Coping Strategies of Gay Men in College Fraternities

Jack Trump, Graduate Student, Eastern Illinois University
Dr. Charles Eberly, Professor of Counseling and Student Development, Eastern Illinois University

The collegiate years offer a great deal more than just vocational preparation. On most campuses, students have opportunities to take advantage of a multitude of co-curricular activities that encourage active participation within their community such as the American college fraternity. Fraternity members are exposed to a wide variety of leadership possibilities and are provided opportunities to develop mature, interpersonal relationships (Winston & Saunders, 1987). The college social fraternity culture can be very supportive of its members, encouraging their growth and development as responsible citizens in a global society. Within this framework, Baier and Whipple (1990) asserted that fraternities often socialize their members to view the group as a family, or a "brotherhood." However, this supportive environment for some may concurrently be a very hostile environment for others, particularly those who may be in the process of developing a homosexual identity. Kuh and Lyons (1990) claimed that "a close community can become closed, oppress as well as support…" (p. 21).

The process of homosexual identity development can be confounding for many gay males who become submersed in an environment that may not offer support or validation for their being gay. The environment of the college social fraternity often reflects the values, attitudes, beliefs and prejudices held by society that homosexuality is "wrong" or "deviant." Thus many gay males who join college social fraternities face a great deal of adversity. Arnold and Kuh (1993) posit, "Fraternities are products of a larger cultural context… they do not exist apart from the societies and institutions that create and support them" (p. 331). Paradoxically, while college social fraternities may be unsupportive of homosexuality, there seems to be an abundance of gay males who are active fraternity members. Freeman and Windmeyer (1998) gave voice to the lived experience of selected gay men and their involvement as a gay male in a college social fraternity, affirming that gay men do achieve membership in fraternities. To understand this phenomenon, one must first recognize the impact of homophobia and heterosexism and the effect of internalized homophobia on gay men. Adams, Bell and Griffin (1997) defined heterosexism as the "societal/cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable orientation" (p. 162). Homophobia is:

> The fear, hatred, or intolerance of lesbians, gay men, or any behavior that is outside the boundaries of traditional gender roles. Homophobia can be manifested as fear of association with lesbian or gay people or being perceived as lesbian or gay. Homophobic behavior can range from telling jokes about lesbian and gay people to physical violence against people thought to be lesbian or gay. (Adams, et al., p. 162)

As an adolescent, a young gay male feels as if he is not any different than his heterosexual counterparts (Johnson, 1996). As such, these young males often internalize societal values through cultural messages that often view homosexuality as deviant or immoral (Lasser, 1999). When these adolescents begin to realize that their sexuality is different from their peers, they often have internalized homophobic feelings about gay men and lesbians (Johnson, 1996; Wilson, 1999). Moreover, Herek, as cited in Lasser (1999), claims that, "homophobia is an integral component of socially constructed, idealized masculinity – that is, to be hostile toward homosexual persons in general and gay men in particular" (p. 27). All of this occurs before the adolescent male even realizes that he may be homosexual. This is due to the fact that, "Sex is one of the few physical experiences where we know how we feel about it (attitudes of good/bad, right/wrong) before we experience it" (Johnson, 1996, p.38). With the recognition that homosexuality might be distinctively relevant to one's self, learning how to cope becomes an essential task for the young adolescent trying to survive in a society perpetuating homophobia and heterosexism.

Fortunately, many gay males are able to manage the pressures that result from being rejected and marginalized by elements of society (Boies, 1997; Mahan, 1998; Lasser, 1999). They adopt certain strategies that help them to cope in certain situations. Mahan (1998) asserted that coping should be viewed as contextual, "referring to the individual's thoughts and behaviors within a specific context" (p. 51). Moreover, he stated, "Individuals adjust coping efforts from context to context depending on whether they appraise the stressful event as a harmless threat or a challenge" (Mahan, 1999, p. 52).

Coping can be divided into two basic types – subconscious coping and conscious coping (Mahan, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed a model of coping that focused specifically on conscious coping strategies, the purposive cognitions or behaviors of an individual, suggesting that participants cannot report that of which they are not aware and thus only the conscious is relevant to study. This model is known as the Transactional Model of Coping. The essence of this model is that the individual and the environment are not mutually exclusive. The individual evaluates the level of harm or threat to determine which, if any, coping responses will be used. The model emphasizes context specificity. As the context (environment)

Jack Trump
cgjrt@eiu.edu

Dr. Charles Eberly
cfcge@eiu.edu

changes, the individual adjusts his or her coping efforts accordingly. Conscious coping is then separated into two categories – problem-focused (action) and emotion-focused (meaning-altering) (Mahan, 1999; Todoroff, 1995). Gay males use a variation of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Cox, 1996; Kaiser 1998, Mahan, 1998).

