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Queering Aging: Dialectical Analysis of Mediated Representations of Sexuality

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Queering Aging: Dialectical Analysis of Mediated Representations of Sexuality

Overview and Rationale

With a focus on aging sexual minorities, a population often overlooked by both queer theory and mediated representations, this classroom activity invites students to critically examine the intersection of queerness and television. First, students will get a brief introduction to queer theory and dialectical thinking. Second, students will view the made-for-television HBO film *Behind the Candelabra*. Third, students will engage in a queer dialectical analysis of the intersection of queerness and aging in the TV program.

Influenced by poststructuralism, critical theory, feminism, and cultural studies, **queer theory** provides an open theoretical system to view, understand, and analyze social relations (Berlant & Warner, 1995; Jagose, 1996; Yep, 2003). More specifically, queer theory is both a conceptual model and a set of analytical tools to deconstruct power relations (i.e., the ways power functions and operates in our relationships) and the violence of normativity (i.e., the potentially harmful effects of social norms on bodies, identities, and communities) (Yep & Schönfeldt-Aultman, 2012). **Queer** may be understood, among other things, as a noun and a verb. As a noun, queer, in a narrow sense, has been used as an umbrella term for sexual minorities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirited, etc.) and, in a broader sense, queer has come to signify non-normativity (Yep, 2003, 2013). As a verb, queer refers to the process of making something familiar and taken-for-granted (e.g., aging, sexuality) into something unfamiliar and strange in order to analyze its underlying power relations (e.g., who benefits from particular representations of aging and sexuality? Who is disempowered and rendered invisible?) (Yep & Schönfeldt-Aultman, 2012). Through the process of queering, possibilities of resistance as well as different ways of thinking, doing, living, and relating can be explored (Yep, 2013). Finally, Yep, Lescure, and Allen (in press) suggest that **queering aging** can be used in two senses. In the first, it seeks to deconstruct aging as a social construction (Laz, 1998) with a focus on sexual minorities (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Whaler & Gabbay, 1997). In the second, it seeks to recover and highlight the sexuality of aging adults as they operate within, through, and against sociocultural assumptions about the absence of sexuality in their lives (Walz, 2002). Taken together, queering aging highlights the importance of consuming and analyzing mediated representations in nuanced and complex ways by focusing on how aging and sexuality intersect with each other and with other identity markers (e.g., the body).

The omnipresence of mediated representations, including television images and messages, has become a social and cultural reality of the twenty-first century in the United States and abroad. As such, it is critical for students to learn to become more engaged and sophisticated consumers of media. Our classroom activity provides an opportunity for this critical engagement.

A **dialectical analysis** suggests that social relations, identities, and events may be viewed as an ongoing set of potentially multiple tensions (i.e., “both/and”) rather than a static set of opposing traits and characteristics (i.e., “either/or”). For example, a televised representation of an aging gay man has the potential to be both empowering and disempowering (i.e., “both/and”) at the

same time rather than simply one or the other (i.e., “either/or”) (Yep, Lescure, & Allen, in press). Such a representation could simultaneously reinforce and challenge stereotypes of aging gay men in US culture. Further, **mediated representations** constitute—not simply mirror or reflect—the identity or event being represented (Hall, 2013). Through the process of representation, the meanings of an identity or event are created, maintained, reinforced, and/or challenged. In this sense, representation is inextricably connected to power relations.

To queer aging through a dialectical analysis of mediated representations of sexuality, this activity focuses on multiple and potentially contradictory readings of our televised cultural text *Behind the Candelabra*. As such, we use “queering aging” in both senses identified above to explore how televised images may simultaneously reify and contest popular cultural stereotypes of aging gay men. To do so, we invite students to engage in intersectional reading.

Intersectionality refers to how race, class, gender, sexuality, the body, and nation, among other markers of social difference, come together to simultaneously produce social and cultural identities (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, the identity of a sexual minority person is not simply about sexuality but also about race, gender, social class, bodily abilities, and so on. An intersectional reading, in this sense, refers to the process of attending to these vectors of identity simultaneously when we are critically consuming and engaging with media images.

General Timeline

To provide time and scheduling flexibility of this activity, we offer two variations. The longer version involves watching *Behind the Candelabra* in its entirety. The duration for this version is 180-210 minutes. The shorter version involves watching specific clips of the film and having the instructor provide more contextualization for each clip. This version is about 90 minutes. To prepare students for the activity, we recommend they read some of the sources we mentioned above. Because queer theory can be dense and difficult for the uninitiated, we recommend Yep & Schönfeldt-Aultman (2012), which is accessibly written for an undergraduate audience. For students who are interested in further engagement with aging and queerness after the activity, Yep, Lescure, & Allen (in press), Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco (2010), Knauer (2011), Walz (2002), and Whaler & Gabbay (1997) are useful resources.

Lesson Plan

As previously noted, this activity can be done in two variations. After reading our detailed description of the lesson plan, instructors are encouraged to develop their own variations to suit the framework and needs of their classes.

