding homosexuality. Throughout this chapter, the role of gender constructions has been asserted as a factor in misunderstandings surrounding homosexuality. Another assertion is the mutual confusion for both heterosexuals and homosexuals for how social life should be structured to include homosexual relationships. The Integration Stage demonstrates a period for compromise; for homosexuals and heterosexuals to join together and attempt to learn from each other how this new normal should be structured. For example, season two's episode "Mother's Day" shows Cam's aversion to being referred to as the mother, and attempts to answer the question: Who is the mom? People view Cameron as the more feminine of the two males; therefore, he is continuously referred to as "[the] mother...[the] wife...a woman." Cameron feels as though his more feminine qualities do not make him a woman—a fair distinction to make. This is not to say that Cameron views being called a woman as a degradation of his character; rather, Cameron is just not a woman, he is a man. In society, people tend to misgender homosexuals: woman with more masculine qualities become one of the guys, and males with more feminine qualities are treated as one of the girls. Mitch tries to explain to Cameron that his inclusion with the moms, the reason why he is included in the Mother's Day celebrations is because, "[they] are a new type of family. [People] don't have the right vocabulary for us yet. They need one of us to be

the mom.” This quotation by Mitch brings to mind the Richard Rorty discussion within the Developmental Stage. Recall that Rorty explained the need for a third vocabulary to be created when the pre-existing vocabularies are no longer representative of the human world. This moment also demonstrates to audiences a sense of mutual understanding. In a sense, it is saying “you are trying to understand and include us (homosexuals), and though you are not always correct, we can be patient and work through this together.” Rather than demonstrating an explosive uproar over marginalization and continued misgendering, *Modern Family* portrays a sense of compromise and mutual understanding: We are all trying. This issue demonstrates the influence of gender constructions within homosexual issues. Referring to Cameron as a mom does not necessarily concern his sexuality; rather, it addresses the notions surrounding gender in heteronormative society. The caregiver of the family is conscribed to be the mom, not the dad. The binary constructions of gender characteristics create strict and distinct roles for each gender. It does not concern the sex, the physical make-up, of a human, but rather the way in which they express themselves. Mitch attempts to explain this to Cameron by showing him a Mother’s Day Card in which a description of a mother is contained. Mitch reads the list and they both agree that Cameron has those positive, motherly qualities, such as caring and loving. Thus, Cameron and Mitch come to a mutual understanding that society is simply using the terminology they currently have in order to better understand and incorporate homosexuals. By demonstrating Cameron’s point of view, *Modern Family* again represents homosexuality in a humanizing way. The “Mother’s

Day” episode further demonstrates to the audience the importance of continuously and jointly reorganizing social constructions in order to generate a vocabulary that includes all forms of families and persons.

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, The Integration Stage includes representations of homosexuality that aid its humanization and normalization. In what is arguably one of the more important aspects of this stage, it also demonstrates representations that legitimize homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. In a two part finale to season five, *Modern Family* depicts Cameron and Mitch’s wedding day. It is the stance of this study that more important than addressing what a gay wedding looks like is the very inclusion of a gay wedding on a major broadcasting network. Earlier in this study it was explained, utilizing Foucault’s theories, that the television screen has become a major platform for displays of exercising discursive power. When *Modern Family* depicted a homosexual couple joining in union—mirroring the actual legalization of gay marriage in California—it legitimized homosexuality. The family has been the epicenter for sexual maturity. It was the job of the family to teach the appropriate ways in which to express one’s sexuality and to reinforce these restrictions. By showing a gay wedding on television, *Modern Family* ushered homosexual marriage into the realm of significant. It has been acknowledged, demonstrated, legitimized. Though it is a television show, these marriage episodes legitimized gay marriage in America not only on the screen as an acceptable part of social life, but also as a legally substantial union. It included homosexual marriage into the power institution of the television screen and also the institution of marriage

which legally qualifies couples as legitimate. *Modern Family* helped to normalize, humanize, and legitimize homosexuality, and by doing so for a national audience, created a new story for viewers to associate with homosexuality, changing their terministic screens, and contributing to shift in representation and understanding of homosexuality. As the actor who plays Phil, Ty Burrell, in an interview with *The Telegraph*:

“This is probably a little over wrought, but I actually do think the writers are making the world a better place. It’s one of my favorite things about the show. I love it when I talk to conservatives and they’re describing all three couples, and they never mention that one of them is gay. That’s the brilliance of the writing. In a completely unaggressive, apolitical way, they are showing this couple as completely normal dealing with ordinary stuff. The banality of it is the most revolutionary thing” (*The Telegraph*).

Or as Bryan Fischer, an extreme right-wing conservative says:

“What’s illustrated [in *Modern Family*] is [the] way the media influences the way people think about life. The portrait there that’s being presented is designed to make you think that same-sex households are wonderful, they’re loving, this is paradise, this is the optimum nurturing environment for children....You know, that’s the danger. It’s just like getting a little bit of poison over a long period of time, eventually getting enough accumulation in there where it can be

kind of lethal to the organism. And I think that's what you're seeing with a lot of this programming. It has to do with kind of the basic view of morality and marriage and life and family that people have. It's very corrosive; people are just watching TV to be entertained, not realizing that their view of life is being twisted in a way that's very harmful to them and harmful to our culture” (Fischer).

