How Binary Thinking and Polarization Affect the Queer Community

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Author's Note:

The content of this paper include discussion of transphobia, abuse and also mentions suicide. It may be incredibly triggering for certain individuals. Please read at your own discretion.

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When a baby is born at the hospital, the doctors will excitedly announce if the baby is a boy or a girl. However, what would happen if we did not announce the gender, nor followed gender norms for our children? A famous story titled, *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* by Lois Gould discussed the fictional Joneses family and their child named X who was raised with toys for both boys and girls and excelled in all types of classes. X never revealed their gender to anyone, but soon the young boys started to vacuum and the young girls started to mow the yard after meeting X. These changes caused the Parents Association to grow angry with young X and have tests done to determine their gender. The Parents Association says that if X is a boy, they must follow the boy rules and if they are a girl then they must follow the girl rules; however, if they are somewhere in between, then X must be expelled. While the story of X ends with a happy ending, real life does not always work this way. The story teaches how society enforces a strict gender binary through polarization. This paper aims to discuss the gender binary ingrained into society and how binary thinking is harmful to the queer community. Additionally, this paper aims to address how the queer community is polarized into specific identities that do not accurately allow for self-expression. These topics will be presented through several real-life occurances that are often overlooked by society in an attempt to dismiss the harm inflicted on the queer community. The gender binary and polarization are harmful to all individuals because it limits self-expression; however, they are particularly harmful to members of the queer community as they police and regulate identity and what is sociably acceptable.

The gender binary and heteronormativity have been established long before these terms were coined. Gender normativity is "a series of cultural, political, legal, and religious assumptions that attempt to divide our bodies into two categories" (Smith and Stanley, 2011),

which directly creates and also reinforces the gender binary. The gender binary is seen in almost all aspects of life. For example, when doing gender reveal parties, families will have pink for a girl or blue for a boy; but what about when the baby is born as an X? In the previously mentioned story, *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, when the Joneses tell their family that the child is neither a boy or girl, but rather an X, their family is disgusted and exclaims that something is wrong with X (Gould, 1978). This is something that is commonly seen across the United States, as roughly 10% of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals have reported physical violence from a family member as a response to learning of their identity. Additionally, 8% of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals have reported being kicked out of their house after informing their family of their identity (James et al., 2016).

As people continue through life, things do not always get easier. In fact, sometimes things continue to get worse for queer individuals as people attempt to enforce the gender binary. As X goes to school, their peers begin to ask questions trying to learn X's gender; however, after failing to figure it out, the other students begin to mock X. The other students refuse to accept a girl who played basketball or a boy who wanted to weave baskets in the art room (Gould, 1978). Students who do not follow society's gender norms generally are bullied for being different. A total of 54% transgender and gender nonconforming students reported being verbally harassed after coming out and 17% of students said that the mistreatment was so severe that they had to transfer schools to avoid the harm (James et al., 2016). The gender binary has become so ingrained into society that roughly 59% of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals use the incorrectly gendered public restroom in fear of using a gender neutral or correctly gendered public restroom as it appears to others as challenging the gender binary (James et al., 2016). In addition, individuals not able to use the restroom that aligns with their gender creates

medical issues for the individual. As transgender and non-binary individuals avoid using public restrooms to limit the amount of conflict they face, they also are more likely to have issues such as “bladder or kidney infections, cystitis, chronic dehydration, and urinary stones” (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). Many have argued that allowing transgender and non-binary people to use the bathroom they most identify with, would directly lead to the possibility of harmful situations for cisgendered individuals. However, if the concern is to avoid harmful situations, could the argument not be made that bathrooms should be constructed to allow people to control the space and lock the door behind them? People displace the blame towards gender, claiming that transgender and non-binary individuals want to attack or harass women; these assertions “pit one group of people who are oppressed against another group of people who are oppressed” (Erickson-Schroth, 2014).

