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Thank God for AIDS: Persistent Stereotypes of Homosexuals in U.S. Network Television

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### Abstract

This paper explores the use of stereotypes to characterize homosexuals on network television in the United States. With a goal of raising reader awareness of network television's over-reliance on stereotypes, I also argue that the stereotypical depictions of homosexuals on network television has negative and sometimes even dangerous ramifications in contemporary U.S. culture. Many argue that the increasing number of gay and lesbian characters featured on network television is an indication of society's emerging acceptance of homosexuality. However, this is a false assumption given that many of the shows cited as promoting equality are not meant to do that, but instead are created to improve network reputations, address current controversial issues, and ultimately boost ratings. Stereotypes have long been employed to assist networks in reaching these goals. While the existence of homosexual characters on television is certainly not harmful, using stereotypes in their depiction ultimately has negative implications including limiting viewers' perspectives and encouraging further stereotyping, discrimination in various forms, and, in extreme cases, perhaps even violence.

### Thank God for AIDS: Persistent Stereotypes of Homosexuals in U.S. Network Television

In recent years, U.S. television networks have made an attempt to incorporate homosexual images into the mainstream. Through illusory measures, various television shows have perpetrated the perception of equality. Indeed, the vast presence of “atypical” homosexual characters has quenched society’s thirst for homosexual representation. While programs such as Will & Grace, The L-Word, and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy are certainly welcome additions to television programming, they have not actually encouraged diversity or equality in contemporary U.S. culture by gracing the cover of TV Guide. While it is true that stereotypes are commonly used to depict all groups of people, television’s attempts to assimilate gay culture into everyday life unfortunately have resulted in the creation of characters that portray gay and lesbian figures in an especially limited fashion. Television repeatedly uses stereotypes as a crutch, inaccurately portraying those who are not heterosexual. The result: narrow-minded thinking, blatant discrimination, and even violent hate-crimes.

For Matthew Shepard, a young man from Laramie, Wyoming, the violence that can result from repeated exposure to discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes became a reality. Shepard was brutally murdered in 1998; he was murdered because he was gay. Fred Phelps, an adamant anti-gay protestor and reverend of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, took advantage of Shepard’s funeral by protesting outside the church. He and his followers displayed signs with messages such as “Fags Die, God Laughs.” They spread homophobic sentiments similar to those delivered in a speech given at Arizona State University where Phelps stated, “Not only is homosexuality a sin, but anyone who supports fags is just as guilty as they are. You are both worthy of death” (Baptist Watch). Although some might argue that it is quite a leap to link the usage of stereotypes to violent actions, it is a connection that is actually vital to make.

Subtle messages, such as those sent out by television networks, can covertly influence a person's opinions and thus integrate stereotypes into their belief system.

In an article for CNN, Donna Freydkin, an assistant producer for CNN Interactive Newsroom and staff writer for USA Today, comments that homosexual characters appear in television consistently today "and often as enduring, central and serious elements of their shows' stories." Freydkin illustrates the growing trend of featuring homosexuals on television as pivotal characters, rather than just as novelties. A 2006 study by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, or GLAAD, found that the number of homosexual representations "on the six major broadcast networks will comprise only 1.3 percent of all series regular characters on the networks' 2006-07 schedule" ("Where"). Simply by citing a few TV shows such as Will & Grace, The L-Word, and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, many people argue that, as a society, the United States has reached equality in terms of sexual orientation and its representation on television. Indeed, many continue to make claims that include the popular rationalization "Since shows about gay people exist, then we must be better off," and the increasingly monotonous "Equality has already been reached. Gay people are accepted everywhere." Proponents of these ideas often cite shows like Will & Grace and public displays of same-sex affection such as the kiss between Britney and Madonna at MTV's 2003 Video Music Awards as support for their argument that homosexuality is generally accepted by society. Suzanna Walters, author of All the Rage, concurs: "It is often assumed that increased visibility is an unmitigated 'good thing,' inherently promoting awareness and producing sensitivities" (10). But increased visibility of homosexuals does not necessarily make people more sensitive, and it certainly does not make them more tolerant. Walters states in her book, "visibility does not erase stereotypes nor guarantee liberation" (13). Those who feel that homosexuals have attained equality seem to have

overlooked the fact that the mere existence of gay characters on television does not—can not—constitute sexual orientation equality.