Variation 1 (180-210 minutes)

Before playing the film, the instructor should frame the activity by contextualizing queer theory and dialectical thinking. The instructor should ultimately emphasize the importance of engaging critically and deeply with mediated representations while highlighting the utility of queer theory and dialectical thinking in accomplishing this goal. This should take roughly 15 minutes.

The instructor should specifically characterize queer as describing both an identity (i.e., queer as a noun) and a process (i.e., queer as a verb), noting that the process of queering involves taking that which is familiar and rendering it unfamiliar in order to analyze its underlying power relations (Yep & Schönfeldt-Aultman, 2012). To help illustrate this in the context of our activity, the instructor could point out that older adults tend to be stereotypically perceived as nonsexual in US culture, since sexuality tends to be culturally associated with youth (Levy, 1994; Walz, 2002). This association tends to be perceived as natural and normal. Queering aging therefore involves calling the normality of this association into question in order to analyze how it (re)produces ageist US cultural ideologies. After offering this example, the instructor should emphasize that viewing mediated representations from a queer perspective goes beyond analyzing *what is seen* in order to also analyze *what is implied*.

After providing this context, students should view *Behind the Candelabra* in its entirety. The film's running time is roughly 120 minutes. Students should be encouraged to take notes while viewing the film. Students should be prompted to pay careful attention to the ways that stereotypes related to age, gender, and sexuality intersect and how they are reinforced and challenged in specific scenes.

When the film is over, the instructor will lead a class discussion about stereotyping. This should take 15 minutes. This discussion aims to help students think more deeply about the material and symbolic consequences of stereotyping. To aid this level of engagement, we suggest using a visual analogy comparing stereotypes and their consequences to a clear glass pot filled with corn syrup, water, and olive oil. Since these liquids have different densities, they will form three distinct layers when mixed together. The syrup will sink to the bottom of the glass pot, the water will sit in the middle, and the oil will float to the top. We encourage that the instructor draw this on the board and note that a viewer looking at the glass pot from above will only see the oil, but a viewer looking at it from the side will see all three layers. A queer dialectical analysis encourages the viewer to see these three layers.

The instructor should note that, like the mixture, stereotyping also has multiple layers of depth that can be viewed from different perspectives. These three layers will be labeled *descriptors*, *intersectionality*, and *effects*. The top layer, *descriptors*, corresponds with the oil in the analogy. Descriptors refer to superficial, non-intersectional stereotypes. They include the stereotypical notions of gay men as hypersexual and older adults as nonsexual (Knauer, 2011; Yeagley, Hickok, & Bauermeister, 2014). The middle layer, *intersectionality*, corresponds with the water in the analogy. Intersectionality expands the discussion by noting the contradictions and inconsistent logical boundaries of stereotypes when described in relation to multiple identity categories. Since gay men tend to be stereotypically perceived as hypersexual and older adults tend to be perceived as nonsexual, older gay men's identities will then likely be rife with contradiction. The bottom layer, *effects*, corresponds with the syrup in the analogy. Effects refer to the material and symbolic consequences of these stereotypes when viewed intersectionally. Because older gay men find themselves stereotyped into an impossible situation (simultaneously hypersexual as gay men and non-sexual as aging adults), they tend to be rendered "all but unthinkable" (Knauer, 2011, p. 31). The instructor should prompt students to think about other stereotypes in terms of these three levels, noting that taking a queer perspective resembles looking at the glass pot from the side rather than the top.

Students should then be asked a series of questions about the film. This should take 30-60 minutes. These questions include:

1. How did you see stereotypes about sexuality, particularly those of aging gay people, being reinforced *and* challenged in specific scenes throughout the film?
2. How did you see stereotypes about gender, particularly those of aging gay people, being reinforced *and* challenged in specific scenes throughout the film?
3. What are the material and symbolic effects of challenging and/or reinforcing these aging, gender, and sexual stereotypes in such a highly visible and relatively mainstream film?
4. How do representations of identity in film and television, such as those of aging gay people, influence the way people think about identity and communication in everyday life?
5. How can queer theory be a useful tool for engaging with and interpreting mediated representations that they might be familiar with, such as Fox's *Modern Family* and *Glee*?
6. How does emphasizing aging and the body serve to extend queer theory?
7. Why is it important to engage with media texts dialectically, noting that they can serve to both reinforce and challenge stereotypes?

Variation 2 (90 minutes)

In this variation, students will not view *Behind the Candelabra* in its entirety, but will instead watch four specific scenes. Viewing all four scenes will take roughly five minutes.

Before the clips are shown, the instructor should provide context for queer theory and dialectical thinking as mentioned in the first variation of this activity. This should take 15 minutes.

After doing this, the instructor should then engage the class in the discussion of stereotypes as mentioned in the first variation of this activity. This should take 15 minutes.