The gender binary is a fundamental part of society that individuals are taught at a young age. People seek to understand the differences between genders; however, that becomes problematic when society only establishes two genders with strict regulations to follow. Any individual who does not mostly align, or in several cases individuals who do not completely align with the gender binary, are deemed to be outcasts of society. While X’s story does not continue to tell of their adulthood, it is clear to see the gender binary being enforced in the United States. It is still illegal for individuals in certain states to “dress of the opposite sex,” (Desk, 2015) and while this is not nearly as enforced as past years we still see individuals being arrested in recent years for wearing articles of clothing that do not match the strict gender binary (Desk, 2015). One of the most well-known instances of this abusive law is the Stonewall Riots of 1969. During this time, queer people had very few spaces in which they could express their true identity. The Stonewall Inn was one of the locations in which the mafia had bribed the local

government to keep police raids at a minimum to cater to marginalized groups, especially queer individuals. However, police still would raid the Stonewall Inn in attempts to rid the community of homosexuals. They would base their arrests on the "three article rule" in which someone must wear at least three articles of clothing that would serve as an identifier of their gender (Stanley and Smith, 2011). This New York state legislation forced queer individuals to wear clothing that did not align with their identity and substantially increased gender dysphoria and hightened anxiety (Stanley and Smith, 2011). While the Stonewall riots did eventually become known as the beginning of the gay rights movement, queer individuals are still today pushed into the strict gender binary.

Binary thinking is not the only problem that the queer community faces. Individuals who do not subscribe to the idea of a gender binary are more or less free to express their identity how they would like. The additional problem comes from polarization, or forcing those in the middle of a spectrum to choose one extreme or the other on the binary. In the example of X, once parents began to grow frustrated because they did not understand X's gender they reacted and tried to force X to identify as either male or female. The parents tried to force X to follow either "boy rules" or "girl rules" and claimed that if X was some other gender, that they must be expelled. (Gould, 1978). Polarization is present in many aspects without people's knowledge. As previously stated, a family which does a gender reveal party to announce whether their baby is a boy or girl is a perfect example of polarization. The problem with this idea is that it enforces the strict gender binary by assigning blue, rugged, and tough to male while assigning pink, fragile, and soft to female. It is also based on the child's biological sex, rather than gender, which ignores the possibility that the baby may be born intersex. Gender reveal parties also push ideas of what a child should be like based on their sex. If a child later identifies as transgender or non-binary,

the family is likely to lash out physically or verbally as a response to their child being defiant to the gender norms that their family has established. Non-supportive families enforce polarization for non-binary children. If a child comes out as non-binary, parents will punish their child through a multitude of ways for not identifying as the gender that their family established prior to their birth. Roughly 25% of parents have lashed out in violence or kicked their child out of the house after learning that their child was transgender or non-binary, while nearly half of families did not support their child (James et al., 2016). The problem is that as transgender and non-binary individuals are rejected by their family, reports have shown that those individuals are almost twice as likely to experience homelessness, engage in sex work, or attempt suicide as opposed to the individuals who are supported by their families (James et al., 2016).

While it is clear to see polarization of such extremes on a smaller basis, polarization is ingrained into a "society [that] mandates the control of intersexual bodies because they blur and bridge" the distinctions that have been established through the gender binary (Bem, 1995). Even individuals who are born as intersex are forced onto one side of the gender spectrum by doctors. Doctors generally identify if a child is intersex by 18 months and sometimes with parent consent will change their gender identity based on that information. However, by forcing intersex individuals into either a male or female identity, many intersex people have developed gender dysphoria (Furtado et al., 2018). Many intersex individuals who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth do not transition to a different gender mainly as they are too dysphoric, because if a "wom[a]n with androgen insensitivity … [with] male gonads presents herself as female, she might question her gender … or even not experience herself as a woman (or man) at all" (Furtado et al., 2018). Many of these individuals are afraid to discuss these feelings with their doctor or clinician, because they have not had "appropriate counseling when growing up" to help

understand their body and identity (Furtado et al., 2018). When society refuses to accept anything besides the gender binary based genitalia, individuals are scarred for life by their parents or even the doctors who decide their gender.