That is exactly the point of this chapter and this study—though, there are some differences about the negative nature with which Fischer presents media effects. *Modern Family* is not changing conservative minds today. It does not have a profound effect leading to a nation-wide legalization of homosexual marriage tomorrow, but it is a shift in the representations of homosexuality that affect the associations viewers make with homosexuality. This study also demonstrates that acceptance of homosexuality is a process based on viewers’ willingness to look at visual representations of homosexuality without major critique. In that respect, Fischer and Burrell are both correct. *Modern Family* has the ability, because television is a platform for power relations, to slowly alter the way in which viewers understand homosexuality, family structures, and the very way in which social life is categorized. In that respect, *Modern Family*, and television in general, has the opportunity to affect a powerful change (or at least to contribute to one) by affecting the ways in which viewers think, see, and understand their world.

## **Discussion**

Throughout this study, a shift in representations of homosexuality has been outlined. This shift coincides with an ideological shift within American society which progresses towards a freedom of expression for humanity. Though there is no essential or accurate representation to aim for, as Michael McGee explains in “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology”: “‘truth’...no matter how firmly we believe, is always an illusion” (McGee 500); “we are morally remiss if we do not discard the false and approach the true” (McGee 499). That is to say, though there is no one, true ideology, we are morally obligated as a people to continuously strive to provide a better, all-encompassing ideology with which to understand social life. This study highlights the importance of television’s role in continuously striving for a better ideology. *Will&Grace* demonstrates the beginnings of altering ideology to encompass homosexuality as a norm. *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* depict homosexuals taking control over their own societal constructions which *Modern Family* then incorporated into the pre-existing hegemonic ideology. Though the relationship between television and affecting ideological change can only be argued as correlational, it is still an important factor in administering ideological change. Television reflects society, and because it visually represents ideology, it teaches societal standards to viewers. It is important to investigate the ideology that television portrays, because it does have an effect on viewers’ understanding of social life.

Throughout this study, television shows were analyzed for the purpose of highlighting representations of homosexuality. Though this study describes the ways in which representations of homosexuality have shifted for the better because

oppressive restrictions imposed upon homosexuals were loosened throughout, it does not discuss other aspects of the hegemonic ideology that continues to marginalize people. *Will&Grace*, *Queer As Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Modern Family* all depict primarily middle-class white characters. Though the shift investigated benefits the homosexuals, it continues the marginalization of minority races in America. This continued marginalization could go unnoticed without carefully analyzing what is depicted on the television screen. It is for this reason that critically evaluating television and the ideologies it perpetuates is so important, because if television is not critically assessed then depictions of ideologies that support marginalizing others will continue. Television is capable of teaching viewers about societal standards, and those standards must be watched carefully. With that being said, the inclusion of minority races within homosexual representations appears to be on the rise, as evidenced by *Orange Is the New Black*.

In Netflix's *Orange is the New Black* there is a variety of homosexual representations including minority groups. Though *Orange is the New Black* is still pre-dominantly composed of white people, with homosexual minorities composed to two African-American women as its diversity, it could, arguably, represent The Priming Stage within a shift towards representing racial minorities within the LGBT community as well as within American society as a whole. The specific limitation of the present study within racial representation highlights the importance of ideology within television. For example, television could contribute to an ideological shift which aims to incorporate a breadth of racial representations in a similar manner to

the present study. Meaning, if we view *Orange is the New Black* as a Priming Stage within a shift in minority representation within the homosexual community, then a show wherein racial minorities expound upon themselves could follow, with the effect of developing the new, more accurate associations within viewers which contribute to a cumulative, systematic ideological shift. Then, the perspective demonstrated within a Developmental Stage could be incorporated into hegemonic ideology within a show that meets the characteristics of an Integration Stage. Thus, an ideological shift *could* take place over a period time with the help of television representations. That is not to say that television alone could instill an ideological shift of this nature, rather it reflects societal ideologies and helps to inform viewers of this new ideology leading to a shift in their understanding of their social world. Thus, these television shows would be a contributing factor within a sea of factors that could, potentially, instill an ideological shift that calls for a breadth of racial representations.

The power of television, though currently only correlational in nature, is supported by the legal changes that temporally coincide with altering television representations. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 California legalized gay marriage. In May 2014 *Modern Family* aired its two-part season finale about Mitch and Cam's wedding. When this episode aired, 17 states had legalized marriage by court decision, state legislature, or popular vote. Between the airing of part one and part two of their wedding, 2 more states legalized gay marriage. This gives a total of 19 states to legalize gay marriage by the end of May 2014. Today, six months later, in October of

2014, 32 states have legalized gay marriage. As of October 6, 2014, 5<sup>7</sup> more states are on their way to legalizing gay marriage because marriage bans have been overturned, but appeals are still in progress. In the six months following Mitch and Cam's wedding—the first gay wedding ever depicted on a national broadcasting channel—the number of states with legalized gay marriage almost doubled. Is this a coincidence? Perhaps. But it is also likely that parasocial contact with a gay couple over five years until their eventual union demonstrated to American citizens that homosexuals are human, homosexual couples are in love, and couples in love deserve the right to get married. Television depiction can affect, even with the most minute strength, the civil laws of a nation. If that is not a reflection of the power potential of television depictions, what is?

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics on gay marriage found at <http://gaymarriage.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=004857>

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