A number of researchers have identified and labeled distinctive coping strategies that are used by gay males. Woods (1992) found in his study that gay males in the corporate world used three coping strategies to manage their sexual identity – counterfeiting an identity, integrating an identity and avoiding a sexual identity. Participants often used more than one strategy, forcing them to segregate their audiences. Moreover, their peers' attitudes toward homosexuality had a strong influence on which coping strategy the men used. In contrast to managing their sexual identity, some participants used an integration strategy. However, by disclosing their identity, the men exposed themselves to prejudice and increased performance pressures. Similarly, Johnson (1999) suggested that the coping strategies of gay adolescents fall into two distinct "reaction patterns" and that a boy will attempt to be the "best little boy on the face of the earth," or he will "drop-out" (p. 38).

In the Greek community, research on gay men and lesbians suggests that the reaction patterns of college-aged students mirrors the reaction patterns found in adolescents. In Case's 1996 study, 80% of the men Case interviewed held at least one executive committee position, and over 20% were either president or vice president. In explaining these findings, Case suggested that these tendencies towards "overachievement" or an overwhelmingly high level of involvement may "reflect a desire for validation and acceptance by the group" (p. 2). This mirrors the "best boy" effect Johnson (1999) found in adolescent gay males, suggesting that there may be a correlation between the behaviors and coping strategies of the two age groups.

Whether coping is problem-focused or emotion-focused, gay men in fraternities utilize a multitude of conscious strategies to cope with societal homophobia and heterosexism. Although the social college fraternity may represent the same anti-homosexual values as our American society, these organizations nevertheless attract gay male members. In our work as student affairs professionals, it is important for us to be aware of these issues and the particular coping strategies of those gay males involved. Through our knowledge of their experiences, we can better serve this population and effectively facilitate their involvement in this aspect of campus life.

References

Adams, M., Bell, L.A., & Griffin, P. (1997). Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook. New York: Routledge.

Baier, J.L., & Whipple, E.G. (1990). Greek values and attitudes: A comparison with independents. *NASPA Journal, 28,* 43-53.

Boies, S.C. (1997). *Community participation, identity development and psychological well-being in young gay men: Exploring expressions of gay self-concept in community interactions.* Unpublished dissertation, The Wright Institute, Berkeley, CA.

Case, D.N. (1996). A glimpse of the invisible membership: A national survey of lesbigay greek members. *Perspectives, 23,* 5-8.

Cox, S., & Gallois, C. (1996). Gay and lesbian identity development: A social identity perspective. *Journal of Homosexuality, 30,* 1-29.

Johnson, D. (1996). The developmental experience of gay/lesbian youth. *Journal of College Admissions, 152-153,* 38-41.

Kaiser, T.A. (1998). *What is the experience of homosexual males in coping with discrimination? A heuristic investigation.* Unpublished dissertation, The Union Institute and University, Cincinnati, OH.

Kuh, G.D., & Arnold J.C. (1993). Liquid bonding: A cultural analysis of the role of alcohol in fraternity pledgeship. *Journal of College Student Development, 34,* 327-334.

Kuh, G.D., & Lyons, J.W. (1990). Fraternities and sororities: Lessons from the *College Experiences Study. NASPA Journal, 28,* 20-29.

Lasser, J.S. (1999). *Managing their visibility: A qualitative study of sexual minority youth and their experiences.* Unpublished dissertation, The University of Texas, Austin.

Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping.* New York: Springer.

Mahan, V.J. (1998). *Heterosexism within educational institutions: Coping efforts of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in west Texas.* Unpublished dissertation, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

Todoroff, G.L. (1995). *Cognitive coping among gay men relative to perceived impact of heterosexism.* Unpublished dissertation, Caribbean Center for Advanced Studies: Miami Institute of Psychology, Miami, FL.

Windmeyer, S.L., & Freeman, P.W. (1998). Out on fraternity row: Personal accounts of being gay in a college fraternity. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.

Winston, R.B., & Saunders, S.A. (1987). The greek experience: Friend or foe of student development? *New Directions for Student Services: Fraternities and sororities on the contemporary college campus, 40,* 5-20.

Woods, J. (1992). The corporate closet: Managing gay identity on the job (Self disclosure). *Dissertation Abstracts International, 53*(5), 1325A. (UMI No. AAC-9227785).

Visit us on the web...

http://www.acpa.nche.edu/comms/SCM/