Of course, television networks do not create homosexual characters, or any characters, for altruistic reasons; usually the shows featuring these characters exist for the sheer purpose of improving network reputations. Public persona is, no doubt, an important factor that television networks consider when deciding which shows will make the air and what time-slot they will receive. “Token” gay characters are often added to television shows, encouraging interest and making the networks seem as if they are promoting diversity and equality in terms of sexual orientation. For example, current hit television shows such as Desperate Housewives, Ugly Betty, Veronica Mars, The O.C., and Nip/Tuck intentionally include these “token” gay and lesbian characters. This is done to boost ratings, appease audience members, and avoid unwanted questioning about a consistent lack of inclusion.

It is also no coincidence that the increased presence of homosexuals on television is occurring at such a critical time; the United States is currently deciding on a number of landmark political issues including same-sex marriage, the right of gay couples to adopt children, and the role of gays in the military. Researchers have commented that shows such as Will & Grace are attracting more attention because the U.S. legal system is currently embroiled in a number of cases involving homosexual rights (Gairola). Thus, television networks are armed with artillery of controversial material that is almost guaranteed to be popular among a variety of audiences. Ramone Johnson, author of a gay life column for About.com, argues that, due to the popularity of gay characters, television shows featuring homosexuals have been “popping up” everywhere, often seeming like “forced ratings boosters” (“ABC’s”). Indeed, networks are always searching for the “next big thing” in order to attract more viewers, and the incorporation of gay characters

seems to suit their needs. In an article for [Popmatters.com](http://Popmatters.com), Rahul Gairola raises the point that “gay representations snag viewers, and so the networks snag more advertisers and thus make more millions” (“Watching”). Ratings are a major motivator for television networks and often lead to the inclusion of a storyline that, if not for its massive cultural popularity, would otherwise be bypassed; shows that can play on gay representation are extremely desirable and often return season-after-season. Some may argue that this desire is evidence of a changing culture in which homosexuals are rapidly gaining acceptance, but this acceptance is superficial; the act of watching a TV show featuring stereotypical gay and lesbian characters does not guarantee acceptance of one’s homosexual neighbors.

The most blatant display of television networks’ use of homosexual characters to promote their own interests is the repeated, heterosexist use of stereotypes to portray gay and lesbian characters. According to Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, “a stereotype is a standardized conception or image of a specific group of people or objects. Stereotypes are ‘mental cookie cutters’—they force a simple pattern upon a complex mass and assign a limited number of characteristics to all members of a group.” When a gay character is featured on a television show, whether it is for one episode, one season, or for an entire series, networks rely on popular stereotypes to portray him or her the vast majority of the time. Often, gay men are portrayed as feminine and flamboyant, while lesbians are portrayed as being more masculine. Equally appalling, television networks have taken their use of stereotypes a step further; they even stereotype their stereotypes. For example, in terms of gender representation, the number of gay males to lesbians on TV is incredibly disproportionate (Gairola). This demonstrates that the presence of lesbians on television is still taboo and seems to suggest that only men have same-sex orientation. Additionally, homosexual males on television are almost exclusively Caucasian.

African-American, Hispanic, and Asian gays are found virtually nowhere. The lack of diverse representation only helps to reinforce the preconceived stereotype that all homosexuals are white men. This information reinforced GLAAD's findings that out of 679 characters, male characters trump females 387 (57 percent) to 292 (43 percent) and continue to be predominantly white at 513 (75 percent). Television's under-representation of lesbians and homosexual people of color will only serve to strengthen already inaccurate stereotypes.