However, polarization does not only affect intersex or non-binary individuals. There was an interesting case of polarization on an individual who was a biological male named David Reimer. During a failed circumcision, Reimer had irreparable damage to his penis. Reimer's doctor, John Money, encouraged Reimer's family to have him undergo a sex reassignment surgery, take female hormones during puberty, and raise him as a female. Reimer was not told that he was born biologically male; however, he felt severe distress and gender dysphoria through his childhood. Money forced Reimer to reenact "sexual positions and motions with his brother, [such as the] … missionary position with thrusting motions" and he also "made the boys inspect one another's pubic areas" (Gaetano, 2017). Money responded with verbal abuse or anger if Reimer refused to do as he was told by Money. Money took advantage of Reimer's situation "to justify thousands of sex reassignment surgeries for cases of children with reproductive abnormalities," such as being intersex or having damaged genitals (Gaetano, 2017). Reimer then continued to suffer from gender dysphoria and psychological trauma through the entirety of his life until he sadly committed suicide in 2004 (Gaetano, 2017). The story of David Reimer shows us that if children do not meet the specific anatomical qualifications, then they will be forced onto one side or the other of the gender spectrum and labeled as female or male. The exclusion of recognition for children born as intersex or with genital abnormalities is problematic as it only enforces polarization towards the extremes of the gender binary.

At present, polarization can be seen on a systematic scale, but often it is implicit bias that is disguised as inclusion. In fact, polarization can even be seen by an everyday person scrolling

through Facebook. In 2014, Facebook changed their website to allow “a third option (‘custom’) that, if selected, offered 56 additional options. A few examples include agender, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender,” and the website also asks you to input your preferred pronouns (Bivens, 2015). While this appears to be a benefit to the queer community, it is actually only beneficial at a first glance. Rena Bivens, an assistant professor at Carleton University with a PhD in Sociology, was able to understand how gender is coded for the popular website, Facebook, by exploring exploits of Facebook's tools meant for third-party developers over the course of 10 years. In 2004, Facebook did not mandate users to put their gender as part of their profile, but instead it was an optional feature. Gender at this point was coded with more than two options: female, male, and undefined (Bivens, 2015). However, as time progressed the owners of Facebook decided to change the requirement to acquire more marketing and monetization strategies. In 2008, the website began to require members to select one of the two genders from the gender binary before they could sign up. Finally, in 2014 they still required users to select one gender from the gender binary before signing up; however, after the user signed up then they could select one of the 56 custom genders along with their pronouns to show on their profile. If a user selected any of the custom options, they are coded similarly to when Facebook did not mandate gender. The main difference is that by selecting any of the custom options, it was now coded as no gender. In addition, if either the options “she” or “he” are selected as pronouns, then the user instantly is labeled as female or male, respectively. The options to set a custom gender or define your pronouns effectively erase a person’s identity when represented to developers and in marketing (Bivens, 2015). It also shows that any person coded as female would see ads marketed for women, regardless of their actual gender. In similar fashion, any person coded as male would see ads marketed for men. Any person who was coded

as not having a gender would see ads targeted towards people without a gender, even if that is not a true representation. While this might still appear as beneficial for some, the only true winner would be the owners of Facebook. Facebook appeared to be progressive to the users, but it also allowed the owners of Facebook to misrepresent their user base to comply for the strict gender binary for developers and advertising clients (Bivens, 2015). By forcing individuals who used Facebook as a social media platform into the gender binary and then selling their data for marketing, it is a clear sign of polarization that pushes the queer community into predefined identities.

As the population continues to grow, it is important to keep in mind how destructive the gender binary and polarization can be to people as they grow up in society. Just as the Joneses raised X without any gender expectations and without forcing them to follow gender norms, society should attempt expanding the gender binary into the spectrum that it truly is without forcing individuals into identities that do not represent them. While it may be unrealistic to expect society to completely disband the gender binary, it is possible to work towards expanding the gender binary into the gender spectrum and be more inclusive to those who identify as any gender outside of just man or woman. Additionally, even though polarization happens on a systematic scale, society can work towards being accepting of people who do not follow predetermined gender roles. The gender binary and polarization affect all individuals as it limits self-expression for all members of society. There is still controversy surrounding self-expression in the queer community especially. But as society becomes more willing to accept additional identities and move away from gender norms, then people will see less polarization of individuals into the strict gender binary.

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