When the discussion has ended, the instructor should contextualize the film for students. *Behind the Candelabra* focuses on the tumultuous love affair between the notoriously flamboyant, aging closeted gay entertainer Liberace (played by Michael Douglas) and his much younger lover, Scott Thorson (played by Matt Damon). It premiered on HBO in May 2013 to major critical acclaim.

After providing some background context, students will view the first clip. This clip begins at 22:33 into the film and ends at 24:13. This scene involves Liberace attempting to convince Thorson to spend the night with him at his mansion. Thorson was initially apprehensive about this proposition, but ultimately capitulates when Liberace promises to keep to his own side of the bed. Liberace goes on to break this promise by performing fellatio on an uncomfortable-looking Thorson in the morning.

When this clip ends, students will then view the second clip, which is a short but explicit sex scene between Liberace and Thorson. This clip begins at 37:35 into the film and ends at 37:55. In this scene, Liberace is shown offering a popper (a recreational inhalant drug) to Thorson as they are having sex. After Thorson declines the popper, Liberace states, "It makes it better." Liberace is then shown inhaling the popper while still having sex with Thorson.

Questions for students in relation to the first and second clips (20 minutes):

1. How do these two scenes challenge stereotypes and norms in relation to age and sexuality?
2. How do these two scenes reinforce stereotypes and norms in relation to age and sexuality?

After the discussion has finished, students will view the third clip. This clip begins at 42:38 into the film and ends at 44:00. This scene depicts Liberace and Thorson at home watching Liberace's appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* on television. When he sees himself on screen, Liberace dramatically and excitedly critiques his appearance, comparing himself to his "father in drag." This scene quickly cuts to Liberace meeting with his plastic surgeon (played by Rob Lowe), who promises Liberace that he can make him look "as young as Scott."

When this clip ends, students will view the final clip. This clip begins at 1:03:15 into the film and ends at 1:05:11. Throughout the film, Liberace has been depicted as the breadwinner and patriarchal figure in his relationships, but especially in his relationship with Thorson. This particular scene involves an argument between Liberace and Thorson as their relationship begins to deteriorate. Liberace and Thorson argue about Liberace's affinity for pornography and Thorson's refusal to act as the bottom during sex. As the argument progresses, Liberace exclaims, "Oh, God! All of a sudden we're sounding like gay Lucy and Ricky!" In response Thorson asks, "Why am I the Lucy?" Liberace replies, "Because I'm the bandleader with the nightclub act."

Questions for students in relation to the third and fourth clips (20 minutes):

1. How do these two scenes challenge stereotypes and norms in relation to age, gender, and sexuality?
2. How do these two scenes reinforce stereotypes and norms in relation to age, gender, and sexuality?

Finally, students should be invited to discuss and contemplate the following concluding questions (15 minutes):

1. How do representations of identity in film and television, such as those of aging gay people, influence the way people think about identity and communication in everyday life?
2. How can queer theory be a useful tool for engaging with and interpreting other mediated representations, such as Fox's *Modern Family* and *Glee*?
3. How does focusing on aging and the body serve to extend queer theory?
4. Why is it important to engage with media texts dialectically, noting that they can serve to both reinforce and challenge stereotypes?

Conclusion

While other popular media texts such as *Modern Family* and *Glee* prominently feature characters with non-normative sexual identities, we argue that *Behind the Candelabra* uniquely and queerly

(though not unproblematically) engages with representations of aging and sexuality. As Brown (2009) notes, queer aging tends to be a topic of silence within queer theory and sexuality tends to be a topic of silence within aging. As queer aging is generally a topic of silence within academic paradigms concerned with destabilizing and critiquing normativities, the lack of popular media texts that portray aging queer characters does not surprise us. It is for this reason that we currently hold *Behind the Candelabra* to be an ideal media text for the purpose of exploring the intersections between queer theory, aging, sexuality, gender, and mediated representations. If instructors wish to focus on queering aging with different media texts, we recommend looking into *Vicious*, shown on PBS in the United States, or *Love is Strange*, released by Sony Pictures.

This activity can also be adapted for use in discussions of mediated representations that do not feature the intersections of aging and queerness. To facilitate these discussions, instructors should broaden their focus in a way that gives students the necessary analytical tools to engage more deeply and dialectically with the politics of mediated representation. Throughout our lesson plan, we noted that mediated representations of non-normative identities are often simultaneously beneficial and detrimental. This idea can also be explored in great detail with other media texts that visibly feature queer characters, texts like *Modern Family*, *Glee*, *Will & Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Avila-Saavedra, 2008; Dhaenens, 2013; Kessler, 2011; Shugar, 2003; Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2006).

As an increasing number of popular media texts offer representations of characters who embody various non-normative subject positions, it can be tempting for viewers to equate this high frequency of representation with a transformation of cultural identity hierarchies. Because the effects of mediated representations often lie hidden beneath that which is on the surface, we ultimately argue that using this activity will sharpen students' critical engagement with queer theory, dialectical thinking, and media texts.

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