The most striking and perhaps most popular example of a stereotypical gay character is Jack McFarland of NBC's Will & Grace. Jack fits almost every single stereotype that society holds of homosexual men. One critic calls him the most "narcissistic, shallow, Cher-loving, boy-chasing, fashion-obsessed, show-tune-singing" character, "a sturdy stereotype if ever there was one" (13).

Sturdy stereotypes aside, Will & Grace can certainly be described as compelling. Sure, it's funny. Each of the characters brings his or her own brand of comedy to the show, resulting in a highly amusing chemistry that contributes to the show's entertainment value. Nominated for countless Emmy Awards, Will & Grace has been hailed as "one of the best primetime comedies on the air," and has featured celebrity guest-stars such as Debbie Reynolds, Molly Shannon, Gregory Hines, and Joan Collins (Gairola). Jack, although the ultimate stereotypical gay guy, undoubtedly contributes to the sidesplitting entertainment. He is sarcastic, neurotic, and extremely outspoken, a perfect contrast to Will, the show's other gay character. While Will seems to triumph over traditional stereotypes, he too subtly embodies these inaccurate generalizations.

Simply by existing, the show does act as evidence that equality in terms of sexual orientation could happen in the future. However, while Will & Grace has made a remarkable

contribution to television, the fact that the show employs the use of stereotypes to do this should not be overlooked. All of the show's popularity is inconsequential toward the reality of the obstacles that homosexuals continue to face. Unfortunately, the show's popularity is based on finding humor in stock-stereotypes. Of course this is the case for many popular television shows; however, the use of stereotypes is especially prevalent in the depiction of gays and lesbians. While Will and Grace may be viewed as valuable for its exposure of homosexuals, it is ultimately detrimental as it reinforces stereotypes and serves to portray a lack of diversity among homosexuals.

Another entertaining show, Bravo Channel's Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, uses both gay and straight men in its storyline, often resorting to stereotypes to represent both parties. Art Cohen analyzes the show in his article "Eyes on the Guys: Gay Men's Turn on TV" and reveals that viewers have complained that Queer Eye "perpetuates stereotypes in a TV landscape that still doesn't have all that many gay characters." According to Cohen, viewers feel that the show relies on "stereotyped mannerisms and smarmy innuendoes about anal sex ... [a sign] that gay men are still a novelty on TV and not part of the mainstream." This holds true for most of the shows on television featuring homosexuals including the 1990's hit Beverly Hills, 90210. Jimmy, a white, homosexual man, had contracted the AIDS virus. While this stereotype is not used as commonly as others these days, it is a stereotype nonetheless. According to Kyo-Patrick Hart, a communications studies professor at Plymouth State University, by using this particular stereotype, 90210 "did its viewers a serious disservice...[reinforcing] the rigidity of patriarchal gender roles pertaining to sexuality and perpetuated heterosexism, to the detriment of gay men." Running endlessly in syndication, 90210, like so many other contemporary TV shows, has managed to create entire storylines based on simple, stock stereotypes.

Another television sector, reality television, gives a so-called “unscripted” look into the lives of real people. While Reality TV is anything but real, it has often been championed for the large number of homosexuals that the shows feature, bringing gays and lesbians “into America’s living rooms in a way that would have been unimaginable a few years ago” (Lo). Homosexual figures are often desirable when casting for this new craze in television: the characters add voyeuristic intrigue to the shows, and thus into the stereotypically portrayed lives of homosexuals. Even on reality-based shows, gays and lesbians are not depicted as full-fledged and diverse individuals. Their words and actions are often morphed to fit desired stereotypes. In an article written for [afterEllen.com](http://afterEllen.com), Malinda Lo cites examples from popular shows such as Big Brother, Survivor and America’s Next Top Model: “On Big Brother, Ivette was a conniving, back-stabbing, stereotypical villain. On Survivor, Ami and Scout led a women's alliance to near-victory by waving the ‘woman power’ flag. On Top Model, Kim seduced a straight girl—another stereotypical role for lesbians.” These examples reinforce stereotypical images of all the characters; lesbians are portrayed as being evil, masculine, and ready to seduce all straight women they meet. Undoubtedly, the use of stereotypes to portray homosexual figures has invaded every aspect of television, from sitcom to reality, drama to comedy, and cartoon to soap opera.

In his article, “Eyes on the Guys: Gay Men’s Turn on TV,” Cohen states that “Surely the sophisticated viewer knows that not all gay men dress like the models in *Esquire* or maintain homes worthy of *Architectural Digest*. And certainly not all straight guys are dumb lugs who can’t boil water or wash their own clothes.” But not every viewer is sophisticated. Networks cannot assume that their viewers are able to look beyond the stereotypes that have been employed and see the fallacies that have been created. What television networks do not realize is

that their abundant use of stereotypes has extreme implications. In truth, the viewers are more likely to take these stereotypes to heart and use them to hurt others. In an article titled “Social Power,” from the European Journal of Social Psychology, Markus Brauer and Richard Bourhis describe the effects that stereotypes can have on different groups; Brauer and Bourhis conclude that those in a position of power tend to use stereotypes more frequently and often have negative perceptions of others. Also, they tend to “take action more frequently and generally behave in a more variable manner.” Often, this results in low power groups being the target of stereotypes at a greater frequency than those in power. This puts those of low power at a disadvantage, making them more susceptible to acts such as discrimination and violence.

Stereotypes are dangerous. According to Nachbar and Lause, stereotypes-“encourage people to internalize a cultural image,” frequently resulting in discrimination. Despicable acts of discrimination occur every day and are made manifest in many forms. In the most extreme cases of discrimination, stereotypes have led to violence. For Matthew Shepard, this was just the case. After Shepard was murdered, the accused, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, continued to employ stereotypes to attempt exoneration; rather than admitting that their actions were a hate crime, McKinney and Henderson claimed they had been stricken by “gay panic.” According to Stentor Danielson, gay panic occurs “when a homosexual makes an advance on someone with repressed homosexual tendencies or experiences.” This often leads to violent and uncontrolled reactions. McKinney and Russell claimed that Shepard had made a sexual advance at them, placing his hand on their legs. Homosexual men are often characterized as being “sexually adventurous and willing to pursue sexual encounters with strangers” (Connolly). Ultimately, as determined by the judge, “the defense attorneys in the Matt Shepard case relied upon tired old stereotypes” (Connolly). The men, found guilty of kidnapping and murder, among other things,

received hefty sentences. Still, no amount of time spent in jail can erase the truth; stereotypes were part of the reason that an innocent man was killed. In this case, stereotypes were extremely harmful, and were used falsely to defend criminal action.

Matthew Shepard continues to serve as an example that “there is nothing worse than to live in a society in which the traces of your own existence have been erased or squeezed into a narrow and humiliating set of stereotypes” (Walters 13). Unfortunately, stereotypes are being abused on a daily basis; television networks have long employed the use of stereotypes in their portrayal of people, most recently to depict homosexuals. While television networks are not responsible for the bigotry displayed by extremists like Revered Phelps and these acts of violence that have occurred, their irresponsible use of stereotypes to depict homosexuals can only contribute to limited thinking, further stereotyping, discrimination, and violence; as in the case of Matthew Shepard.

There is no accurate way to characterize a homosexual. People of same-sex orientation must be portrayed as real people, as living, breathing people. In the final scenes of The Laramie Project, an HBO film based on a play written by The Tectonic Theater Project, anti-gay protestors are shown at the trial for Matthew Shepard’s murder. One protestor displays a sign spreading a particularly sickening message: “Thank God for AIDS.” If television networks continue with their dangerous practices, they will also continue to contribute to the hatred that fuels people to stereotype others, even to the point of creating signs with these appalling messages.

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